

Sony Open in Hawaii

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Waialae Country Club

Zach Johnson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'd like to welcome Zach Johnson into the interview room here at the 2023 Sony Open in Hawaii. Zach, an important year ahead of you this year. You're making your 18th appearance here at this event; won once before.

Just some opening comments on the year ahead.

ZACH JOHNSON: It's always first week of school kind of thing. Love coming back to this place. I don't like coming here without my family. That part kind of stinks. But at the same time, that's part of the job.

I love it. I love everything about the golf course, the tournament, certainly what Sony has done. Excited for the year. A lot on the horizon. A lot of certainly heavy responsibilities, but all of which I welcome. Can't wait for what certainly what the fall will hold.

Between now and then, a lot going on. A lot of decisions, a lot of, you know, just cool things that will start to surface here. For the most part it's been pretty slow, but it will start to pick up steam shortly, and that's a good thing.

The Ryder Cup has some substance, so an honor to be a part of it.

Q. Just talking about your golf first, but all the stuff that's going to happen in the fall, what are you working on? What do you expect of yourself as you juggle the things you're doing?

ZACH JOHNSON: Had a little -- I shouldn't say a little, had a pretty meaty, more than one, but a meaty meeting with my coaches over the break. Laid out some pretty honest items, goals, objectives. There was a lot of candid discussion, and, I mean, I probably should have said it after my first comment, I'm a golfer first, so I want to play good golf.

I want to win golf tournaments, and I would love to make my team and not play. So that is a priority. In order to do that though, a lot of work has to be done. A lot of, you

know, work in the dirt, to be cliché, has to be done.

I'm looking forward to that. I think the beauty of where I am right now is that my body is still good and I can still go out and play a full schedule and still maintain other responsibilities. So that's a pretty unique posture.

Yeah, I'm excited for this year. I've done a lot of work and more to come.

Q. Are you guaranteeing us that if you made the team on points you would definitely not play?

ZACH JOHNSON: No, I didn't say that. I would like to be in the position to have that choice. That would be a really great problem.

Q. That's fence sitting?

ZACH JOHNSON: Fence sitting?

Q. What's the thing you're working on the most? If it's in the dirt, where...

ZACH JOHNSON: No, no, we've assessed everything. We've chewed on stats, we've chewed on numbers, chewed on, well, even opinions, and the subjective, too.

I think it's not rocket science at this point, but in order for me to play good golf, I've got to drive it really, really good. I've got to hit my wedges really, really good. Obviously hit putts. So those are my three areas of focus. My practice is set up accordingly.

You know, from there, obviously playing golf tournaments, and I would say courses that probably lend itself to my style of game is a portion of that. I feel like I've won on courses I shouldn't win on and feel like I played poorly year after year on courses I could flourish on. If you play good, you play good.

But I love where my team is and the accountability. That's probably the best word we've tried to bring into the mold. I love where that is at right now.



Q. I had a couple questions: You're 45?

ZACH JOHNSON: Almost 47.

Q. And you talk about health and playing and this, that, the other. Is it hard not to subconsciously give up on the competitive side of your career knowing the position you're in, the role you're in?

ZACH JOHNSON: I don't know. I mean, that's actually a pretty good question. I think about those kind of situations, like they might enter your mind briefly. I try not to bring the golf course home with me, but golf is always part of my thoughts every day. Regardless if I have two weeks off, two months, or two days off, it's always in my mind.

So I can't not try to get better at this game. I feel like my mentality this year in a lot of ways and in a number of areas in my life, is just where my feet are right now. Stay right there.

Yeah, obviously there is great experiences in the past and a lot to come in the future, but I want to relish the time right now. So what that means for me is, you know, whatever that could be, right? Whether it's my faith, family, my golf, whatever, that's where I am. That's kind of my -- that's what I'm fixated on every day.

So I think going back to your question, I think you can get caught up in that probably. I'm one that's always trying to get better. You have to assess, but you also have to -- the assessment has to be brief, and the bulk of your percentage time of working has to be on improvement, and that's where I'm at.

Q. Where are your feet most of the time? Where do they need to be? This isn't a setup question either, by the way.

ZACH JOHNSON: No, no. I think my feet just got to be right -- I mean, exactly where -- you plan, right? You obviously put your calendar together, put your golf calendar together, family calendar together. You're got to be grounded in what you know to be true.

So that's where I'm at. I've got a lot on my plate, a lot going on at home. A lot going on at home. But you balance all that. Your feet have to be fixated on what's really important.

Q. Without prying, why isn't your family here?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, seasons of life. Kids are in school.

Q. School, okay.

ZACH JOHNSON: We have some health issues in the family that need attention. Fortunately it's not my wife or my kids, but things of that nature that, yeah, just make it -- seasons of life. That's really where we are.

Q. There is always kind of takeaways from a Ryder Cup or Presidents Cup. This Presidents Cup was Jordan went 5-0-0 and Max Homa was 4-0-0 and a bunch of other stuff that you could have taken from it. I was wondering, just because you're in the position you're in what was the thing that opened your eyes the most about that Presidents Cup at Quail Hollow?

ZACH JOHNSON: Opened my eyes the most about the Presidents Cup? Looking back on it, obviously the climate of this game has changed pretty dramatically in the last so many odd months, 12 plus months, whatever. The desire for our key players, our top players to still go out and compete and prioritize, elevate the Presidents Cup, was really what stood out to me.

Our best players -- in my opinion, our best players, the ones that -- obviously these 12 players were our best players, but some of our key players desperately wanted to make the team and elevate that tournament, so that's what stands out.

Outside of that, I would say I think the Presidents Cup, yeah, I would say the Presidents Cup, without question, had a lot of truth behind the cliché that there are great players everywhere and we just don't know about them yet.

We do. You guys probably do because you see them day in and day out. The youth of your sport domestically and abroad is exceptional, and it surfaced there and it was pretty fantastic.

If you're just a golf fan and just turn that thing on and see the quality of golf that was had on a very, very trying golf course, it was impressive. Whether it was putts, shots, hole outs, of 24 guys. It's just amazing what can happen.

So to me, those are the two things that stand out. Our top players want it bad and the youth and the depth of specifically all-around-the-world golf is impressive.

Q. (Regarding pairings.)

ZACH JOHNSON: Right. Well, you know, along those lines, another thing that stood out, and it really started to surface I would say on Steve's team, call it year and a half ago, right? The individuals that -- well, the young guys, rookies, some of our veteran players, the lack of drama

that we've had as a team as of late has been very encouraging. I would say that's a big word, drama, but everyone is there for a common goal and it was evident.

Steve did a tremendous job. Davis did a tremendous job. Shocker, got those two guys coming with me to Rome.

Yeah, I mean, my point in saying that is I think we did learn some pairings there and I think we have a lot more freedom and options. I think there was more options in Charlotte that we didn't execute that I think could be good, too, depending on the scenario, the course, depending upon, you know, the pairings, the format, the odds, evens, et cetera, et cetera.

So that's encouraging.

Q. In your experience, what creates drama and how do you avoid it?

ZACH JOHNSON: In my experience, I think the only drama that I prefer and the ones -- the only drama I like to see is based on what the golf ball does. Nothing outside the ropes necessarily. Nothing inside the team room or even leading up to it.

I think if the only drama that is witnessed is by the shots being had, that's a great event.

Q. What creates it though?

ZACH JOHNSON: Oh, I would say everybody is like, well you got to throw egos aside. I don't think that's necessarily the case. You have to be confident in yourself, but you have to be dialed in and committed to the ultimate goal of team first.

I want you to bring your ego. There is a reason why you're on the PGA Tour and probably had some success. Ego has a negative connotation, but there is a healthy cockiness, confidence that we all have to have. I think the best players in the world have that.

Q. Davis mentioned how close he thought this team was, too, that Presidents Cup team. Given the level of play of the Americans in the Ryder Cup, some of those guys are obviously not going to be on this team because they weren't on the Presidents Cup. We know they've left for LIV. Is there almost an idiot-proof aspect where you don't have to think too hard about it because there isn't drama and there are some natural pairings and they are a talented and together group of guys? Basically you can't screw this up.

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah, well, I don't know that. I'm not

going to say that. I'm fully vulnerable to screwing things up. We all are. I would say the continuity we have from Cup to Cup to Cup to Cup right now is something I'm very impressed with and grateful for.

I think it kind of started six, seven years ago, but just because we have continuity and some sort of system does not mean it's foolproof and results in wins. But I appreciate and I fully acknowledge that there is something to be said about what has been laid -- the system, the template that's been laid in front of me.

Yeah, it's systematic, but it's also not rigid. It has some fluidity and the ability to take on the personality of the leader and the leaders. So what's probably the most encouraging going forward and what we've witnessed already, and I think we see it in other sports, is every good team, yes, you have a leader that makes pretty instrumental, key, arguably heavy decisions and a team or cast that supports that.

But the ownership of the team, successful teams, tends to be taken on by the players, and that's what we're seeing and I really, really like that. Again, I go back to I'm grateful and appreciative of that because it's their team.

Ultimately I know there are decisions that I want them to go play golf and play the best they can and be can comfortable in the most uncomfortable arenas. All the periphery and all the things that weigh heavy on those week, I want them to fall on my shoulders so they can be free and go play golf.

We're kind of in that space. Again, it's not perfect because we're all imperfect, but the camaraderie, the chemistry, and the ownership of these players is very tangible.

Q. So can you think of a situation where because of the captain, either a Cup is won or lost?

ZACH JOHNSON: Oh, because of the captain?

Q. Uh-huh.

ZACH JOHNSON: No, I can't. I think that's too hypothetical. I would say that there has been some situations where there has been unfortunate -- what's the word? Well, I will say since like I said, six, seven, eight years ago where the players that actually played in those Cups have a little bit of say, things really started to take shape and bring about a continuity and a consistency in the system year after year after year.

Before that, you know, it really wasn't like that. I applaud certainly the PGA Tour but the PGA of America for allowing



us -- I mean, we didn't have a Ryder Cup committee ten years ago. There are three of us on that committee, along with the president and the vice president and now Seth Waugh.

Those kind of changes have been instrumental in I think adding to what I've just said. No, you can never really put the blame on the leadership of the teams because we're all pros. At the end of the day, we're still hitting shots and still got to go out and play golf.

You know, I think it was a caddie back in the day who told me, he was like, you know, a Ryder Cup captain, a captain -- it was actually a Presidents Cup -- the captain can kind of put your -- you can put your players in a good position to go out and play good golf, but it's easier to put your players in a position to go out and play bad golf. That just means pairings, and that's where the difficulty lies.

So my job is to eliminate most of that. It's hard to do, but I want to put them in a place where they feel they've got ownership, expectations are met, and they can play free golf.

Q. Other thing is I know that you were thinking about trying to get players to come over to play the Italian Open at the very least, or possibly come over during Open Championship time and play. Where does that stand?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah, that was discussed at length numerous times. I have not and I don't think I will encourage anybody necessarily to go out and play the Italian Open. It's going to be in the spring. For a number of reasons. Bottom line it's not easy. Two, these guys got their? Schedules planned out by then. Then three, most importantly, it falls in a week on the PGA Tour that I think everybody holds in high regard in Charlotte, a pretty revered tournament.

Nothing against the Italian Open. If they want to go play, that's great. I think it's fantastic. But at the same time, there is a lot going on here. We're not going to receive Ryder Cup points in the Italian Open, so that would be something we don't want to go down and Charlotte doesn't deserve that. Quail Hollow and everybody at Wells Fargo doesn't deserve that, because that's an awesome tournament. So that's not what we're going to be doing.

I do have a plan and one that's pretty much -- well, is confirmed. I'll just say this: There is an opportunity for those individuals that make the 2023 Ryder Cup to see the Italian Open, Marco Simone, the golf course, before the tournament, and come home and then go back.

Q. What is it?

ZACH JOHNSON: What is the opportunity? We're just going to go play Marco Simone as a team.

Q. What time frame?

ZACH JOHNSON: Between now and the Ryder Cup. You may recall this, and I'll add to that, the one time -- my first Ryder Cup was 2006, and I can't remember specifically what week it was. I just remember Akron was around that time, Bridgestone, or whatever it was called.

Q. After Akron. Right around Deutsche Bank too.

ZACH JOHNSON: After Akron? The point is we went -- maybe that's right because Deutsche Bank started on Friday. That might have been right. I remember leaving wherever we were, going to Ireland for two nights, three days, hanging out as team and playing and then coming back for a month and then going back.

Q. How did that go?

ZACH JOHNSON: It was awesome. Those three days were amazing.

Q. How did it go in Ireland?

ZACH JOHNSON: That's such a bad, mean question. Awful question.

Q. Wasn't that the year that Tiger took all the rookies to dinner and actually paid for it?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah, in Akron. Actually paid for, what does that mean? Jeez.

Q. You know what that means.

ZACH JOHNSON: Pretty generous guy as far as I can tell, jeez. Actually of one my favorite restaurants on the PGA Tour, too, Diamond Grille. Miss it. It's three years away from me going back there or having the option. It's fantastic, everything about it.

Yeah, it was me and two or three, might have been four or five.

Q. (Indiscernible) J.J, Vaughan.

ZACH JOHNSON: There you go. Maybe one other, too. All of us rooks, yeah. It was awesome.

Q. And Tiger paid?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yes, Tiger paid. In cash. No credit card there.

Q. I know that. I got caught once. Someone else paid for me. We talked about this in the last couple weeks or so, but your thoughts on the atmosphere at the champion's dinner this year with so many different...

ZACH JOHNSON: This coming spring?

Q. Yeah. What do you think?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, if there is anything in our sport, in sports in general, but in our sport that completely defines class and grace, it's the Masters tournament. You know, I still relish each and every year when I get that invite. I still relish every opportunity to go sit at that table on Tuesday nights.

I have no idea what's going to happen, but, I mean, I can't wait to go. Those that are not playing out here and playing elsewhere that can sit at that table, I mean, they've earned that right. I don't know what's going to happen. I'm just saying they clearly earned that right.

Q. Would you expect that the one guy at the dinner who has not won the Masters would encourage everybody to remind them what the dinner is about?

ZACH JOHNSON: Say that again.

Q. Do you think Fred will send out a note?

ZACH JOHNSON: Oh, the one guy. Oh, I am not going to speak on behalf of Augusta National or Fred. That's not for me to say. I can tell you this: Every time we sit down and Chairman Ridley is there, it's sincere that he is grateful that he gets to sit with us, because as he keeps stating that we invite him.

So that's a pretty cool tradition that Mr. Hogan started back in the day, and obviously won that Augusta National and certainly that chairmanship respects and admires.

Q. Good time to ask Zach if he would rather go to the dinner or play in the tournament?

ZACH JOHNSON: Play in the dinner? I don't understand what the question is. Would I rather go to the dinner or play in the tournament? Yes. (Laughter.)

You know what? You get a smart Alec answer after a smart Alec question.

Q. Asked Adam that too and he looked at me like I was crazy.

ZACH JOHNSON: I mean, yes, I want to play in the tournament. Of course I want to play in the tournament. Yeah, no, that's fair. That's a fair question.

Q. Do you have an assigned seat?

ZACH JOHNSON: Nah, I've pretty much sat on the same side of the table I think all my career there -- career -- my tenure there. But, no, I mean, like who I've sat between has varied to some degree. There is an area that I...

Q. Jordan wouldn't know where to sit.

ZACH JOHNSON: Jordan and I sit next to each other every time. When did he win the tournament, '16?

Q. '15.

ZACH JOHNSON: '15, okay.

Q. Left side, right side?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, there was at least one year, maybe two, when we were in a different room. It was COVID year, but maybe twice. But I think it was twice. I think it was Dustin and Tiger.

Q. Has it gone from like a U-shaped table back to one big table?

ZACH JOHNSON: That's what I'm saying. When it was a different shape, I think there were two years in there, I can't remember, and now it's just the one big table.

Q. Back to the Ryder Cup, is there too big of a home field advantage?

ZACH JOHNSON: Too big of a home field advantage? Can you elaborate?

Q. Well, the U.S. hasn't won over there.

ZACH JOHNSON: Oh, in that regard. There is a lot of beautiful aspects to this tournament, and I think that's one of them. I mean, I love personally and I would say almost selfishly, I love the fact that it's difficult to win over there. Extremely difficult to win over there.

I wouldn't have it any other way. Yes, if it was my turn to represent our team here, I would certainly take that upon myself if everybody saw fit. But if I had my choice, I would want to lead a team over there.

Q. Why?

ZACH JOHNSON: Because it's so different. I love difficult situations. I love being uncomfortable. I love proving everything wrong. It's just the way I'm built, the way I'm wired.

The way I see it, those kind of scenarios are just -- I keep saying it, but I love the word opportunity. I don't want to say there is more motivation, but I would say this: When I turn on the TV and none of my teams are playing, I'm still going to watch sports, and I want the team that's not supposed to win to win. That's what drives me. That's what gets me going.

I like the buzzer beaters. I like the Cinderellas, you know, the Butlers, and what's the team in Chicago?

Q. Loyola?

ZACH JOHNSON: Loyola. Man, those are the kind of things that get my riled up.

Q. TCU?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah. Well, yeah. I mean, you know, there is other parallels. I love the fact that it's just difficult.

Q. Do you relate to those type of teams more?

ZACH JOHNSON: Probably, yeah. I mean, it's not like it's -- I don't know how parallel they are, but it's a substantial difference between a team and what I do, or what I've done in my career. I'm not supposed to be necessarily sitting here, so...

Q. What's the guy who is No. 1 on Drake doing right now?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, yesterday he was texting with me, so he's, shoot, living his best life. He was a brilliant kid. You have to be with the exception of myself to go to Drake. And another exception. (Winking.)

He's an alum. Not very proud though, is he? He played professional golf, No. 1. He won, I don't know, upwards of a handful of times on the Canadian Tour, a bunch of mini tour events. We used to travel and live together post college.

He has got two great kids and a great wife, and probably plays really high amateur golf occasionally and has a great job. He's doing great. He was one of those rocket surgeons, you know, in the head kind of thing.

Q. Can you explain why after your win at the Open you kind of I would say not had your best golf?

ZACH JOHNSON: That's a hard answer. I think I had, not a handful, but certainly numerous opportunities to win golf tournaments. That's the way I look at it. Some mishaps there, but there were some mental things involved there certainly.

I kind of actually mentioned it earlier. I got mentally fixated on assessing where my game was, what was in my golf bag, what I'm doing practicing, rather than just doing the work that I know will transfer on to golf course.

And so I've shifted my brain, my mind out of that mode into a mode of complete improvement practice, not getting stagnant, not getting content, and I would say not getting into a maintenance mentality rather than just trying to improve.

That and I don't play as much as I used to. You know, I've got three kids, and, again, going back to my priorities, I have to be at home more, and that's fine.

I remember having a couple conversations with Steve. I never really implemented the Steve Stricker model, played for three, four years there, but it was very few. I tried that one year and I played very poorly, so just doesn't work for me.

Q. Do you take anything out of that you'll apply this fall?

ZACH JOHNSON: You mean...

Oh, I would hope so. I think I'm going to take all of what I've learned throughout my career, good, bad, indifferent, and apply it ideally.

I think so much of what my role is now as the captain, I'm going to rely on what I've learned at these Cups, the communication aspects, laying out expectations, keeping things transparent, and the lines of communication open with these guys.

That's what's important, I think, and my team would say -- going back to that word, I think the communication didn't cease, but it was not a priority within my team, coach to coach and back to me and how that works.

So that's where the accountability and the transparency comes in. It's my fault, because I am arguably the CEO of my team. The communication was lacking, for whatever reason. I just kind of got caught in the mundane.



Q. So obviously certainly early and I know that when you mention Tiger Woods everybody gets excited. Tiger will probably maybe play four events. We don't know for sure. None of us know. I don't know if he knows actually.

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah.

Q. If he got to a point where he thought he could be beneficial to you and your team as a player and he hadn't played anywhere near enough events, would you contemplate picking somebody like that?

ZACH JOHNSON: I would only contemplate having him on the team if he felt -- if he was putting up some numbers and some scores, No. 1, showing some sign of being competitive.

And then No. 2, that discussion would be had with the other guys that are a part of that team, and specifically him. If there is anything I trust in Tiger Woods, is that he's extremely invested in this team and the future Cups. Extremely invested. I can't speak that enough.

And then I think you would do anything and everything for betterment of the team. I assume he would say -- I don't like basing on assumptions, but I confident that he would say, yeah, I can play, or no, I can't, if that makes sense.

Now, from all accounts, and we're communicating with him quite a bit. Actually trying to get a phone call here shortly, but nothing of any substance. He's a part of the team. It's just a matter of to what degree, right?

Another piece of that is this golf course. You've seen it. It's fun in a golf cart. I don't think it's going to be a whole lot of joy just walking, because, you know, it's extremely -- it's definitely hillier than Augusta National.

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