

# Waste Management Phoenix Open

## Open

Tuesday, February 2, 2021

Scottsdale, Arizona, USA

TPC Scottsdale

## Webb Simpson

### Press Conference

DOUG MILNE: We'd like to welcome defending champion of the Waste Management Phoenix Open, Webb Simpson. Thanks for joining us for a few minutes. Obviously a place you're fond to come back to. You're making your 11th start. In addition to a win last year, you've had a second, and in addition to those two, three additional top-10 finishes. Obviously a place special to you. Just some thoughts on being back here this week.

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, it feels great to be back. I was just walking in the clubhouse, and it's crazy to me how fast time goes out here on the TOUR, that it's been a year since I was here last year on Sunday.

I always love playing golf in the desert. This golf course has always been fun for me to play. I enjoy competing on it. It's very different this year, just walking around not seeing grandstands, being able to see the 18th hole from the parking lot. A lot of things will be different this year, but it still feels good to be back, and I look forward to trying to defend my title.

DOUG MILNE: So far this season you're off to a great start, three top 10s in seven starts, including a top 5 at Sony, in your most recent start. If you could assess the state of your game heading into the week.

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, this year has been an interesting year, getting the coronavirus at the end of December, showing up at Sentry the Wednesday before. We haven't had the best winter in Charlotte so it's been tough to really work on my game a lot, but saw some good things at the Sony, like you mentioned. Paul gave me a putting tip at Sentry after the first round and I started putting a lot better the final three rounds and putted great at Sony.

So I would say the one area that hasn't been as sharp is my approach to the greens, but I've worked on a few things in the last couple weeks that I feel like are going to serve me this week.

I just feel good. I feel like I'm approaching the game right



now with a simple mindset, and we kind of have a game plan on this golf course.

I'm excited where the game is and looking forward to -- I've got a lot of work to do, I think, the next two days to get ready, but I'll be ready.

**Q. Always a fun talking point is the 17th hole here. If you could take us through your mindset on the deciding factors of how you play that hole.**

WEBB SIMPSON: On 17?

**Q. Yes.**

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, so obviously we'll always go for the green. I have to have it downwind for me to carry that cross bunker 40 yards short or so, but the only pin that really requires a good amount of conversation is the back left because we can hit a great drive at the right center of the green and go too far and then you have no shot. So that's really the only pin that requires much of a conversation.

The other pins, front left, front right, back right, we're going kind of right center of the green every day. Sometimes I'll hit it higher to soften it out, sometimes I'll hit it lower to try to scoot it. It kind of depends on the wind, kind of depends how firm the golf course is during that round. But again, back left is the one, you give me a 4 right now I'll take it and not play it.

**Q. I had a question about the fans. It's kind of a two-part question. There will be a limited number of fans. This will be the first time in a while you've played in front of fans. I was wondering what your thoughts about finally hearing some reaction to some of your shots again, but it's nowhere near where it normally is, so how different is this tournament going to play without the throngs of people everywhere?**

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, I definitely miss the fans. You make a 20-footer, you want to hear people clap, get excited, or a chip-in or whatever it might be. I think playing out here for a while, you realize kind of how Tiger and Phil and these guys really use the crowd to their advantage, whether you're 1-over and you need some momentum, making a 20-footer for birdie and feeling that energy from

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the crowd can sometimes get you going when you kind of are flat.

And I mean, the environment Tony and I played in last year on Sunday, the playoff, even the final round with Hudson, it's so fun to be in that energy and to hear the noises, and all day you're hearing roaring on 16 or boos.

So that will definitely be missed this year, maybe more than any other golf course we play.

But you know, it's one of these years where I feel like we're going to go through it and we're going to realize what we're missing, and so we're going to hopefully be back to normal next year, I hope, because this tournament is kind of in a league of its own when it comes to the energy and the loudness.

It's fun to feel that kind of nervous energy walking through the tunnel on 15 and knowing you're about to enter into an environment that we'll never have again for the rest of the year. It will definitely be missed. But maybe a little stress-free this year compared to every other year.

**Q. I'm just curious, what's the best thing you ever heard at the 16th hole, either about yourself or somebody else?**

WEBB SIMPSON: I can't remember specifics, but I love when they go after the caddies and they start saying specific things about the caddies and their life or their home or their childhood, whatever it might be. It's kind of like the students at Duke University and the basketball games. They come up with stuff that you wonder how they could.

It just provides some humor. You want to enjoy that moment. I remember my first couple years here I would be so nervous I'd just want to get through it and get to 17. But then I just got to the point where I kind of laughed and enjoyed it, looked around. You know, those people, they're funny, and they come up with some great stuff. So I wish I had a specific one for you, but when they go after the caddies, I always enjoy it.

**Q. Since you left here with the trophy last year, where are you trying to gain some improvements, specific improvements in your game, and did you visit with Butch on your way out here like you have in the past?**

WEBB SIMPSON: No, I wasn't able to visit with Butch. I had to get out here a little earlier, but I would say the one area I feel like we kind of keep coming back to for me is kind of the straightforward chips and pitch shots that I've really been working hard on. Kind of the special shots

around the green I've been pretty good with.

And then kind of shots out of the rough. Typically I drive it fairly straight so I don't get a ton of work out of the rough, and even at Sony it cost me a couple shots of just kind of guessing about the lie or the ball coming off a little right when I thought it was going to come off a little left. I would say those two areas where the ones where I feel like if I can improve there it will take me just up a notch a little bit in my ability to be more consistent.

Hopefully we've got a little rough this week and I can work on it the next couple days, but yeah, I'm always kind of eyeing those areas, and if I keep coming back to them it shows I need to improve there.

**Q. 16 in particular, how do you think it's going to play without 22,000 fans this year?**

WEBB SIMPSON: I think guys will play it very -- I don't think you'll see much difference in scores. You know, I think PGA TOUR players have this weird way about them that the tougher and more chaotic an environment, the more they focus and they hit good shots. There's been some amazing shots over the years there.

I don't think it'll affect the scores really at all. I just think the overall energy on 15, 16, 17 with the lack of fans there is going to be different and kind of a letdown.

But still, it looks like it's built out. I haven't been out there, but it looks like it's built out a good amount. Hopefully they'll get as many as they can in there.

**Q. It's just one level now instead of three.**

WEBB SIMPSON: Okay.

**Q. Without having 150,000 people on the course, does that change anything about your approach, where you're not hearing 16 on the other side of the course, anything like that?**

WEBB SIMPSON: Not really. I mean, this tournament at the end of the week we always feel like we just played a major because we're so tired from -- you have to zone out a lot of times throughout the round. You have to focus extra hard on getting ready for a shot because there's just a lot of noise.

So I think I'm not going to play the course any differently, but I definitely think I'll be able to conserve energy a lot more knowing that a normal year on the 4th or 5th hole I might be somebody yelling in my backswing. I probably won't have as much of that this year.

**Q. Today the USGA and R&A released some proposals regarding distance down the road, maybe limiting driver shaft lengths, maybe some ball testing things. Just wondering where you stand on the whole distance debate, and also how big a player should the PGA TOUR be in this whole discussion?**

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, it's a great question. My first problem I have with the driver length is if a 6'10" really good golfer comes out, like are we really going to tell him he can't use anything longer than 46? So that's my only problem with the length of the driver.

But I've been kind of saying for the last few years, I don't think equipment is the problem. I do think -- Jack Nicklaus hit it a lot further than Bobby Jones, and then the guys after Jack are going to hit it further than Jack. Distance was never really that big of an issue when Jack was playing and hitting it 300 yards.

I just think the issue comes down to golf course architecture. We need more doglegs. We need tighter fairways. We need longer rough. We need smaller greens. We need more firm greens. All those things I just named save money, saves water, saves land that you have to build a golf course. We know that 8,000-yard golf courses are not the answer. Books Koepka shot 16-under at Erin Hills. I believe that's what he shot.

Lengthening courses is not the issue. Bunker placements, dog legs, tree placements. I even think at Augusta on 13 we don't need that tee 40 yards back. What they need is a mid-sized tree 20 yards in front of the tee box and five feet left of the tee box because the issue right now is guys can't tee it up on the right and they can even cut it, some of these guys, over the tree. Well, if you put a tree there guys can't do that.

It's just like the 4th hole this year at Winged Foot; it's a dogleg left par-4 but there's a tree there with branches so the bombers can't hit their cut over that bunker, so a lot of the bombers just hit 3-wood.

So I really think the attention does not need to be on equipment or the golf ball. Billy Horschel had a great comment a couple years ago. He said the golf ball is not an issue; I hit a 7-iron in college 180 yards and now I hit it 180 yards, so it can't really be the golf ball is the problem.

Now, the driver, the face is a lot thinner. They're bigger. I understand that. But I don't think an equipment rollback does anybody any good when we can change the way golf courses are designed and it's better for amateurs, it's better for pros, and there are plenty of golf courses on the

PGA TOUR that have stood the test of time because of the way they're designed.

Equipment advances don't really pay off or pay a dividend on those courses, and I just feel like these tweaks we could make are really not that hard and they're cost effective.

Your last point about the PGA TOUR, I think their voice should be very loud. I respect the USGA and R&A a great deal, and I know that their intentions are great, but I don't think an equipment rollback is what we need. I think we need different -- I think we need to tweak our golf courses.

**Q. Do you have any lingering effects from COVID-19, and if you don't, what was the first thing you ate that you were able to taste and how good was it?**

WEBB SIMPSON: My taste is like 75 percent back. That was definitely a lot worse than I anticipated, not being able to taste food. Smell was fine.

But my taste came back -- like it's slowly coming back, so it didn't like all of a sudden come back. But I'm a coffee guy, and I just missed being able to smell and taste my coffee in the morning. Now that it's coming back, I have a greater appreciation for it.

**Q. And the other thing, we've talked about how different it's going to sound there this week. Without the grandstands, without fans lining the holes, are there places you can be more aggressive or less aggressive? Are sight lines going to be changed for you drastically? Will there be any difference because of that?**

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, I think there are certain holes where tee shots with a big crowd -- having a big crowd there actually helped. I think of 11, there's tons of people down the right side and guys typically will miss it right there and the crowd would stop it from going in the desert.

I think things like that -- I don't think my sight lines will change much or where I'm aiming, but I think that might be the biggest thing is the crowds stopping balls because once it gets in these deserts, like left on 5, right on 3, the ball just keeps going. And so now we're not going to have as many people, so you might see more of that.

**Q. Just to follow up on what you were saying before, do you think the PGA TOUR is playing at some of the wrong venues right now? Does the PGA TOUR need to change where it plays?**

WEBB SIMPSON: That's a great question. I just think the PGA TOUR needs to take a harder look, as well, about

where we're going in the game.

You take a golf course -- a perfect example, No. 10 at Quail Hollow, my home club, the bunker is 300 yards to carry it. Well, if you can carry it 300 yards, which I would say roughly 30 to 35 guys on the PGA TOUR now can carry that far, their fairway is roughly twice the size of a guy who can't carry it 300.

My idea was, hey, flip the bunker, just flip it, and now the amateurs, they have a wider fairway. Shorter hitters have a wider fairway. The bombers can still hit driver but now it's 330 to carry; nobody is carrying that bunker. You've made the hole harder for the more advantaged guy who hits it forever, but it's still in his court to hit driver if he wants to, and you've made it easier for the amateur.

So that little tweak I think is where some of these TPCs the PGA TOUR could say, hey, we're going to make this harder but we're not going to add length. We don't need length. We need more bunkers, we need more trees, like I said.

I think it's almost more of the major championships, where they're going. They want to make them hard. Well, make them hard by doing the things that I've said with trees and bunkers.

Guys on 14 at Augusta, another thing, they're hitting cuts there. It's a dogleg left. Guys 30 years ago would have said, What do you mean they're hitting cuts? Well, they're hitting cuts over the tree. Well, they can't hit a cut over the tree if you plant a couple pine trees, which Augusta is so good at doing. 17 has got it seems like 30 more trees than it did 10 years ago on both sides of the fairway. But on 14, again, you plant a couple pine trees up the left 30, 40 yards off the tee, guys can't hit cuts. They're forced to try to turn it right to left. And with modern-day equipment, it's harder to turn drivers right to left, so they'll probably hit 3-wood.

So I think there needs to be more of that kind of outside-the-box thinking than simply let's make courses longer and limit the distance. The Dustin Johnsons and the Bryson DeChambeaus of the PGA TOUR with limited equipment are still going to be the bombers if this happens, and I think we'll have the same problems. Guys are -- we're very adaptive out here. We're going to figure it out, and I think they'll have the same issue again in 20 years.

And the last thing I'll say is I love the fact that bombers sell tickets, and I think they do. Little kids don't want to come watch me hit a driver off the tee, they want to see Bryson DeChambeau and Dustin Johnson, and I think that's good for the game as long as these courses can kind of go along with that, with the distance changes.

**Q. And there's been talk about you with the leader in strokes gained attitude. Is there something in Justin Thomas that you admire other than how far he hits it or being a great iron player?**

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, I've played with him. I feel like every time I've played with him he's had like a 62 or 63. I love watching him play when he gets going. I feel like he actually gets more comfortable and more excited to play when he's 7-, 8-under. There's like a hyper focus, and I saw that in Tiger over the years.

So he's a really fun guy to go out with, especially when he's playing well. Like I said, the better he plays, the kind of more into it I feel like he gets.

**Q. I just wanted to know if you could maybe take me through the range of emotions last year, just the way things ended here, Super Bowl Sunday, the momentum you got from that and then having to shut it down a couple weeks later, maybe plans for the year, plans changed, what you went through in December and then being back here. How did you process that whole thing?**

WEBB SIMPSON: Well, you know, when I hit it in the water on 15 on Sunday and Tony hit it down the middle, I was already one back. I didn't think it's over, but I thought, man, I've got a lot of work to do, especially if he makes birdie here.

And he made par, and I made bogey, and I'm two back, and all of a sudden I birdied 17 and 18, and it all happened so fast I couldn't believe riding back to 18 tee that I was in a playoff.

You know, one playoff hole ends and it's over, I won.

I think it took me a while that night -- I went back to my hotel, watched Super Bowl before my red eye and I really just sat there quiet and just processed how everything just transpired, and it was a great feeling.

And then being back here a year later, so much has happened, obviously. It's been sad to see what coronavirus has done to the world. A lot of mixed emotions. I've been super proud of the PGA TOUR and the fact that we've been able to play and be safe while we're doing it and give people something to watch on TV.

I'm just thankful, thankful to have a job. I know so many people right now are hurting, financially, physically, people have lost loved ones to this disease.

So it's an interesting place of like I'm thankful to be here but you're also a little bit sad and burdened because you know we get to go play golf today, a lot of the world is hurting and suffering.

Yeah, I'm just grateful to be back, and what a great opportunity to try to defend here.

**Q. NBC is debuting a gambling simulcast this week for the first time this week, one more stage for legalizing sports gambling. What are your thoughts on how this might affect what you do, how the PGA TOUR handles its business, stuff like that?**

WEBB SIMPSON: Yeah, I'm not well-versed in this area. I've been in conversations with guys where the only thing it seems like most guys are worried about is while we're playing, is there going to be more chatter before and after shots or before and after made or missed putts, guys out there gambling on us. Hopefully the PGA TOUR has a very strict plan on that kind of banter from spectators to players. Hopefully they'll put a strict plan in place that we're not going to have kind of the comments from the bettors out there during the round. That's obviously something we've never dealt with. Hopefully we don't have to. That's just one potential problem I see.

DOUG MILNE: Webb, we always appreciate your time, and certainly wish you the best of luck this week. Thank you.

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