

John Deere Classic

Tuesday, July 6, 2021

TPC Deere Run

Silvis, Illinois, USA

Dylan Frittelli

Press Conference

AMANDA HERRINGTON: We'd like to welcome 2019 John Deere Classic champion Dylan Frittelli to the virtual interview room here at the John Deere Classic. It's been two years since you claimed your trophy here at the John Deere Classic for your maiden PGA TOUR title. I'm sure you've gotten this question a lot, but now that you're finally back here to defend, what's it been like this whole time waiting to defend?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: No, it's been interesting. It's been long and slow and lots of windup and leadup and conversations with the tournament director and other people associated with the tournament, but I'm glad it's finally -- it was the right decision last year to postpone it with it being the 50th anniversary and everything that was going on with COVID and sort of start of the PGA TOUR coming back out. I think it was the right decision that John Deere and everyone made.

AMANDA HERRINGTON: It will be your first title defense. I'm sure you will learn as you go through the week, but looking back on the season, two top 10s, 130 in the FedExCup standings so you're on the outside looking in; you know how important it is to have a big week, no more so than here. Talk about your season and where you're looking to get headed to the Playoffs.

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Yeah, my season has been pretty up and down. I've played well in some of the bigger tournaments so my World Ranking hasn't suffered too much, but I haven't made many FedExCup points. The regular events and all the other ones throughout the season I've pretty much struggled with.

Yeah, it's three, four tournaments left, I guess I'm only going to play two of them beyond this, but I'm just looking at just popping inside that Top 125, getting in the first playoff event and from there I'll bust it and try to get into the top 75 or 70 for the next event. I'm just looking to do well this week and try to make birdies and try and conjure up some of those feelings I had two years ago.

It's quite a long time ago. I played the back nine today and



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had some good memories coming through there, but yeah, two years is quite a long time in a young person's life. If I'm only 31 years old it's almost -- what is that, 5 percent of my life, 10 percent of my life?

Q. We saw you out there yesterday, saw you out there again today. Obviously I think front nine yesterday, back nine today. You mentioned the memories a little bit. Can you talk a little bit about that when you're out there, do you remember certain holes? This course obviously must fit your eye because you played very well two years ago. Talk about being back here and some of the memories you've had the last two days when it comes to the John Deere Classic and Deere Run.

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Yeah, I played the front nine yesterday and the back nine today. Front nine, I didn't have too many memories. I remember bogeying the first hole. I think it was the second round. That was the only bogey I had all week, so that was pretty memorable in a negative sense.

But course looked pretty similar. It's quite firm right now. Surprised how firm it was on a Monday and a Tuesday. I don't know about scoring or how they're going to play the course setup, but it's definitely going to be a bit firmer than the last time I played.

Memories on the back nine, I think it was cool once I got to 16, that was really where everything sort of focused in for me. I realized on 17 green that I was leading by two but I knew by the time 16 came with hearing some chatter in the crowd, so playing that par-3, that was a cool experience today. I actually hit it in the left hazard, it bounced off the green and rolled into the left hazard. I was playing a young kid, Luke, and he hit it nice and close and made birdie.

Yeah, not many things to like focus on or try -- I'm not superstitious, I'm not really looking for little nuggets here and there, but it's just nice to be back and have a few of those memories pop up.

Q. You've obviously had your struggles this year. Can you put your finger on which part of your game that you're working on to try and improve your results?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Yeah, I've worked with my coach



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obviously intensely to try and figure it out. We've outlined short irons and putting. Putting is a major one. My putting stats have been terrible this year, to be blunt.

But I know my technique and everything related to it is pretty sound. It's more so trying to make putts and be more creative and stop trying to be so analytical and worry about that technique. Trying to be more creative, more productive on making putts and doing drills that challenge me to make putts.

Short irons, I guess I'm driving it a little bit more in the rough with the gained distance and I'm hitting driver more often, so I find myself in that 160- or 150-and-in yardage a lot more often. I've also focused on that, trying to get that better.

In general I'm playing pretty well. I don't think, as a lot of guys say, my results don't reflect how I'm playing. I think mental side I've been a little bit distracted the last few months. I haven't really been too focused. Came out of a relationship recently, so hopefully that's going to get me on a nice straight trajectory to playing the good golf again. Once that kind of clears up and I've worked on those two things, I think I'll be back to top-70, top-60 player that I know I can be.

Q. I know you don't have anything to compare this to, but what's it been like having two years as a champ and then coming back now? Are those feelings of 2019 coming back, or does it feel like it's taken a little bit longer? Does it feel different with that gap in there?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: I'll say that the feelings I get off the course, somewhat similar, like driving the same roads and seeing the Solis family, staying in that same room, and then being in the clubhouse, seeing some people here and just kind of doing my normal routine, that has a lot more, I guess, cognizance in my mind of oh, yeah, this is the place where I won; this is cool; I was nervous before the final round, or these little things pop up.

But to try to answer that question about the golf course, there wasn't much about the golf course that sort of got me excited because it's all about the fans really and the people out there and the atmosphere, and those are the feelings that sort of stick in my mind. It's the adrenaline and ooh, we've got people watching, it's in the moment. Those are the things that stick with me. When you play a practice round with no fans, there's no comparison at all. The day-to-day things I definitely have felt like bring back memories and feel pretty good in that sense.

Q. Talk about the fans real quick; what's it been like for you? You've played on TOUR events without fans.

They're slowly getting back on the golf course now. How does that affect your game and your approach on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: It's been awesome having the fans back. I didn't realize -- we didn't realize, I think I'll speak for a lot of guys on TOUR, how much we missed them, and just that energy that you can thrive off having some fans and cheering you on and even just focusing you in knowing people are there watching you. It was cool in the beginning logistically driving to the golf course, play and leave and you don't have to worry about any traffic or anything, but the aspect on the course, trying to play, trying to perform, it's a whole lot better having people there and a whole lot more fun. I think guys probably got a little bored and tired and monotonous playing week in, week out without anyone watching. But having them out now last week, tons of fans, weeks before that, tons of fans, and I think the more fans we can get out, the better, and hopefully bring enjoyment to those people, as well.

I've spoken how it affects me, but I know other people are trying to come out and trying to watch golf because they love it, and hopefully more tournaments will open up.

Q. I know you've never defended before, been in this position. We talked to you on media day a little bit about it. Can you talk about your mindset coming into this week? Is it simply make a lot of birdies, put up good scores and win? And is it different with the responsibilities of being a defending champion? I know there might not be as much because of COVID and some of the restrictions, having to do these interviews and kind of some other things you have to do as a defending champion?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: My mindset is just to play well. I haven't really played well or contended all season really. I've got a couple top 10s or whatever I've had, but I really haven't been in contention much.

I'm just trying to get off to a good start, play well the first nine holes and get in contention, and from there if I obviously feel some juices flowing and I'm three, four, five shots within the lead on Saturday, I think that'll be a good achievement for me.

I like my chances when I'm in contention. I think if you had to do a statistical analysis whenever I am around the lead, I do perform well and I do have the presence of mind to do well.

My major goal is just to be somewhere near that lead on Saturday and try and get in contention because I know once I get there I can zone in and focus and do really well.

The thing I've struggled with is just getting there within three, four, five shots of the lead after 36 holes.

And then the question about the stuff around the interviews and extra things, it's nice. It's enjoyable. I know most guys probably are like, ugh, got to do this, got to do more media, but it's nice to be reminded that you won a tournament and people care about you and you've got some billboards and you've got your name up in lights. It's not often that it happens in your career, so I'm going to savor that.

Q. At the start of the year, and I know it's stiff competition to finish in the top two of the South African contingent, but were the Olympics ever an allure for you? Were they ever a goal?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Yes.

Q. And the fact that Si Woo and Sungjae Im are bypassing next week to prepare for the Olympics, what are your thoughts on that?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Yeah, I wanted to make the Olympics. That was a major goal for me, for my planning. I wanted to get in there, but there have been some other South Africans who have played really well. Even if I played better or to my potential, I don't think I would have been in that sort of top two with Louis and Christiaan being -- well, I guess Garrick Higgo has just gone ahead of Christiaan Bezuidenhout now, but to get into the top 30 is what it would have taken in the World Rankings, so that was a tough ask if we had to go back two years ago.

But yeah, I think hopefully in the next 15, 16 years I'll have an opportunity to play in the Olympics. It's a big thing coming from University of Texas where I was surrounded by tons of Olympians on the track team and swimming team, and it was something I was reminded of pretty much all throughout my four years when I had colleagues and teammates and friends as Longhorns going to the Olympics. It's definitely a big career goal for me.

Q. The approach, the decision by Sungjae Im and Si Woo Kim to skip the Open Championship to prepare for the Olympics, it kind of elevates the Olympics to a different level. Has there been any reaction in the locker rooms about that?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: No, I didn't even know that until you told me, so I can't speak for Sungjae and Si Woo. You'll have to ask them the question. But that's cool that they've done that. I think that's more probably just logistics for them. They may have to go back to Korea and fly into Japan from Korea for the Olympic committee and maybe they couldn't have done it logistically or it would have been

tough. I don't know what their decisions were around that, but you'd have to obviously get their feedback.

Q. As I understand, more than a gold medal or a medal, the opportunity apparently to avoid conscription has some of the motivation for them, as well.

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Yeah, that's for sure. I've heard that from Ben An. Obviously the Asian Games or Olympics they get to skip that stuff. I don't know much about Korean culture, but I'm sure they're very respectful of being selected for the Olympics.

Q. You sort of touched on it; you're one of a number of top South Africans; at the moment, 10 South Africans in the top 100 in the world. Does that kind of spur you on, that there's so many good players around you and to even play better yourself?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Yeah, for sure. It's awesome to see this next crop of guys coming through. Wilco and Garrick I guess are the newest additions to the top 100 and top-level South African golf. I keep trying to put a finger on what it is that we're doing in South Africa that keeps creating these players and everyone asks me that question and I can't give one simple answer. There's so many aspects to it.

But I do get worried sometimes that I'm like, oh, maybe there will come a day where we don't keep producing South Africans, so I'm trying to invest in the juniors. I've reached out to Golf RSA, the South African golf committee, to see how I could help, and I've done a couple -- I guess during COVID I did a few online Zoom chats with some of the elite academy amateurs and juniors just to give them some insight, and I'm hoping to help them out even more because when I was growing up it was cool to look up to those guys doing well, Retief and Ernie, but there was no real connection I had with those guys. So I think it's important to try and -- I'm 31 years old, get these youngsters now also sort of staying in contact with the amateurs and juniors and trying to inspire them because I think that can only help guys move on and make it to the next level.

Q. You mentioned you don't mind doing the interviews, the press conferences, you like seeing your image up on the billboards. Has that added any pressure to this week, and do you do anything different to prepare as a result of the extra responsibilities and extra exposure?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: Nope. I value every week just as much as the next. Maybe a major I might skip the week before or plan a schedule around it, but every tournament

I'm trying to make as many birdies as I can, go through my schedule as best I can. There's no real change in that. I'm a process-oriented guy, so everything has got to be done to the best of my ability, and if I'm not doing that, why am I even coming to play a tournament. So no, same function, same level of intensity. It's all the same effort.

Q. Does the Open Championship spot spur you on anymore? Is that any added incentive this week?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: I don't even know. Have we got that spot back?

Q. We got it back this week, yes.

DYLAN FRITTELLI: I guess it's back. I mean, I don't have enough medication with me for another seven or eight days, so that may be a little tricky. I'm sure they have medication in the UK, as well. But clothing, I think I have enough clothes. I don't have enough warm clothes, that's for sure, but besides that fact, yeah, I'm going to try and win, go play the Open Championship. It's obviously one of the biggest events we play, and I've really enjoyed the three that I've played in so far. Now that you tell me we have that spot, maybe I'll try a little bit harder and finish first instead of second or third instead of fourth if the top three guys are exempt already.

Q. Just to follow on the question about the state of South African golf and why it's thriving, are people asking you for a specific reason? Have you noticed people are more interested in South African golf now given what you guys are doing on the world stage? And then maybe just a follow-up, as well, on the conversations that you have with the youngsters, what are you trying to pass on to them in terms of what you're telling them back home?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: I wouldn't say there's that much interest over here in the States about guys asking. I don't think people here realize that we have 10 South Africans in the top 100. They're used to years of having Ernie and Retief in the top 10, and that's obviously commonplace for, what, 15, 20 years. Guys are like, 10 guys, okay, that's probably normal, but obviously you and I know that's not normal, 10, and probably seven of those 10 of young South Africans, guys under the age of 33 or 34. That's really awesome in my eyes.

Regarding the other youngsters, Wilco and Garrick, I played a practice round with them at U.S. Open. I obviously played with Wilco at the SA Open in December. I just quiz them. I try and see what they're thinking and just watch them play and see if there's any kinks in their armor and then I'll step in and try and offer advice, but with what

I've seen of Garrick there's very little to improve upon. He seems very focused. He seems very diligent with everything he does.

Wilco, same thing. I was very impressed at the SA Open with the sort of game that he has and thinking through shots and playing well. I know he hits it far and I thought that was all he had in his arsenal, but they're both very well-rounded golfers, so I don't think there's much that I can give on the technical or the performance side. Maybe I can help on the logistical side or try and guide them in the right way how to manage a schedule and what pitfalls not to run into off the course, but as far as I can see, those guys have done great.

I'm not sure who else there is to worry about or youngsters to give knowledge to. All the other guys seem to be around my age and have been doing it for eight or nine years, so there's not much to help there.

Q. Just wondering if you've had the opportunity to speak to Jon Rahm subsequent to his U.S. Open victory and your thoughts on karma and how that all played out.

DYLAN FRITTELLI: No, I haven't spoken to him. I think it's awesome that he's won. I mean, he was surely the next best player not to have won a major, in the history, I guess, and in the last five or six years. Yeah, that was an unfortunate event in Columbus. He took it well. I saw an interview where he said, hey, it's a rule, I knew it was a rule, and I think that's a great mindset to have. I think a lot of other players would have whined and worried, and oh, woe is me, that shouldn't have happened, but he took it on the chin and rolled with it. I think that speaks volumes for who he is, and then it also speaks volumes for how he prepared for the U.S. Open because he forgot about it and moved on. I think some people would just dwell on that for weeks and worry about it.

So I think more so than karma, I think it's credit to him for actively going about it, setting his mind right, forgetting about it and chasing down that next tournament.

Q. On that same regards with COVID, the TOUR announced recently that testing was going to be stopping here in the next couple weeks. You've been through this. You've got a pretty unique perspective of the whole thing. How do you feel about the TOUR getting back to, quote-unquote, normal, without any testing and the restrictions going away?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: I mean, I haven't obviously been briefed on all the stuff that went on behind the scenes with CDC and doctors and recommendations, but I trust the

TOUR, I trust the policies they put in place. I mean, yeah, I haven't heard of many -- Hideki got it, I guess, recently and there will probably be a few more guys to get it the rest of this year.

But I'm vaccinated. I'm not sure what the percentage of the TOUR is that's vaccinated. I'm sure over 60, 70 percent of the employees are vaccinated.

I think it's sort of an aftereffect now if there's a region or a tournament that's worried about it, about hot spots and things topping up come to the TOUR and negotiate and have a special exemption or maybe test on random weeks, but I don't see that happening. I think the U.S. are 150 million plus have had the vaccine in the U.S. now, so I think we're very fortunate to be in a geography and an area where that's sort of not a concern moving forward.

Q. Are you still being tested, even though you've had it and gone through protocols?

DYLAN FRITTELLI: No, I'm vaccinated so I'm not subject to the testing protocol for the next three weeks until the policy changes.

AMANDA HERRINGTON: Dylan, thank you again so much for spending time with us. Good luck this week.

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