

American Century Championship

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Lake Tahoe, Nevada, USA

Edgewood Tahoe

John Smoltz

Press Conference



Q. Have you been out on the course yet?

JOHN SMOLTZ: I went Monday and played Monday and did not play yesterday and won't play today. So I'm changing my approach.

Q. How is the course playing compared to what you've seen in years past?

JOHN SMOLTZ: This is the fastest I've seen the greens this early in the week. I don't know if that's great news for the field, but the greens were outstanding and the course is in fantastic shape. So the winter must have treated this place very well.

Q. Second place last year. You're 4.5-to-1 to win this year. What do you think you've gotta do this year better than you did last year?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Every year, I know what it takes. It's gotta make putts. I just don't make enough birdies. I'm too conservative early, and I play my way into it and try to race back on Sunday.

Last year, Pacific Palisades, I was just super steady, and I had seven or eight birdies and made it interesting. But you can't be that many points down and find yourself winning a tournament. I've spent more time in the last year and a half just putting and figuring out these greens. They are the equalizer.

I am going to -- I say it but until you get in a tournament and do it -- I'm going to be more aggressive with the putting. I think I try to ease every putt and lip them in. They don't lip in here. They just don't.

You've got to be able to know, look, every golfer that I know hates three-putting, but if you're putting for birdie in this tournament, a three-putt is not a bad thing, meaning if you give the birdie a chance to go in, then you've got a chance to maximize the scoring. But if you never give it a

chance and you make pars, which is what I do, then you're basically crawling into the top five, but you have no chance of winning. So I need to make birdies.

Q. You and Annika, obviously the top two probably who haven't won here yet. Is this the year for maybe either one of you?

JOHN SMOLTZ: I know for her, this has got to be one of the most exciting tournaments for her to play in. It's exciting for everybody, but for her to even compete the way that she does at this point is amazing, if you think about where she's at in her golf game and just the epic player, one of the greatest players of all time.

I love playing with Annika because I learn more about golf watching her swing a golf club than ever before.

For me, yeah, my time's running out. So I better figure out a way to get to that winner's circle. I have embraced more about tournament golf than ever before.

I played in a lot of tournaments this year. So just the nuances of playing in tournament golf. In years past, I might play in two tournaments before I come here. And this year I played in eight. I think that helps when you've done that a few times.

Q. Are those all celebrity tournaments or various --

JOHN SMOLTZ: Part of the tour we started called the Pro. So we've got six tournaments and now we're in our playoffs. So that part of the game.

I would argue that anybody that comes here that's a plus handicap, first time will have a hard time playing this golf course thinking on their expectation. So whatever your handicap is, add three shots to it for tournament golf, because that's typically what, over three days, what you're going to do.

In other words, I shoot par too much. I need to shoot under par. That's kind of what my mindset is.

Q. Seems like every year we add one or two names to



the list of people who can win it. Obviously probably Joe Pavelski was on it a few years ago. But where does it rank now compared to the previous 36 tournaments in terms of the competitiveness to win?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Well, celebrity golf and athletes in general have come, you could say, maybe through COVID, golf has become a very popular sport and athletes are playing it when they retire and they're playing it while they're playing.

It's more popular now than ever before, and guys and gals are getting better and better. The elite level of, let's say, 15 percent of this field has gotten subsequently better.

Like an active player, Austin Reaves, is a really, really good player for the Lakers. First year he started off, and everyone was, like, oh, man, you have a little drop-off. So he'll be much better this year.

But anytime there's a player you hear is a plus, and it's the first time coming here, you just know that this will be different.

So this is probably, over the last four or five years, there are more people that have a chance to win. And that's a good thing for the field.

Q. Charles's annual bet that they have up here to finish in the top 80, 75, whatever. It's now to 62-63. Any thoughts on that and where his game is?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Oh, he's come so far. I played with Charles 20 years ago. And where he is at now -- motivated, lost weight, looks great -- every year he's got a bar that he's trying to raise.

He's great for this tournament. I think he's going to finish below the 62 threshold, if that's what it is.

Q. We've been asking a couple of people their pick to win, and they've said you. What would that moment mean to you if you're able to get over the hump and win this?

JOHN SMOLTZ: You know, everything that I've done in my life is to aim to be the best at what I do. So that would just validate it. This has kind of followed my professional career. Expectations through the roof. Supposed to win multiple Cy Youngs, weren't winning it for the longest time.

I can tell you as an athlete what that feels like. It's not great. My expectations are higher than anybody else's, but at the same time, you cannot do anything about everybody else's.

So when '96 came and I won the Cy Young, it relieved a lot of people who were picking. But for me, I like tournament golf, but I only have one goal, and that's to win it.

So coming second four times or whatever it is, it's time to get to the winner's circle.

Q. How do the competitive juices compare from when you were on the mound versus now when you're teeing off?

JOHN SMOLTZ: The biggest difference for me -- it's probably a big contributor why I haven't won, to be honest -- on the mound I set the tempo, and I'm a fast tempo, fast player, probably too fast. And here you've got to wait. And every shot's kind of like your first tee shot.

I'm getting better at it, but there's really polar opposites. If I had to wait three minutes before every pitch, I would probably not be very good. Mentally, I like to get after it and go. And that's why I'll challenge anybody to fast golf.

But tournament is not fast golf. So you have to be able to play in that environment, and I'm learning. Maybe been a slow learner, but I'm getting better.

Q. You touched on it earlier. How important will it be to try to get out to a faster start on Friday so you're not playing catch-up?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, exactly. I think I averaged 15 to 17 points every Friday. My scoring goes up on Saturday. It goes up on Sunday. I would love for my scoring go up on Friday significantly. I think I had 28 points on Sunday last year, which put me in position to possibly -- but Joe Pavelski, he didn't take his foot off the gas.

I would love to be 23 points. I would take 23 points, I'm sure everyone would, but you think about the point system here. If you just avoid the double bogeys, if you get four to five birdies, which I get a lot in casual golf, then you're right in the mix.

But I've had 18 birdie putts out here before, which doesn't happen very often, and made one. So that can't happen. You've got to make a few more than one.

Q. Aside from golf, just with the ABS system, just if you could give your thoughts on what you've thought of it thus far.

JOHN SMOLTZ: I love it that it's only two, and it stays that way. Never ever, ever can we go to an automatic strike zone because baseball would be tremendously bad and

hitters would struggle mightily. The game would get a lot more boring.

Anything that's going to keep the game from slowing down. Now, what it's done, it's cut down on the swings from hitters, and it's added more walks.

So pitchers and hitters have to be accurate in their assessment. I've already seen some bone head challenges, some unbelievably stupid challenges, that you just know players lose time and space. I've seen a guy challenge two consecutive times in his own at-bat, lose both, and the team is out of challenges. I like it's two. I like the strategy of it. And obviously what we're seeing is umpires are much better than we thought or give them credit for.

It's about a 50/50 split right now. So as long as it stays there, I'll be a big fan of it.

Q. You came in second twice. Once with a score of 69 a couple years ago, and then last year with a 64. What is it that does this that you're trying to win and all of a sudden there's a little gentle fade-away?

JOHN SMOLTZ: What it is is I lead the entire field in pars every year. No one will ever get more pars than me in the last 16 years.

Q. They have to change the scoring system then, the pars are worth more?

JOHN SMOLTZ: No, well, that's what we have on our tour, but the pars are worth two. But it comes down to making putts. Those guys that make putts and have their six or seven birdies are going to have more chances to win. And I know it. What happens is I get into a mode where I get into par mode. I hate it. I wish I could get out of par mode, but when you play stroke play for most of your life, you just realize that the score is the barometer. And out here it's not. One bad hole's not going to lose it. But I think at one point I had 29 pars in a row in this tournament. That doesn't do anything. It's nice to have 29 pars, but you have to make birdies.

Q. You also had 64 points the year before in 2024 before your last finish at number two. And you were in fourth place when Mardy Fish was just going nuts with 83 points.

JOHN SMOLTZ: And that's what happens. I think when I look at all the things that I've done -- I'm going to do things differently this week. I'm not playing much golf. I play way too much golf when I get here. I get so excited, I can't stand sitting around. So I'll just play a ton of golf. This

year, I have not done that, and I hope that plays better, that I'm fresher. But this is the greatest tournament we get to play in.

When you tee it up for tournament play, you have to find a way to have fun and play great because I'm the best at playing in practice rounds. I can shoot 6-, 7-under with the best of them. You have to do that in the tournament. And that's what I'm looking to do this year.

Q. You said you were mentioning -- you mentioned you were focusing on putts. But last year you mentioned to me at some point that you had some kind of training thing for a swing, for power.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yes, ShockForce, a machine that allowed me to get my distance back so I could quit falling so far behind these young players who bomb it. So I've been training on that machine that allows me to get back to about 280-, 290-yard tee shots. At 59, I'll take that. We all want to hit the ball as far as we can. But at the same time you lose strength and you don't train for it. So I've been actually training for that while I'm home. Now, this year, unfortunately, I haven't been home much, because that's where my machine is. So my machine's home and when I'm home, I train and I feel great.

Q. Have you had any run-ins with the Phillie Phanatic this year?

JOHN SMOLTZ: I have not, but he's my favorite. Every time I say that, the other mascots get a little mad at me. But all those years in Philly, I just found myself watching him. He is absolutely awesome, and the All-Star Game being there, I head there right after Sunday's round and I'm looking forward to the festivities and the game in Philly.

Q. I believe you were trying to qualify for the U.S. Senior Open again this year.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yes.

Q. How did that go, and did you pull anything from that that may help you here other than making putts?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Well, they moved it to two rounds, two stages. I made it through the first stage and got to the second one in Florida. I was playing great golf when I got there. I had one hole that made the difference on hole number 11. I believe if 11 goes different, I'm going to be in. But at the same time it's always those learning experiences that get you to be a better golfer.

So 1-over going into 11 and just didn't get the right wind direction that I thought I was going to get. Instead of



making birdie, I made bogey. And at that point it's a shoot-out. Again, I just didn't make enough birdies. So that seems to be following me around. But I'm going to change that.

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