

Valspar Championship

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Palm Harbor, Florida, USA

Innisbrook Resort (Copperhead)

Justin Thomas

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Justin Thomas to the interview room here at the 2023 Valspar Championship. Justin just got off the course, kind of a cold one, but how was it out on the course? I know you told us that this is kind of one of your favorite layouts of the year.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I thought we were done with the West Coast Swing, but it appears that we are back to the cold and rain. But, yeah, I love this golf course. I think it's a really -- it's very much -- have you some risk-reward opportunities, but it's placement. You have a lot of doglegs. It's a premium of hitting the ball in the fairway.

The course is in fantastic shape. The greens are potentially the best I've ever seen them. Yeah, I mean, not that it's not raining very much or very hard at all, but if we get a little bit more, it will obviously soften it up a bit. But it's pretty much just about going out and executing from that point in. It's always a fun week here.

THE MODERATOR: This will be your sixth start here, third consecutive. What do you remember about last year with the top-3 finish?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I remember playing well and I felt like I had a great chance going into Sunday. I was just kind of hanging right there. I just had a couple holes I couldn't really just ride some momentum. I got off to a decent start on the front, and I was playing with Sam, who obviously ended up winning the tournament. Just the difference of him winning it and me not was, it felt like, the things that you need to do to win he was doing and I was not on the back nine.

Just had a couple shots or putts that just didn't quite get close enough or just burned the edge instead of hitting it closer, making birdies, and gaining some momentum. But it was nice to get in the hunt and get in contention because it definitely has some good -- it's a good atmosphere out here late on a Sunday, so hopefully we can recreate that this year.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll take some questions.

Q. When you kind of think back to the evolution throughout your career and how you prepare for a tournament Tuesday and Wednesday and the things you think about, has that changed or evolved at all when you think back to that or is it pretty much similar to when you started?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It definitely changes. I think it's -- I mean, it even changes now. For instance, I had visions of potentially going to Augusta this week Monday and Tuesday from Jacksonville since it wasn't too far away, then looked at the weather and saw it was kind of iffy and maybe a little cold, so I felt like I wasn't going to get much out of it. Then I was like, oh, well, I'll just come to Tampa and have a day off Monday, but then I was like the third group out on Sunday, so I went home for two days.

So I spent Sunday night and Monday night in my own bed in my house and was able to come here yesterday afternoon, played nine holes today in the pro-am. I'll do a little practice and then peg it tomorrow.

So I think a lot of it is more just me kind of listening to how I'm feeling, listening to my body. I mean, if it's a time in the season or maybe a time in a stretch where I feel like I need some rest, I may not do as much at the course, versus in the summer and in Jupiter courses are traditionally not as in great of shape just because of how hot and humid it is. So that might be something where I'll go to a tournament a little earlier, and then try to get accustomed to the grass and the conditions of the course and whatnot.

So it changes a lot. I definitely don't feel the need to get there Monday morning like I did probably my rookie year or first couple years as a professional, but at the same time sometimes I need to.

Q. Is there for this particular course any certain shot shape or club or feel that you try to dial in specifically based on what this course demands or not necessarily?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No, just driving it well, I think is a premium. I think you really need to drive the ball well. I



think it's a -- it requires some shot shaping, both to work with the doglegs, but also to kind of hold some fairways. You get a fairway like No. 6, a hard dogleg right, but it kind of has some like Olympic vibes where the fairway slopes hard right-to-left.

So not only do you need to cut it quite a bit, but you need to cut it and land it in the right side of the fairway to hold the fairway. Then the next hole you have the wind off the left, the fairway slopes a little left-to-right, so as a fader that I am like that fairway feels very, very small to me versus if I drew it.

So it's really just about, for me, if I'm not comfortable, just try to put the ball in the fairway, get it on the green, make par, and go to the next hole. And then if I'm able to get in some kind of rhythm over 72 holes, try to get on a little bit of a run here and there.

Q. How would you characterize your year so far? Is it fair to say that you're frustrated or is that too strong to say that you would be frustrated? And then I'll follow up, I guess, just to kind of see where you're at with how things have gone.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I would say frustrated is definitely something I would have -- one of the words I would use to describe how I'm feeling. It's a lot. It's just been an odd year. I mean, I've been working really hard and trying to get what I feel like is back to more how I'm playing. But then again, I'll have weeks where -- it's weird. It's like I've described it to probably my team, it's like I feel really close and I feel really far at times. So it's kind of bizarre.

I'll have some signs of feeling like I'm there, and then kind of -- I need to get the consistency, I feel like, back in some things, but then again, not feel like -- I don't need to start over and kind of rewrite the book. It's not that far off. It's just this game of golf can do that sometimes. I think that quote kind of was going around again of what Max said however many years ago, you know, this game can make you feel one swing away from want to go quit and one swing away from feeling like you're going to win the Masters and that's kind of where I'm at right now.

So in terms -- I mean, my golf game obviously doesn't feel great. I haven't been playing really, really well, but I feel like I'm close. I'm just trying to stay patient and stay positive and just kind of wait for good things to happen because I know that great things are coming. It's just a matter of time and I just need to be in the right frame of mind for it.

Q. Is it too simplistic to say that putts just aren't going

in or obviously does more lead to not putts not going in?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's strange because I feel like I'm rolling the ball arguably better than I ever have. I mean, I'm hitting more putts that have chances of going in than I ever have. Then you look at it that way, and you say, well, like, I'm putting it well. I'm rolling the ball well. I'm just not getting the result I want. Then at the same time, well, putting's kind of all about making it. So if you're not making it, you know, what's it matter kind of thing.

But I mean, everybody that plays out here will tell you, you just have -- you have stretches or you have times where the ball's lipping out sometimes, and then you have where it's going your way and the ball's going in. It's just kind of been a little bit of a run where it feels like I've hit a lot of good putts and hit shots that are close to working out one way or the other and just haven't.

But that's golf and that's the sport. And, yeah, I feel really comfortable, really good over my putter. I just need to get my speed dialed in and just really see some go in because I've had -- especially on the West Coast, I had some really good putting tournaments. I just didn't necessarily have it for four days. I would have maybe two days or three days or two days with good, one of okay, and one bad, and it is just about minimizing those bad and really trying to get it going when it's good.

Q. On Saturday morning it was kind of touch and go as to whether or not you were going to make the cut at THE PLAYERS. It probably came down to the last guy, I think. So I'm curious, when you're that far back and maybe you're struggling a little bit, are you almost hoping that you miss?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No.

Q. Is there anything to be gained from not, you know, from not being there and getting out?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No, no. In my eyes, if you make the cut, you have a chance to win the tournament. I know that's something Tiger's told me a long time too. You got to give yourself a chance, especially there. I mean, I know I can go out and shoot 9- or 10-under any given day and it just was -- it was unfortunate because obviously I didn't -- I had so many just careless mistakes, but it was significantly tougher Friday afternoon than it was -- when I woke up Saturday and the wind wasn't blowing and I turned on the coverage and I saw how easy -- how much easier it was and soft, I didn't have a very good feeling about it. And if I heard them say on the coverage one more time how much easier it was Saturday morning than Friday afternoon, I

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was about to break my remote. So I muted it and watched the golf.

But I knew there was nothing I could do. I fought hard. I tried to give myself a chance. And I was like, you know, I can hit balls on the range and go practice on the putting green all I want, but working on things in competition or trying to see some positive things happen in competition is going to be the best form of preparation or confidence.

So, yeah, obviously, I didn't want to finish 60th, but I wanted to have a week end like Tom Hoge had.

Q. There was some significant news in the golf world yesterday with the USGA and the R & A's proposal. Just curious what your reaction was to it and how you think the PGA TOUR should respond.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I think I was -- my reaction was disappointed and also not surprised, to be honest. I think the USGA over the years has -- in my eyes, it's harsh, but made some pretty selfish decisions. They definitely, in my mind, have done a lot of things that aren't for the betterment of the game, although they claim it. I had conversations with some USGA members and it just -- to me, I don't understand how it's growing the game. For them to say in the same sentence that golf is in the best place it's ever been, everything is great, but...

And I'm like, well, there shouldn't be a but. You're trying to create a solution for a problem that doesn't exist. To me, it's just -- it's so bad for the game of golf, for an opportunity -- I mean, some of the great things to me is the fact that you can play the exact same golf ball that I play. I mean, that's cool. For an every day amateur golfer, it's very unique that we are able to play the exact same equipment. Yeah, I understand that I may have a different grind on a wedge, whatever you want to call it, but you can go to the pro shop and buy the same golf ball that I play or Scottie Scheffler plays or whatever.

But the USGA wants to bring it to a point where that's not the case. They want it to be, okay, well, the pros play this way and the amateurs play this way, and that just doesn't -- I don't understand how that's better for the game of golf. The amount of time, money that these manufacturers have spent trying to create the best product possible and now you're going to tell them and us that we have to start over for potentially if the PGA TOUR, PGA of America, don't adopt this local rule. So for two of the four biggest events of the year we're going to have to use a different ball? Like, try to explain to me how that's better for the game of golf.

And they're basing it off the top .1 percent of all golfers.

You know what I mean? I don't know how many of y'all consistently play golf in here, but I promise none of you have come in from the golf course and said, you know, I'm hitting it so far and straight today that golf's just not even fun anymore. Like, no, that's not -- it's just not reality.

So I know I went on a rant a little bit, but it irritates me because it's consistent with, I feel like, decisions and things that the USGA has done in the past when it comes to rules or whatnot and data. I mean, what is it, using 127-mile-an-hour clubhead speed? Like, if you can swing 127 miles an hour, like, power to you. I mean, people are running faster, so, what, are they just going to make the length of a mile longer so that the fastest mile time doesn't change, or are they going to put the NBA hoop at 13 feet because people can jump higher now?

Like, no. It's evolution. We're athletes now. Like, we're training to hit the ball further and faster and if you can do it, so good for you. So yeah, as you can tell, I'm clearly against it.

Q. So then would you rather the TOUR stay status quo, even if it means that there are a couple of events a year that you would have to use a different ball?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Well, I just think if it's going to come to this point it's like what's -- why are this group of call it 5- to 15-handicapped amateurs determining the rules of golf for professional golfers or why are they saying that we have to do something? So is it something where down the road where it's like, you know what, then fine, if you want to change something based off of your data that we feel like is pretty biased and incorrect and self-centered to what you believe in, then maybe we'll just create our own or we'll do our own thing.

So I don't know where the TOUR stands on that. I can't speak on behalf of what they're planning on doing. But to my knowledge, they haven't necessarily been on board with it or wanting to pursue the rolling the ball back. I mean, I'm all for not letting it go any further. And I think this is another important thing, like, this would help me. Rolling the ball back is only going to help, I feel like, somebody who hits it far and is a good ball-striker. It's just an advantage for me even more so, I feel like, than I have and I'm still not for it. It's just -- it's a bigger picture. It's about the game of golf. If I can hear some reasons that claim it's better for the game of golf, then so be it, but I've yet to hear any.

Q. You've been playing the Valspar for about the whole length of the sponsorship of Valspar. Have you noticed any changes in the event in terms of what happens out there on the course during the week from

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when you first came here in 2015, I think it was?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I mean, Tracy's unbelievable, Tracy West. I mean, she's done such a spectacular job with this event and truly makes myself, my team, all the other players feel very wanted here, which, you know, is a cool feeling, just in terms of the hospitality, just little things of taking care of all of us in little specific ways. It's great. I think it's a fantastic tournament that I know guys that have come here and played that have been able to work it into their schedule understand it, and I know that there's other guys that would love to play here that just kind of can't make it work in their schedule.

So it's an unfortunate timing-wise, but I know that there's a handful of us that we're going to do all we can to make it work because not only is the golf course great, but Tracy and everybody on the team does a great job of making this tournament fantastic. It seems like more and more people are coming every year. I don't know, the tent behind No. 12 seems to get a little rowdier and rowdier, so I know that they're enjoying that. Yeah, it seems like it's all positives.

Q. This golf course hosted the J.C. Penney Classic, a mixed event for a really long time. Now for the first time in a long time since the '90s there's a mixed event that's going to be on the schedule. Just curious what your thoughts are on that coming back and if you might play.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's very cool. I think it's going to be really cool opportunity for, obviously, those ladies to showcase their talent with us and for us to -- I think it's going to develop some really cool friendships. I mean, I'm very close with Jess, and I'm not as close with Nelly as I am Jess, so my two partners that I had potentially in my mind are taken already, so... (laughing.)

I'm not sure in terms of -- I mean, I don't even know what I'm necessarily doing the rest of the summer, let alone in December. But I think it's going to be great. I think it's going to be great for golf, it's going to be great for women's golf, which is obviously huge. It's going to get some, them some exposure that is well deserved. I'm sure there's going to be a lot of competitiveness to it, which is what -- all of us are athletes and very competitive and in our respected sport. So I think it will be good TV.

THE MODERATOR: Perfect. Thank you, Justin. Best of luck this week.

JUSTIN THOMAS:

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