

THE PLAYERS Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA

TPC Sawgrass

Viktor Hovland

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Viktor Hovland to the interview room here at the 2024 PLAYERS Championship. Viktor, making your fourth start here at the TPC Sawgrass, finished tied for third last year. Just some opening comments on your comfort level on this golf course and the challenge you look forward to this week.

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, I like this golf course a lot. I'm a big fan of Pete Dye golf courses in general. I think this course does a really good job of separating the players that are on their game that week, and if you're a little bit off you get penalized. There's a lot of really tough visually tee shots and small greens, and there's good opportunities to shoot low scores, but at the same time there's a lot of water and other things going on, so I love the golf course and played good here the last two years, so hopefully try to build on that.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go right into questions.

Q. You said you're a Pete Dye fan. Why is that the case?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: I just think he builds fair golf courses, but off the tee it might not necessarily look that there's a whole lot of room, but when you get up there, there's plenty of room. It's just visually intimidating, and I like how he uses angles really well, particularly on par-3 holes.

For example I play Oak Tree National a lot when I'm in Oklahoma, and there's a lot of greens that are tilted on the sides where you usually have water on left side, and if you bail out right, now you have a really tough chip from a collection area where the green kind of runs away from you, things like that. It might only be 170 or 180 or 190 yards, and it's enough room on the green to work with, but it just tests every single shot that you have.

I think he's just a genius, and I really like a lot of his golf courses.

Q. For many who will never play this course, how would you describe what it feels like to step on to that



17th tee and play such an iconic hole?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, depends if you're playing a tournament or just a practice round. It definitely plays a lot different in a practice round. It's just a sand wedge, gap wedge or maybe a pitching wedge, depending upon the conditions.

I mean if the water wasn't there, you would almost never miss the water -- or hit it in the water. So, that definitely, the contrasts definitely jars in your head a little bit, then with the wind swirling and stuff like that. So even though it's such a short shot, it's definitely a lot to think about. Yeah, just super iconic, and it's a really cool hole.

Q. With regard to Scottie and the run that he's been on, can you speak to that consistency level for him? And kind of as a follow and what your impression of that is, but kind of as a follow, he doesn't seem to have a very much of a star power aura around him like a Rory or a Rahm or that kind of thing. What is it about him that he is so under the radar while he's doing such great things with the golf clubs?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, the level of golf that he's played the last few years has been very, very impressive. I've personally had some really, really nice ball striking weeks, and I feel like periods of time I could match that, which I believe I can, but for him to have done that for so long and won so many tournaments that he's done the last couple years is very, very impressive because you get into periods of times where you feel like you can't miss and you're hitting it on a string, but then next month it might feel a little bit difficult. That's the game of golf.

He just seems to keep doing what he's doing. He's obviously doing a great job there, not just physically with his golf game but also mentally, because that takes a lot of toll on you mentally. Just to be up there every single week, it's very, very stressful. So he's doing a lot of things right.

I think when you're playing that great you don't necessarily have to be the guy that has the loudest opinions or walk around there and think everything you say is gospel. So I think he's handling this in the right way, and it's probably something that helps him play better, because the louder you speak or the more controversial opinions you have,



you're just going to bring more attention and it's going to be harder to play golf. So I think he's doing just fine.

Q. We just met the rookies. They had the little scrum out there, I think there were 22 of them, and four of them were from what I would think of as Nordic countries or Scandinavia if you stretch it counting Finland. They all credited their national programs for part of the reason that more and more are showing up, and I wanted to get your perspective. Seems like there's a big influx. What do you attribute that to and what do you think of it?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, great question. I really don't know. It's something that we, at least in Norway, have discussed a lot throughout the years. Because we've always had, we've had a federation that have sent junior players to tournaments and we've always had a very good junior program. So we've always had a lot of talent that's done well in international European tournaments, not so many that have gone to college in the United States and continued to play in amateur golf and turn pro and be as successful as they might have would have wanted.

But I think it's a great thing that the federation is doing in sending us or kids to have opportunities to max yourself because one thing is growing up in Norway or Sweden or Finland or Denmark, you play against your peers but you don't really know how good you are until you kind of breach out of that scene and test your game amongst other guys that are better than you.

So those opportunities are huge, but I will probably say, not to dog on the Norwegian federation, but it seems like at least the Swedish program and the Danish program that I'm a little bit more familiar with, they have kept up that support in amateur golf when the juniors start to get a little bit older and even kind of in their professional career.

I don't know what the reason is for some guys becoming good or not. I think that's kind of the reason for the debate, because we just don't know. But it definitely seems like Scandinavian golf is figuring something out the last few years.

Q. Semi-related, but another rookie that we met was this 42-year-old player named David Skinns. I don't know if you're at all familiar with him, but I just wanted to ask you what you thought, because it's very different from your experience where he's a longtime journeyman who is now on the PGA TOUR, but what do you think when you see people like that who have kind of stuck with it and here they are 20 years later, haven't quit and finally are kind of getting their moment? What is that like for you?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, huge respect. I don't know his story at all. I've seen him around there, and he had a chance to win Honda a couple weeks ago I think I saw. So he's obviously a great player.

Yeah, just massive respect, because I think the guys that persist without getting some sort of results for a long time, they're kind of looked at as, I mean, maybe losers or they're kind of delusional like, hey, why do you keep playing, why don't you do something else, you're clearly not on a path to where you want to get. So, the guys who persist and they end up successful in the future, that's really cool. I think that's something that I have a lot of respect for.

Q. I know you guys are all trying to beat each other, but golf is somewhat unusual in that guys do help each other sometimes. I was wondering, when an older player or some other player has helped you or given you some sort of tangible advice, whether it's on how to schedule yourself or how to practice or anything like that, and then conversely, whether you've paid it forward and done the same for another player.

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, I remember my rookie year on TOUR I traveled a lot with Charles Howell and his family, obviously ties to Oklahoma State, and their family's just great people. Played a bunch of practice rounds with him, even though he liked to play a little bit earlier than I do.

He took me under his wing, and I just fired a bunch of questions at him, and he answered honestly. Obviously being out here for so long, it's not about technical stuff or -- it's more the smaller things, how you handle yourself, how you handle your business, and just kind of believing that you're good enough to play out there.

It's not so much the tips but just being around people that have the experience and they believe in you, they like being around you. I think that just gives you the most comfort. So I owe a lot to Charles Howell and his family.

As it comes to other guys asking me for advice, I don't find too many guys coming up to me and asking about stuff, but if they do, I'll just answer honestly, whatever I have on my mind. I don't try to keep any secrets. I try to -- yeah, if we can all get better, I think that's cool. Just raises the level of the competition.

Q. I would imagine you've done the same for the Oklahoma State kids?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, I try, to the guys that are willing to listen. I'm not trying to say that everything that I

say is correct. I just say, hey, this is what works for me, and you can try this out yourself, see if it works or not.

That's the tricky thing about this game; it's like you have the laws of physics, if you want to draw or fade it, this is how the physics have to be, but there's a lot of ways you can go about trying to produce that. Those different solutions might be different for everyone.

I think as long as you have an open mind and you keep trying and failing, you keep learning from those experiences, I think that's kind of the right way to go about it.

Q. I don't know what type of relationship you have with Gary Woodland, but I'm just wondering if I could get your reaction to how jarring it felt when you first heard the news about what he was going through and how uplifting it may be now to see him back.

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, I'm not too familiar with all the information of what happened to him. I know he had a brain tumor, and obviously that's super scary stuff.

The few times I've been around him and played with him, he's a great guy, handles himself very, very well. He's obviously a great player, but I don't think I've met a single person that has said anything disparagingly about Gary.

So I have a lot of respect for him. For him to obviously take some time off and have surgery and then come back right away and play out here is amazing.

I think the TOUR's a lot better off having him out there, so I wish him all the best.

Q. You made some comments in December about the leadership of the PGA TOUR and how you felt like they could have handled this a lot better. Xander yesterday said Jay still has a long way to go with him. Rory just said he has full confidence in Jay. Where do you stand on your confidence level in the PGA TOUR leadership moving into this new chapter?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: The thing is, like, I play golf for a living. I don't know exactly what should have been done because at the end of the day I don't have all the information, and I don't know that -- I can't just say, okay, this is what exactly needs to be done or should have been done.

But at the same time, there were some things that were said that has been walked back on and then things have been very contradictory. As a leader of an organization, I will want a person like that to take some ownership and

say, hey, we made a couple of mistakes, but this is how we're going to rectify it, instead of kind of sweeping it under the rug, which I felt like has been done to a certain degree.

So I don't mind people making mistakes. We all make mistakes. But I think when you make a mistake you got to own up to it and say, hey, we're trying to do better here, and this is how we're going to do it.

Q. Quick follow on that, has anything happened over the past three months that has improved your outlook for the future of the PGA TOUR?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: That's a great question. To be honest, I haven't given it too much thought. These Signature Events, for example, they have been great for the players that are in the tournaments. I don't know if that's necessarily what the fans want to watch. I don't know if it's long-term going to produce a better product or not. I hear the arguments for it, I hear the arguments against it, so I haven't given it too much thought.

Yeah, certainly I've read Lucas Glover's comments last week where he said having the smaller field sizes are not making it more competitive. Yes, you're getting the best players to play, the top guys to show up, but the fields are more competitive when you have bigger field sizes. I think that's just the fact. There's a reason why we're playing THE PLAYERS Championship with 144 guys.

But at the end of the day, I don't know what the fans want to watch. Do they want to watch these limited field sizes or do they want to watch the bigger sizes, I really don't know. So, yeah, I just don't know what trajectory we're on.

I think a lot of that is depending upon the fact of what happens to the LIV guys; do they come back eventually. I don't think it's a great outlook if we keep being divided for 10, 15 years, whatever, however long it's going to take. There has to be some kind of decision being made in the future.

Q. This is completely unrelated, Scottie has been asked incessantly about his putting, much like a year or two ago you were asked incessantly about your short game. Curious on a personal level how much does that grate on you, and how do you keep that criticism from affecting you when you're so extraordinary in one area and perhaps deficient in another?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: I really don't care. I just, like I know what my game is like. I know that, yeah, that was a bad week in chipping or, yeah, I know I struggle with chipping, like I don't have to keep that a secret because it's all out

there, everyone can see. I'm not trying to prove everyone else that, oh, yeah, I am a good chipper now. It's, like, I'm going to show 'em all. It's like, no, I just want to improve for myself and I go about my business. I'm pretty open about it, I'm not trying to hide it, because it's all out there for everyone to see. I keep working on it. I know I can fix these things, because I have shown it. In the last year I was chipping it great and was making some huge strides. Yeah, you guys can keep asking about it, but I keep working on it and trying to fix it.

Q. You keep saying that you don't know, and I'm just wondering, is that the responsibility of you or is that the responsibility of the TOUR to make you know?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Great question. I don't know. (Laughing). Probably there's definitely a responsibility on my side. I could have definitely gone out of my way to put more time and effort into figuring out what kind of trajectory we're on and put myself into that debate a bit more. Although, I do trust the players on the PAC to represent the players in the best way possible and I have been in communication with some of those guys to fill me in. But at the same time, I'm just not that interested in spending my free time in trying to figure out every single nuance in the situation. So, I'm trying to stay outside a little bit and play my game, because, yeah, I trust the guys on the board to kind of do their thing.

Q. There's 750 million dollars up for grabs for 36 guys, and you're going to definitely be one of them. Do you think that you should be compensated in that way?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: For? I don't even know.

Q. In the grants, the grants that will be coming out of the money from the SSG.

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, again, I don't know the, how the PGA TOUR, as a franchise, works. If there is -- if there is enough money out there that is sustainable, I think the players should be paid a fair share. Now, I have no idea what the fair share is. If SSG wants to put money into that kind of grant to pay top players, who am I to just say no to that. But I'm not going to throw a fit if I don't get any money. If that makes sense. So, I really don't know what the finances are and how this is sustainable. Obviously I think there should be a plan put in place where if the PGA TOUR does better, there's more viewership, the business grows, I think the players should have some way to be paid accordingly with that growth, if that's the SSG grant that they're given, sure, that's away to do it. But I really don't know. So, again, that's probably part of my, that's something that I need to look into further to inform myself better.

Q. Speaking of money, for somebody who seems to lead a pretty simplistic life, did it ever register to you at all last year that you won 18 million dollars from the FedExCup? Did that ever sink in?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: I mean, yeah, you see it everywhere on the news, so, yeah, it does sink in. But it's not something that I think about all the time. It's nice to have, but yeah, especially when we're living in a world where money is more and more important, it seems like. So it's definitely nice to have that freedom, but it's not something that drives the decision making in my everyday life.

Q. I wanted to circle back on one thing, because Jay was asked yesterday what it's like for him to try and regain trust from June 6th. But at the same time having to keep so much of this stuff private. What's it like for a player to look at Jay -- and you mentioned the word ownership a minute ago -- but not being able to tell you even if you did want to know.

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, that's a fine balance. It's a tricky thing. I'm not saying I have all the answers, and I'm sure Jay and the leadership had their reasons to do the things that they did. I just think there has to be some reconciliation between, okay, it's a member organization where the leadership is representing the membership, and then decisions are being made without the players knowing about these decisions, or even having the information present, then I think there has to be some transparency between that to at least save some face and saying that, hey, we represent the players and this is a membership organization or a players organization. I think those two lines have to be reconciled a little bit better.

Q. Can you tell us whether you think there's any obvious reason why the European golfers have had relatively less success here than say at Augusta? I mean, is there something that immediately strikes you about the course that you think they or you might not have felt as at ease about or what?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: That's a great question. I never thought of it like that. I would say Sawgrass, if anything, would maybe have, would maybe be slightly more tailored to European golf, because I do think European golf courses in general are a little bit more penalizing off the tee. It's not the longest golf course, even though on paper the yardage is definitely up there, but it plays a lot shorter. You have a lot of shorter par-4s where you have to hit 3-irons and 4-irons off the tee to place yourself. A lot of short irons and small greens. I think I feel like that's more similar to kind of European golf. So, I don't know, it might be just mere chance or just the fact that it's 144 guys in this

field, it's just a hard tournament to win. There just aren't maybe too many European players playing in this event, comparatively.

Q. You talked about Scottie's consistency for example, I mean, in regard to you when you look back now on the heater you were on last August and fall, right, was there any difficulty mentally of just, you know the heights you can reach now, and trying to maintain that as you've kind of gone into this year?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yes, but I didn't kind of think of it that way. I was just super pumped that I had gotten so much better and I got the potential out that I knew was in there, but it was just more motivating to keep practicing and keep playing at that level, because it was fun and I knew I was capable of it. I didn't think of, oh, I hope it keeps going, or, what if it goes away, and stuff like that. Golf is a hard game and it's naturally going to go up and down. That was certainly an up year and I would feel like right now is more of a down period, but you still got to show up to work and try to get better and hopefully we get to appeared pretty soon.

Q. How do you feel you're at? Do you feel like you're finding something right now to get back to an up?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: I wouldn't say -- it's more like a slower process right now. I feel like I've gotten a little bit off track and I just need to start working in the right way again. I think things are going to fall into place a little bit more, but it's not, I wish it was as simple as just kind of an overnight, one feel and then we're back on it. This is kind of a little bit of a project, but gives me something to work on and I believe that when this starts to get easier and easier to do, it's going to be right back to where we were.

Q. You talked about your move to South Florida, how is that going to help your game and where will you be playing out of and why that spot you're choosing to play out of?

VIKTOR HOVLAND: Yeah, still trying to figure out where I want to practice full-time over there. I had a great time so far. I haven't really been doing too much besides playing golf. Obviously in South Florida there aren't too many other places to beat, when it comes to playing golf there. I certainly miss Oklahoma, I miss the people out there, and the golf is great over there. You get some tough weather that you have to show up and grind in, which sometimes you don't quite get in South Florida, even though it's certainly windy enough, so that gives you some challenge. But the cold days, the super windy days and all that stuff, I certainly miss that in Oklahoma. But for everyday practice, the facilities are always in great shape and the weather is

always nice enough that you can practice putting and chipping and all that stuff. So, hopefully it will help me in the future, but it's not like -- and I've told the guys at, for example, Oklahoma State, if things aren't necessarily ideal in your practice facilities, that it's not the facilities that are making you good, it's, you have to use the facilities in a way that's going to make you better. So, just by moving to Florida, it's not going to make my game better. I have to practice in a way that's going to make me better, but I think it's a lot easier to do so there.

THE MODERATOR: All right, Viktor, thank you very much for the time. Best of luck this week.

VIKTOR HOVLAND: You got it.

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