

John Deere Classic

Wednesday, July 5, 2023

TPC Deere Run

Silvis, Illinois, USA

Zach Johnson

Caitlin Clark

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Zach Johnson and Caitlin Clark here in the interview room at the 2023 John Deere Classic. You've just come off the golf course in a steamy, humid weather into the nice cool interview room after the pro-am.

I guess, Caitlin, we'll just start with you. What was that experience like for you? I guess we would like to know a little bit about your golf game, to start with.

CAITLIN CLARK: It was really fun. I had a really good time. I thought I did a little better on the front nine. Wasn't as tired. Kind of got really tired on the back nine, but it was really fun.

I appreciate all the Hawkeye fans that were out there today. A lot of people that support the Hawks, support women's basketball, so that was super cool to see.

Just enjoying it because it's different for me. This is a little out of my comfort zone, so just tried to have fun with it.

Obviously, when you get to golf against the Ryder Cup captain, not many people get that opportunity, so it's pretty special.

THE MODERATOR: How much golf have you played, and when did you start the game? How did you get into it?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly I played when I was a little kid, started golfing with my dad, but then I didn't play much all throughout high school. Then kind of started again in college. I obviously am pretty busy, so I don't get to golf as much as I would like.

But I love to do it when I can get out. I love to go. Some other people on our team play, so that's fun. We obviously make it competitive. It's not like I'm just going out there and playing 18 holes by myself. We make it a competition, so that's what's fun about it.



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I try to get out once a week or play as much as I can. Not usually an 18-hole golfer. More of a nine-hole or twilight 12-hole. So this is a little much for me, but it was fun.

THE MODERATOR: Zach, welcome back. This is your 21st start here, I believe, at this event. You feel like you're the mayor of this event perhaps? Just some comments on coming back and what that experience --

ZACH JOHNSON: I don't know about mayor. More like jester.

I mean, it's well-documented this is a home for me. I don't really know how else to put it. I love coming back here. If I need to list the reasons why, we could be here for a while, but it really starts and ends with the people and certainly what this community is all about. I would say what the Midwest is all about.

But obviously Eastern Iowa is home. Having a relationship with John Deere and knowing what their priorities are, their prerogatives are for this community, it just makes it extremely easy and a highlight every year.

THE MODERATOR: One more question from me before we open it up for questions. Zach, it's been obviously a pretty busy year for you with the Ryder Cup captaincy. How have you compartmentalized playing, and how would you assess your season given all the extra responsibilities?

ZACH JOHNSON: The latter part of that question, my season has not been where I want it. Given that, I'm extremely encouraged.

I feel like I say that every time I'm here, but it's just factual. I so appreciate where my team is. I appreciate that they push me, encourage me, and frustrate me, if that makes sense.

I'm still motivated and wanting to play high-level golf, specifically win. I mean, as a competitor, there's no other real ultimate reason as to why you would compete, and that's how I work.

Now, the compartmentalization side of things is just that. I think the best players in the world, arguably the best athletes and I would even venture to say some of the best and most successful individuals, are really good at

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compartmentalizing. I would also say prioritizing.

The PGA of America, who is my partner in the Ryder Cup, is really, really, really efficient and really good at allowing me to still work and still go about what's important to me, whether it's my family or golf.

I'm able to kind of navigate this year. It's different, but it's also extremely -- I'm extremely grateful. I can still go out and do what I do.

It's a team effort. I haven't seen my family much as of late, which is kind of frustrating, but that's what I signed up for. My wife is going to Rome next week, so I'm not going to see her for a while.

Again, those are great issues, and we have great people around us, so yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Caitlin, not exactly a day off for you, as you look around this room and saw the galleries today. Can you talk about the experience and how much pressure you put on yourself to hit a few good golf shots today in front of the home crowd?

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I like to think I hit a few. I wasn't as good down the end, but there was a couple that were really good, especially on the first tee I hit a nice drive, which was fun.

Honestly, I wasn't really nervous. I mean, I don't -- golf is not my main sport. He might get nervous, but I don't really get nervous, but I guess I don't get nervous for basketball either.

More than anything just enjoying the experience. Like you said, this is not an off day for me, but it is something I really, really enjoy and love getting to do this.

It's just cool getting to interact with all the young kids that were here today and really enjoy being around them. I used to run around golf courses and want to go to golf events when I was a young kid or basketball events, and it can really change your life if they can have one interaction with you.

Just trying to make as much time as I can to sign an autograph for a young kid or give them a ball or give them a high-five because that goes a really long way.

Q. (Off microphone)

CAITLIN CLARK: I don't have much time for them, but

obviously this one means a little more. It's close to where I'm from. A lot of Hawkeye fans can come to this and support the community, so it was an easy yes.

Then obviously getting to play alongside Zach. I think this one is a little different, a little more special to me than any other pro-am that I could probably play in.

Q. As we were talking to you over that Zoom call last week, you said that you were just excited to get a chance to pick Zach Johnson's brain for nine holes today. But, Zach, I heard you talking to Jan Jensen saying -- I think the quote that you said is, "To say I'm a fan of Caitlin Clark would be an understatement." Were you a little starstruck today even getting to play alongside her?

ZACH JOHNSON: Oh, absolutely. I don't live in the State of Iowa, but when it comes to my attachment outside of my family certainly and outside of a couple other entities, right, specifically my foundation and I would say Transamerica, I'm a fan of the state and those that excel at a high level.

Then when you compound -- obviously we know that when she crosses half court, she's lethal. A lot of parallels there. I'm trying to figure out how.

I'm more of a fan of the way she and specifically the way Lisa and her team, Jan and her team, go about everything else. It's off the court that makes it easy to be a fan.

I'm not surprised because that's the way the university is, and it's certainly the way Iowans are in general. I just think that's the way you handle yourself, with integrity and class. But you work your butt off, and if success comes, you're going to have fandom. It's just the way it is.

Now, specifically this young lady on my right is transcendent given her talent, but I can't speak highly enough about how she handles herself, whether it's in interviews or just the way she goes about her work.

Obviously she's had a lot of awards and success, but she always goes back to her team. I have a team myself, and that's where I go back to because, as I'm assuming Caitlin would attest to, I don't want to speak on behalf for her, but you can't do it alone regardless of what the sport is or endeavor is.

You have to surround yourself around great people, and they're the ones that deserve at least a heavy dose of that credit, so it's easy.

Q. Caitlin, I want to go back to that Zoom call because you did mention the four hours. What did you learn



from Zach today that will help your game? And, conversely, Zach, I know you.

ZACH JOHNSON: Four hour, nine holes.

Q. You're a nut when it comes to Iowa sports. What did you learn from her today about Iowa athletics or recruiting or -- I know you. I know how you are with Iowa sports. Both of you guys on what you guys learned from each other today.

CAITLIN CLARK: First of all, Zach is pretty funny. I will give you that. He is a funny guy.

ZACH JOHNSON: Really? My wife, can she hear that?

CAITLIN CLARK: He is pretty funny. I don't know. We worked on my chipping a little bit.

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah. If we're going to get specific, yeah.

CAITLIN CLARK: Leaning more on my front foot, more weight on my front foot.

ZACH JOHNSON: We both hate the portal. We figured that out. The portal does no one any good.

CAITLIN CLARK: You're funny.

ZACH JOHNSON: I shouldn't say that. There's excuses for it. I'm getting too specific, but we did talk about that. Just the evolution --

CAITLIN CLARK: He is trying to recruit for us. He is our new biggest advocate, Zach Johnson.

ZACH JOHNSON: I'm making deals for Caitlin. I figured it out. She's got at least three years of eligibility left.

CAITLIN CLARK: He talked to the NCAA. He has it figured out.

ZACH JOHNSON: They can't get anything done anyway, so might as well just try to get it done now. Three years left, a couple of corporate deals. Shouldn't be a problem.

(Laughing)

Q. Good work out there, Caitlin. I was talking to Coach Jensen earlier, and she mentioned how much she enjoyed seeing your basketball mentality transfer to the course. Tell me a bit about how you mentally prepared for your JDC debut and what approach you took today?

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I think just taking a deep breath, and that's the same thing with basketball. You know, don't feel the pressure so much.

I think even Zach would say the mental side of basketball or golf is way more important than the physical skill or hitting a shot or hitting the ball. It's so much more mental.

I think throughout my career, I'm only 21, so being able to learn that has been hard, but it is really, really true. You have one bad thing, you have to recover, whether it's a turnover, whether it's a missed putt, whether it's a missed chip.

I think that's the biggest thing is things are going to go wrong. That's how sports work. It's how you respond to it. That's how I have approached things last year and throughout my career moving forward.

Q. Zach, when is the last time you were the second most popular Iowan on a golf course?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, you could argue that maybe -- Connor McCaffrey was walking with us today too, so I'm probably third or fourth down the list. My nephew --

CAITLIN CLARK: You're No. 1. No, your nephew is No. 1.

ZACH JOHNSON: He is definitely No. 1, Declan. Yeah, that's awesome, man. Wouldn't have it any other way. You would be lying to yourself if you said you were surprised.

I'll just tell you, here's a good story. I'm at Augusta National on Sunday before the tournament, and the drive, chip, and putt is commencing. They asked some of the former champions to hand out awards to these youngsters, which is awesome.

You have a representative from essentially every big body in golf. Obviously you have a green jacket there. You have somebody from the PGA of America. You have somebody from the R&A and then the USGA.

My USGA associate was the Commissioner of the WNBA. I'm trying to get this done with. It was ten minutes of my time, which is great because I was also playing and hosting a guest, but the buzz around Augusta National that afternoon was the game coming up that afternoon.

So my point is I don't know if transcendent is the right word, but what happened this year in the NCAA women's tournament as an Iowan, but also a fan of sport, was just spectacular.

I would argue, shoot, your game against Georgia was amazing.

CAITLIN CLARK: Too close.

ZACH JOHNSON: Fair. They were tuned in. This Commissioner gal, sweet gal. She just, like, she's got to just go pro next year. She has three years of eligibility left. It was great. It was great.

I just think that speaks volumes to where the sport is going. Certainly what she's doing and some of her peers are doing. I mean, she would say it too. You can go down the list. What's the girl at UConn? She's a stud.

CAITLIN CLARK: Paige.

ZACH JOHNSON: These athletes are just -- it's impressive. I hope it continues to grow, but I know a lot of it is her doing. It's impressive.

Q. Is there a parallel? Obviously in golf Tiger Woods was transcendent.

ZACH JOHNSON: Sure. Yeah, I don't know. I'm not smart enough to know that. I know what the numbers say. I mean, more people watch the NCAA women's than the NCAA men's, and I'm a huge fan of college basketball in general.

So I don't know what the parallels will be, but ratings are ratings. You can't hide data; right? More so I am just in awe. Even when they won, they handled it with grace. When they lost, they handled it with grace. That speaks volumes. That's what it's all about.

As an Iowan and a Hawkeye fan, you want to see them win, but LSU was good, shoot. That's where they paid tribute.

Q. Did you get one of these today?

ZACH JOHNSON: I did not. No, no. We're going to go play pick-up ball here later this afternoon, so maybe I'll get that in her arena.

Q. Caitlin, were you looking to the bench for a blow at any point on the back nine?

CAITLIN CLARK: I was. I needed a sub for a little bit. I'm, like, Zach, can you just hit all my shots for me? No, it was fun.

I got a little burned. Got to get my tan on.

ZACH JOHNSON: Good problem.

Q. Caitlin, I think we've asked you several times this year sort of to put the year in perspective, but things keep happening. How does this rate with everything else, National Championship game, National Player of the Year, the Honda Cup, to have a chance to play with the Ryder Cup captain?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it's really different, and that's what makes it so unique and so special is not many people have this opportunity, and to do it essentially 45 minutes from where I get to play basketball in our state is pretty cool. That's one of the reasons I'm here.

But I think it's just really unique and special, and it's different. I haven't had many opportunities where I get to play a different sport at a PGA TOUR event. As many of you know, I'm a big fan of golf. I love to play it and be around it. I think it's just really fun. Every Sunday I usually have the TV on and am watching.

Obviously, a big fan of Zach. He is a great guy. That's what every single person says that has met him. Very deserving to be the Ryder Cup captain.

Unfortunately, we're going to be in Italy, but not right around that time. In Coach Bluder wants to let me skip the first month of school and stay in Italy, I would be perfectly fine with that, but I doubt that happens.

Q. What's the funniest joke Zach told you today?

ZACH JOHNSON: Oh, I don't have any jokes. I'm not that creative.

Q. What's the funniest thing that happened during your round or --

CAITLIN CLARK: I don't know.

Q. Any anecdotes?

ZACH JOHNSON: That's a good question.

CAITLIN CLARK: The funniest things you can't say. You can't repeat the funniest things.

ZACH JOHNSON: I don't know what you're referring to. I'm kidding.

Q. Somebody shot up a firework (Inaudible). That was something else.

ZACH JOHNSON: That was not comedy.

Q. It was for us.

ZACH JOHNSON: Fair point.

Q. I've got one for both of you. Caitlin, you played with a fellow out there who was 13 years old, who looked to me to be sensational. What did you think of him? Also then, Caitlin, you've played with sort of men's golf's version of you, I guess, on the front nine. What did you think of Ludvig?

CAITLIN CLARK: He was a great guy, number one. He was very soft-spoken, very kind, but I think he said this was just his fourth pro event, which is pretty incredible.

I think he has a really, really bright future, but he was awesome. Not as loud and as outgoing as Zach is, but he can definitely strike the ball. Yeah, he is going to be a fun one to watch. I'll definitely keep my eyes on him.

He was great. Got us off to a nice start. I think we were 7-under with him and finished it strong with Zach.

Q. (Off microphone)

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah. Great kid, Henry from Dubuque, Hank. Really good golf swing. Hits it in the middle of the face. Makes putts.

I would hate to be 25, 30 years old playing out here because that's what you are competing against is these kids that are just really good. Great demeanor too.

I was impressed with how he read putts. You know, if you are around the game as much as I am, there's an art to that. When you get on greens of this nature, it's hard. It's hard to putt. I'm assuming Caitlin -- they're fast, so speed is everything. This young man saw the breaks, saw the line. At that age, he was impressive.

Q. Caitlin, what went through your mind after taking that first stroke? How do you say some of those feelings compare to taking your first shot in some of your more high-stake in-season outings?

CAITLIN CLARK: First tee shot went pretty well. It went straight. It was probably one of my better hits of the day.

I don't know. I wasn't too nervous. Kind of just don't waste time. Just go up there and just hit it. I think it's kind of the same with basketball. You have to kind of settle into the game a little bit. Same here with golf. You have to settle in after the first hole.

It was really just like you're out there playing with nobody watching, and I think that's sometimes how it is playing basketball. You block everything out. I don't always hear the crowd even though they're really, really loud. You kind of get in the zone of doing what you do, and the nerves kind of fade away.

Q. Caitlin, quick one for you. Did Ludvig know who you were?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think he had been informed who I was. I don't know. He went to Texas Tech, so he said he was friends with some basketball players at Texas Tech, so I think he knew.

Yeah, he was a good guy. He said he needed me to teach him some lessons how to shoot, so he was funny.

Q. Zach, for you. Try to get back to golf here. With the collaboration that's happening now between all the tours and LIV, how has that affected your position as Ryder Cup captain? Is that going to alter the makeup of your team? Have you been told anything as to what's going on in that realm?

ZACH JOHNSON: That's a good question, given the climate. Number one, what's transpired, there's still a lot of unknowns. I think we have a pretty good idea as to what the intentions and motivations are for the PGA TOUR.

But when it comes to the Ryder Cup, our system, if you will, was already intact arguably last year even when we decided as a Ryder Cup committee as to how we wanted to navigate the landscape.

My point in saying that is that what's transpiring in professional golf from a competitive level, competition level, is PGA TOUR; right? It's not PGA of America. So the individuals that are Americans that play on other tours that are not the PGA TOUR, they could play, I mean, technically the Latin Tour or the Asian Tour or wherever. More times than not they're going to be members of the PGA of America for a number of reasons. Our liability insurance is number one and some other benefits.

These guys that left the PGA TOUR that had status and left to play on that other tour, the LIV Tour, they're still members of the PGA of America, so they are still able to garner points. They're able to play in the PGA Championship as a result because that's what the PGA of America runs. Obviously, technically, can still be a part of Team USA.

Q. Where does Brooks factor in?

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ZACH JOHNSON: Brooks is third on the list. The top six earn their berth after the BMW. I don't know the date. Mid-August-ish in Chicago. So after that Sunday the top six are solidified, and then we make our six picks. The next week is the Tour Championship. The Tuesday after the Tour Championship is when I make the picks.

We'll formulate 12 by then, but he has worked his way -- he worked his way to second after the PGA Championship because of how well he played at the Masters and at the PGA Championship. The majors kind of last year too, but they were smaller in points.

He is third now after Wyndham Clark has had a nice little run. He has a really good chance of making the team, earning his way on the team, which is extremely impressive.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Zach and Caitlin. Appreciate your time, and good luck in the future.

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