

Arnold Palmer Invitational

Tuesday, March 1, 2022

Bay Hill, Florida, USA

Bay Hill Club and Lodge

Sahith Theegala

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. We would like to welcome Sahith Theegala to the media center here at the Arnold Palmer Invitational presented by MasterCard.

Welcome. You are making your tournament debut. Been able to go around the course and do 18 holes today. What are your initial thoughts and excitement for the week?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Gosh, I'm just obviously really happy to be here. Definitely a special vibe coming to this golf course and all the history and stuff behind it. Probably one of the purest courses I've ever played in my life too, so that helps.

Really excited for the week. The week off definitely made me hungry to get here. But the course is in incredible shape. I watched the highlights from the last couple years to kind of get myself ready. It looked really tough and crusty, so I'm ready for that too.

THE MODERATOR: Like you said, with the week off, making your 13th start this season, but coming off six consecutive starts and just had a week off, how is your game feeling?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, feels really good. The week off definitely helped refresh the body. Got in the gym a little bit with the trainer, which is kind of new for me, so he's helping me a lot. Definitely feel my body is ready, which is one of the big things I think I'm going to need to focus on going into the future.

Q. What else did you do last week?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Let's see. So Monday, I don't think I saw outdoors. I was in my house the whole time. Then three days of golf maybe and a lot of -- I was in the gym a decent amount. Just had a couple dinners with buddies and kind of just did normal stuff, which was nice.

The times I played golf, I didn't even have practice sessions, just kind of cruised around in a cart and played 9

or 18 holes.

Q. If you do look back to the WM Phoenix Open, what comes to mind?

SAHITH THEEGALA: The first thing is obviously all the support I got and hearing my name being chanted and having my family and friends out there. That's definitely -- that was a really cool experience. The fact that so many people were cheering for me is cool. But also the fact that I put myself in a really good spot to win the event, it obviously gave me a lot of confidence, looking at the future events.

Q. What do you normally do to mentally prepare for a match? Do you do anything particularly extra for this one since this is your first Arnold Palmer Invitational?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah. I think I'm still learning that as I go because this is only my second invitational, third invitational. The Waste Management and Genesis back to back were definitely the biggest weeks, or best fields, biggest weeks I ever played in.

I didn't try and do anything differently. I just tried to prepare as if it was a normal event. Obviously depending on the conditions of the course, sometimes you need a little extra work around the greens or in the rough. But, yeah, just try to treat it like another event and try to enjoy every minute of it because pretty much every aspect of this tournament has been really cool so far and it's just been Tuesday.

Looking forward to the rest of the week. No expectations or pressure or anything like that.

Q. You didn't drive here, I hope, right?

SAHITH THEEGALA: I was thinking about it. No, I flew here. It was actually an easy flight, four and 45 minutes.

Q. Have you noticed in the past couple weeks, has there been any kind of you out in public, people recognize you, any kind of celebrity moments since your big week in Phoenix?



SAHITH THEEGALA: Not really because I think I did a good job of kind of keeping it down low this last week. At the golf course, I think they were really great just respecting kind of my privacy, but I was happy to meet people and take pictures and stuff.

But nothing -- I don't think anything in public yet. I'm trying to think. Just like at my golf course, the couple golf courses I played at when I was back home and then even out here in the restaurant yesterday. But I'm eating like a quarter mile away from the course for dinner, so nothing yet.

Q. So any autographs or photos or anything like that?

SAHITH THEEGALA: No, I think -- not yet. Not yet. Like I said, I've been pretty low key. I haven't really done a lot of things since, I guess playing Riv after Waste Management kind of got me over -- I bet, if I went back home right after Waste, it might have been a little bit worse, but nothing yet.

Q. When you hear the word Arnold Palmer and you hear the name, what comes to mind?

SAHITH THEEGALA: One thing, obviously, I never got the honor to meet Mr. Palmer, but one thing everyone has said about him is how much of a gentleman he is and how much he kind of went out of his way to make you feel like just one of his buddies and stuff like that.

Obviously seeing all the umbrellas kind of brings back good memories of watching old Mr. Palmer highlights, and obviously the slogan of playing boldly, which you definitely need to do out here. Yeah, those are the first couple things I think of.

Q. When you go to a course you don't know and you're trying to figure it out, what role does seeing a few videos play for you? I think at the front where you said you were watching some videos of last year. How much does that help you in trying to start to learn a golf course?

SAHITH THEEGALA: It was pretty nice. I think it was just more of the matter of taking a week off and just getting hungry again for the game. I usually don't do that, but I was like, man, I want to see what I'm getting myself into next week.

Obviously, I watched this tournament a lot as a kid, and all of those Tiger putts and even the Rory putt, all of that stuff I've watched a lot of times out here.

That was actually pretty cool to see how the course played

during the weekend. Luckily, I have an experienced caddie on my bag in Carl Smith. He's been a huge help for me this whole year because he's been to all these courses and seen them in different conditions at different times with different players. He's been really great in an aspect of so I don't have to overdo it when I get here.

Q. What have been the two or three most surprising things that you have found playing as a PGA TOUR player versus before that?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, I think one thing is just how incredible the conditions of the courses are week in and week out. I think it's so easy to take for granted. You just kind of expect it to be good, but when you really sit back and look at the golf courses and what these superintendents and guys are doing, I mean, it's pretty incredible what they're doing with perfect fairways, perfect greens, perfect bunkers, you name it.

So that's been really cool, and then I think just how easy the whole system has been for the players in terms of courtesy cars, like player dining. It's been pretty stress-free once we actually get to the event and got a spot picked out to stay. It's been really good. I could see how some guys get spoiled out here.

Q. Just curious, after coming so close and beating the heat there obviously the whole week, and you were close in the fall too, what do you take from those experiences? Is there something you reflect on that you feel like I didn't do this right or that you learned from to help you when that opportunity comes again?

SAHITH THEEGALA: I think the first one at Sanderson, I really did play well that last round. I had two bad swings on 10 and 11 with the 7-iron that I blocked just a hair, and I think on a couple of those shots, I just didn't take an extra second, an extra breath, or even walking up to the tee a second slower. I did feel like I was kind of starting to rush a little bit. The adrenaline was kind of getting to me.

I think going off of that experience I did a much better job at Waste, just kind of going through my routine. I was actually being really deliberate with the way I walk and even set up to the ball on my drives. Just being a little bit slower, taking a little deeper breath. I've always been a pretty quick player, and my tendency is to get quicker.

Both of the rounds, I think -- both of the Sundays I had the lead, I think I shot 1-under the final day. So playing fine, just like a couple things that went wrong both times that I think can be attributed to maybe a lack of experience but also just you're going to hit bad shots during the course of the week, and I think I just hit a couple bad shots at the

wrong time. And obviously the great players find a way to not -- to hit great shots when they need to.

Q. If you go back to September when you started, do you recall what kind of objectives or goals you set for the year or for the season?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Gosh, I was just -- it all moves to fast during that time of the year, I was just happy to have a schedule and to play some events. I learned very quickly that Korn Ferry graduate status is not very good and you really need to play well those first few events in the fall.

Yeah, it all happened so quickly from getting into Korn Ferry Finals by three points, I think the margin was, so I was just thankful to be there. Then I was like, okay, might as well try to make the most out of it, and I did. Played great in Korn Ferry Finals the last two events, and then kind of just keeping that same mindset for all the TOUR events. Oh, I have this insanely great opportunity. Might as well try to take advantage of it.

I think not setting any concrete expectations and stuff like that has been really good for me.

Q. If you didn't -- and maybe this is a moot question, but have you found your outlook change at all post Sanderson, post Phoenix, things like that?

SAHITH THEEGALA: No. I think I'm still trying to do the same thing and get better. Even if it's .0001 percent better every day, week, hour, whatever it is, I think as long as I'm focused on that. My team has obviously helped me get to this point too.

But as long as I'm focused on that kind of progression, I'm not too worried about the expectations. I think just the work that's being put in is going to show.

Q. Lastly, as an observer of the game from when you were in high school and college and what have you, have you taken note of what Jordan Spieth did in 2013, what Collin has done when he came out, Matt Wolff, and how quickly they've risen? Does it give you any thoughts about there's no need to wait, my time can come whenever it comes?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, I think that's a good way to put it. I don't think there's a certain time period that you should be restricting yourself to to allow yourself to play well or whatever. Obviously, we've seen guys hit their peaks in their late 30s, early 40s, then guys hit peaks like Spieth and Collin and Viktor.

I think it's really easy to look, especially for someone my

age, real easy to look at Sam Burns out there, all these young guys that have had a lot of success right away on TOUR, like Collin and Viktor, and it's easy think of them and kind of compare yourself to them and kind of rob yourself of -- just being on TOUR itself is a great accomplishment, but doing what they've done is pretty rare. There's not a lot of people who do that. Only the top guys in the world end up doing stuff like that.

It's really great to see because those are guys I've played with pretty much my whole life in junior and college career. So knowing that a transition from that amateur golf to pro golf, they were able to do that. So it's kind of like, okay, why not? Why shouldn't I be able to do it too? But what those guys did is definitely pretty special.

Q. Given what you accomplished, do you feel like -- I know you're not trying to inspire your brethren, but do you feel like maybe other sponsors exemptions might look at it and be like there are possibilities beyond what maybe they imagined?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Definitely, like even watching Martin last week at the Honda. I know he Monday qualified in, but that was so cool to see.

Golf is such a fickle game. You never know when you're going to get hot. And everybody whether it's the guys I played with at the mini tours last year, the talent level is there. It's just there. It's kind of waiting that right time, right moment, kind of getting one bounce or one break or one round, whatever it might be.

Hopefully, people take inspiration from some of the stuff I was able to do, but they've also played a lot of golf with me and know that talent level is there. It's just kind of figuring out your own formula to get there.

Q. And John Pak, he's here on a sponsors. You've crossed paths with him plenty. What do you think of what he could make of it maybe?

SAHITH THEEGALA: He's obviously a really good player. What he did in college his senior season, he was super dominant. I've been lucky enough, I actually played with him -- because my junior year at Regionals, I think he was a freshman, and I'm pretty sure he waxed me in that event. So he's obviously got a lot of game.

It was a pretty big spotlight because he won all -- he kind of swept the awards this year too, the Haskins, Hogan, and Nicklaus. I did that in 2020. He was just asking me some stuff about how the transition was and all that because I think there's so many eyes on him. Hopefully, he wasn't feeling too much pressure or anything, and hopefully he's

just enjoying the whole process.

Yeah, he's going to have a breakout week one of these weeks for sure, and if not, he's probably going to get his card through the Korn Ferry. He's a really good player. I'll be rooting for him this week.

Q. When you look at the past few years with your wrist injury and that keeping you out for a year and when you turned pro in the middle of COVID, how has all of that kind of adversity and overcoming that, how has that shaped you? Do you feel like you're more appreciative of where you're at now because of that?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yes. Yeah, you hit it right on the head there. Obviously being injured, especially an injury like that that I've never dealt with in my life, not being able to play tournament golf for ten months, it gave me a different perspective. I just found out that, hey, life's not golf and golf's not life, that I had a lot of great people behind me no matter what I do in life.

That was definitely a perspective change for me, and sure enough, after I came back from the injury along with a few swing changes to help my body out a little bit, it was the best golf I ever played. I think a lot of that was mindset related for sure.

Q. I was looking up on the screen today, and Golf Channel had a discussion going on, and the onscreen graphic said, when will the stars start winning again? And I wondered what you thought of that, if you saw that in the locker room or in your hotel room and you see that type of dialogue going on, considering all of the first time winners and the up and comers that are doing so well like yourself?

SAHITH THEEGALA: So what was the -- I actually haven't seen it.

Q. When will the stars start winning again? I think they're talking about the established players.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Okay. I haven't even noticed -- I know that four of the last five winners were first time winners. I feel like the stars are still going to -- they're going to have their time, and they're the top ten guys in the world for a reason. Obviously, Viktor's won a few times worldwide recently. I think he won three out of four starts at one point to start the year.

So I think it's just a matter of time before they start winning, but that's interesting. That's interesting. I feel like a lot of the -- I don't know. Like a guy like Will Zalatoris comes to mind like a star in my opinion. It doesn't mean he has to

win every week. That win is coming soon. It's interesting.

Q. It's a very subjective topic. I was just wondering when you thought -- being looked past, let's say, as a contender.

SAHITH THEEGALA: That's not how I'd look at that when looking at it. I'd think, oh, that's an interesting point and kind of shrug it off, not looking too deep into something like that, but that's interesting.

THE MODERATOR: I believe that's all the questions we have. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us, and good luck this week.

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