

The Northern Trust

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Liberty National Golf Club

Anirban Lahiri

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome back to the playoffs. We're at the Northern Trust here. You've had an exciting journey to get to this place. Just talk about your excitement to be back playing in the FedExCup playoffs.

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I'm thrilled. I'm delighted. It's been a challenging year, and I've had a few hurdles to jump over, and I'm happy that I find myself here. How far I go from here, the reins are back in my hands, and I can actually -- if I just play well, I can make it even better. So, yeah, I'm really excited.

Q. Before we open it up to the media, can you touch on your recent trip to Japan and the Olympics and how special that was for you.

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: It was fantastic. Obviously, being the second Olympics for me, I thought it was way better than my experience in Rio for many different reasons. I started better, but obviously disappointed with the way I played. To some extent, I feel like I kind of ran low on energy, and something that I have to manage better if I ever get another opportunity, but everything was brilliant. No regrets at all, and I'm so glad that I got to be a part of it. It's something that will always be close to my heart. Any time I get to wear the tricolors, it's what I live for.

Q. Can you just give us an understanding and an appreciation as to what maybe finishing 122nd in the FedExCup means as compared to maybe first or second in the Korn Ferry Tour finals.

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: It's a very big difference. I know you understand a lot of it, but I'll answer it as briefly as I can. I think eligibility is a very, very big criteria on the PGA TOUR. There's a lot of different kinds of status that you could have. Obviously, if you won a tournament, that's the ideal status because that guarantees you every start more or less, and then like I said, we're in the playoffs. The deeper you go into the playoffs, the better you finish on the FedExCup, the better your eligibility for next year.

But if you do make it into the top 125, which is your



question, you're almost guaranteed to play all the full field events. When I say full field events, it is barring the invitationals, which is Bay Hill, the Genesis, and Memorial, and also the CJ and the ZOZO Cup, which are the other two short field events. So outside of these five events, you're pretty much guaranteed entry into every other event, including THE PLAYERS Championship, which is almost like a fifth major.

Whereas if you are, say, even third or fourth from the Korn Ferry category, which comes in two or three categories after 125, if you don't play well in the early part of the season, which would be September through end of November, you could find yourself in a situation where you may get 10 or 15 less starts compared to where you would be even if you were the last guy from the 125 category.

So the biggest difference for me personally, having been on the other side of the fence, is I can actually plan a schedule, actually know that I'm going to be eligible and I will be able to enter a lot of the events, whereas in the last couple of years, a lot of times you're waiting to see am I going to enter, is something going to withdraw, am I going to get an invite. That just helps you to plan your year better, plan your conditioning better, plan your fitness better, plan everything. It's a huge difference mentally in terms of your approach.

You can also pick and choose which events you play and which ones you skip, you know, what golf courses fit you and what golf courses don't fit you because that's not something in your hands if you're in the other category because you're going to play whatever you get into. So it's a big deal.

Q. I just want to know, as to in terms of your physical fitness, in terms of what the COVID took out of you and the slow recovery part, how closer are you to where you were before the pandemic hit you? And the second part being how much of the fall season will you be looking up to? Around '16, '17, '18, you always had a good start in the fall season, and then you kind of consistently built upon it.

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: Good questions for me. I think it took me about two full months before I could start getting back closer to my normal speed and normal strength. So I would say by the end of June I started feeling a lot better,



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but it just so happened with my category and with the schedule it was this year, I played a lot of events in June and July. There was one week on, one week off, one week on, one week off. It was really good for me in the sense that coming out of COVID I was able to manage my energy levels really well.

But going into the last spot of the season, obviously, there was no choice. I had to go for broke. I had to take every opportunity. So I played four weeks on the TOUR starting with the Travelers Championship through the Barbasol, and then I had maybe four days off before I left for Tokyo. Tokyo, as you know, was extremely hot and humid, and it took a lot out of us. Then when I came back, I had another four days before I started last week.

I would have said that my conditioning was really good, but these last 45 days, playing four weeks, traveling, playing in Japan, coming back, has definitely taken some out of me, so I would say I'm probably close to like 60 or 70 percent. So my main focus these last two weeks has been managing my energy, managing my workload, making sure I'm getting enough practice and enough rest so I'm still fresh.

To answer the second part of your question, I think it would basically be directly dependent on how deep I go in the playoffs. If I can get myself into BMW and maybe even into the TOUR Championship, then I'll definitely play less in the fall. But if I don't go as deep as I would like to go, I'll probably have more time off between when this postseason finishes and when the next fall season starts, and accordingly, I'll play more or less.

Also, the other thing is depending on how deep I go in the playoffs, I'll know whether I'll get into ZOZO and CJ, which are the shorter field events. So there's still a little bit of permutations and computations, but, yes, I'm still looking to play five or six events in the fall. I always do well in the fall. I think I come out fresh and come out with a renewed sense of focus.

Obviously, just the way things have been these last two years, you want to get off to a good start because you never know how deep it's going to go.

Q. Just a small follow-up. When you say going deep, what do you mean?

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: When I say going deep in a playoff, it basically refers to where you finish the postseason in terms of your FedExCup ranking. What I meant was I started this week as 121, but if I play myself into BMW, that means I'm already in the top 70. Then depending on how I play in BMW, that number might change. So when I say going

deep, it basically means how low can you get your FEDEX number?

Because if I'm in the top, say, 50 or 60, then I'm going to get in all the invitationals, all the limited field events, and suddenly my schedule looks different. But say I finish 115 or 110 or 100, I'm not guaranteed I have the additional, or you could say bonus events. So then your schedule changes again because you know you're not going to get into those events.

So depending on your FedExCup number, you could be looking at an ordinary schedule even though you're fully exempt from the 125 category. That's what I meant.

Q. Just wanted to know of your background of playoffs. So how excited are you? You did mention that a bit in answer to an earlier question, but if you could answer how important are the playoffs and how excited are you to be back in the playoffs?

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I'm thrilled. I'm absolutely thrilled. I think the playoffs are basically we're grinding, we're doing our best. Obviously, we're trying to win, that's the main goal, but the second goal outside of that is to make sure you get in the playoffs. It basically means I get to have a job next year for sure. It means I get to improve on my year. You can have an average year and just about make it to the playoffs, and then if you play really well in these next two or three weeks, that could be the difference between an average year and one of the best years of your career.

So basically, these next two or three weeks are probably, after the majors, the most important weeks in the year for all of us who play on the PGA TOUR because it defines and determines what next year looks like, what opportunities you're going to have, and you know where you would classify your year as a success or a mediocre year or a poor year.

So, yes, I think the playoffs is where it starts. So once you get into the playoffs, basically, you're giving yourself an opportunity to be able to do that. So it's in your hands now, you know, how good a year or not it turns out to be kind of depends on how you play these next two, three weeks.

Q. So I am hearing about your excitement to play here in the playoffs. Also, I want to know have you ever played at the Liberty National? Because it has a very storied past. It's a historic club. Have you ever played, and what is your idea about the club you're going to play?

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: So I've only played here before in the

Presidents Cup in 2017, and even though I have played here in that event, I think there's a big difference between playing this week and playing that week, primarily because that was a match play event, this is a stroke play event.

The golf course was set up differently for match play. In fact, even the course routine was different. The 1st hole and the 18th hole was changed in 2017 so that it fit the match play format better. Now that we're playing the stroke play format, it's going to go back to the standard routine, where 1 through 18 is going to be how the golf course was initially designed for stroke play.

I haven't yet actually gone out and played, so I can't tell you what the difference is in terms of the course conditions or the setup. The other difference is I'm here now in August as opposed to October or late September. I don't even remember exactly when it was. So the weather's different. It's a lot warmer now. When we played last time, it was a lot cooler. That also kind of changes how the golf course plays.

So, yeah, I've been here. I kind of know what to expect. I know what the golf course looks like, but, again, this is going to be a readjustment for me in a way, refamiliarize myself with the layout of the golf course, and more specifically with the conditions this week and also the strategies. Your strategy changes when you're playing match play and when you're playing stroke play. It's completely different.

But, yeah, I have good memories. I had a very memorable day here four years ago, so there's definitely a good, positive connection with the venue. Hopefully, I can build more positive memories this time around.

Q. Can I ask you another question? You were cheering on Aditi Ashok during the Olympics, and she was on the verge of winning, and you also made in your tweet, you made a comment about getting more public course events and more support, garnering more support for golf. Do you think this is the right time, the right moment when obviously she has been a trailblazer for golf, especially women's golf, and you have been flying the flag high in the Presidents Cup and in the World Cups also you have represented, so many number of tournaments you have represented India.

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I don't think there's ever a bad time with -- there's a whole conversation about public courses and public driving ranges. It's been going on now for easily over a decade. I've been a pro myself now for, well, 14 years, starting my 15th year now, and really haven't seen any more ranges or public courses that have come up.

I understand there are a lot of other challenges. There's a lot of premium to real estate and what we need to use it for. We have a lot of other challenges in our country, and I'm totally respectful of that, but it doesn't take a lot to have a small driving range. Liberty National itself, if you look at the history, was built on what used to be a garbage dump, and we have another couple of golf courses in America where we've had PGA TOUR events, which has a similar history. So what's stopping us from maybe doing that? There is a lot of scope for us to be able to take waste areas or areas that are not going to really be of prime usage and convert it into something that can be constructive and meaningful for sport in general, and golf is one of those sports.

So the fact that there were so many eyeballs on golf, thanks to Aditi, the way she played, the fact that a lot of people were talking about it and a lot of politicians and government officials were congratulating and waving about it, which I'm so glad to see. I'd love to see some action being taken towards having more of us, more athletes and other people who could go ahead in the future Olympics and do something meaningful for the country. We all know what a medal at the Olympics means to our country, but we also need to be able to develop on a grass roots level.

You and I can't do as much at the grass roots level as the authorities can. So my tweet and my plea was more to do with that because there are opportunities. We don't have to make 400 acres sprawling luxury golf courses, but you could make three small ranges in areas that we have land that's not going to be used for something else, that nobody's stopping us from doing that, but somebody needs to take the initiative. That was what my plea was more about because that's where you're going to find the diamonds in the rough. That's where you're going to find the talent. You're not going to find it if there's nowhere for someone to go and even get introduced to the sport.

That's how I passionately feel about it because I want to grow the sport, I want people to play the game, and I also want to change the perception. This whole perception that it's a rich man's sport, it's an elitist sport, it needs to go away, but it won't go away unless someone can play 100 rupees and learn how to play golf, and that's not going to happen unless you have a public range or public driving course and have access. So it's like a cycle. It can either be a vicious cycle or it can be a constructive cycle, and it's about changing that.

Q. Just wanted to ask your position now in the FedExCup playoffs, where you're sitting, and with chance to get into BMW, do you change how you approach this week on whether you need to be



aggressive? And secondly, just a followup to the question about being at Liberty National where you had that Presidents Cup experience, with quail hollow being less than a year away, is that also on the horizon for you?

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: Yeah, I think at the end of the day, I've been in this situation so many times in my career, and what I've found over the years is you just focus on what you need to do. You focus on hitting fairways. You focus on hitting it close. You focus on making those putts. You really focus on making as many birdies and minimizing your mistakes. I know it sounds like a broken record, but really that's what you have to do.

Any changes in strategy are only going to come in on a Saturday or a Sunday. If you are able to do what I just said well, only then can you find yourself in a position where there is a need or there is a benefit in changing your strategy. Even at the Olympics, it was the same thing. It was like, oh, you know you're going to need to medal, you need a top three. Would any of us have played differently on a Thursday or Friday? I don't think so.

The idea is to work yourself into a position where you get to a Saturday back nine or a Sunday where you now know, okay, I'm four shots behind medal positions or I need to shoot 8-under today, or I'm in medal position, I need to minimize the mistakes, and do this. But nothing really changes until you can get yourself in that position.

So even though I know what I need to do to get to the next event, I don't think it's going to alter how I go about my golf because, only if I play that way, I'm going to maximize my chances to play my best. At the end of the day, it's only if I play my best that I'm going to keep moving forward. So that's got to be my mentality.

As far as the Presidents Cup is concerned, you said it's a year away, and it's so good to see so many of the internationals playing phenomenally well, whether it's Abraham Ancer, Scotty played well last week, Gracey played well. There's a lot of us who are doing really well. It's going to be a nice, stiff challenge to get into the team. So I know I have to consistently keep playing well. Again, it goes back to what I just said. You just keep doing what you're supposed to do, and the results take care of itself.

Q. Just two small questions, and it depends how long you want to answer it actually.

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: Ball's in my court, okay, I see.

Q. Number one, it's your sixth year on the PGA TOUR, and I don't think people, at least back home, appreciate

what you have managed to do, but what does it tell you about yourself that six years on the PGA TOUR even without winning once, it's difficult and you managed to do it. What does it say about yourself? And the number two question I have is driving. I mean, how well you are driving the golf ball and what has really happened in this last one year that has made that change. You're driving phenomenally well at the moment.

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I'll answer your first question. I think what that tells me is I need to win. It's been too long. Also, I consider this as my seventh year because the one year before I was fully exempt, I still played 12 times, and I still almost kept my card. So I feel like I've been here seven years or seven seasons.

No, it's a big positive for me, the fact that I've kind of not played my best -- I've not even been close to my best, I know that, but I've still managed to keep myself here and keep giving myself the opportunities.

And going back to like how I started the answer, I really need to win. I really need to get that off my chest. I need to get that, you know, albatross off my shoulders, cross off my neck in a way. But I also feel like I've been through so many cycles, so many ups and downs and ups and downs and challenges physically, challenges mentally, emotionally. Being away from home, beginning to make this TOUR and this place my home, a lot has happened. So to that extent, I feel like I'm in a good place right now with my game and with everything else. So hopefully this next season, call it my seventh or my eighth, will be the season when I finally get my first win.

And as far as my driving is concerned, I think it's been a combination of equipment change that has made a huge difference. I went free agent last year, which basically means I don't have an equipment contract with any one company. I think that's really allowed me to play the best 14 clubs that I could play for myself. That's definitely helped me a lot.

I think some of my shortcomings was because of contractual obligations that was inhibiting me, and also the fact that I've started working again, more specifically on my fitness, trying to get stronger, also working on my biomechanics with my trainer here, Ken Macdonald, who's really helped me get faster as well, but more than faster, get more efficient, which is why I might not have 120 miles of club speed, but I'm still able to get the ball out there well over 300 yards when I need to.

And those things are important right now, the way the game's moving. If you don't have that, you're going to find

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it hard to stay competitive on this TOUR. So like I said, I'm doing most of the things. I think over the next few weeks, months, my main challenge is going to be to get back to my fitness levels or maybe even better my fitness levels to pre-COVID. Get my strength and energy levels up to where they were maybe last fall when I was playing my best in the recent past and kick on from there.

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