

Arnold Palmer Invitational

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Bay Hill, Florida, USA

Bay Hill Club and Lodge

Eric Cole

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Eric Cole into the interview room here at the 2023 Arnold Palmer Invitational presented by Mastercard.

Eric is coming off a runner-up at the Honda Classic last week. Eric, if we could just get a comment from you on the emotions in the 48 hours following that dramatic playoff with Chris.

ERIC COLE: Yeah. No, it's been kind of a whirlwind. Got up here and played the pro-am yesterday. But it was a great experience last week. This is a tournament I have always wanted to play, so I'm excited to be here and can't wait for Thursday to get here.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned to me on the way in that this is a place that you've practiced at from the time were you 14 or so. Could you provide some background on that. And also, I think you had caddied for Sam Saunders here. We had Sam call into the telecast last week, which was cool. So just a little background on your familiarity with the course and caddying for Sam.

ERIC COLE: Yeah, sure. My mom got remarried and he was a member here, so I was lucky enough to start practicing and playing out of here when I was probably 14-ish. It was a great place to grow up. Obviously, met Sam and played a ton of rounds with him around here. It was just really special times and great memories. Obviously I caddied for him in this tournament maybe twice. Most recently maybe two or three years ago. It's just a special place to me.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll take some questions.

Q. Can you just sort of CliffsNotes version of the journey, 34 years old, now rookie on the TOUR, just to get where you're at right now.

ERIC COLE: Yeah, sure. So I turned pro in 2010-ish. I'm not really sure exactly what year it was. But played a lot of mini-tour golf. Went to Q-School most of those years and just couldn't get through. Just kind of kept sticking it out

and grinding and got Korn Ferry Tour status in 2016 or 2017. And then I had a back injury, and then I had to wait for that to heal.

I started teaching down in South Florida at a club called Abacoa. Once that was better, I was kind of like, all right, I kind of want to give it another go and went back to Q-School. Got on the Korn Ferry Tour. Played a couple years out there and got my card to come out here last fall.

Q. So the Minor League Golf Tour has some pretty legit players on there, but it's, like, these one-day events and guys can go really low. But how does that translate to like 72 holes-event? I mean, the transition, is it tough to make for a lot of guys, going from that one or two days to longer tournaments?

ERIC COLE: Yeah, I think it's slightly different. Your attitude's a little different, just because being a one-day tournament, you know, you kind of have to play well that day.

But I think it's good prep because when you play a lot of one-day tournaments, like, you have a chance to win a lot of tournaments. So even though it's only one day, on the back nine you get feeling of if I birdie three of these last five holes, then I'll win this tournament today.

I think that's a good mindset to just kind of have whether you're playing four-day tournaments or one. And you also get, like, it might not be quite like the nerves I felt on Sunday, but you still get a little nervous and you still want to win and beat the people you're playing against.

Q. A lot of very explosive players. It was just then taking it into this environment. What are some of the big challenges there, I mean, with the crowds and the course challenges and setups?

ERIC COLE: Yeah, I mean, it's a different atmosphere. It's a really cool atmosphere. I thought it was awesome. But it's definitely different than playing a 18-hole Minor League event in a cart. So that's a little different.

But the courses on TOUR are quite a bit tougher. We



would play some mini-tour events at The Champ, and it's still a really tough test and there's still trouble, but the greens aren't as firm. They're not quite as fast. Even the Korn Ferry Tour, you see a little bit of that where the course setups are just a little bit easier. Especially when you get to the weekend, on the PGA TOUR everything's just kind of heightened, and I think it's a really good thing. It brings out, kind of brings -- the people who are playing the best, it puts them like they can separate themselves from other guys.

Q. What was kind of the biggest or the best, say, text or e-mail that you may have gotten in the last 48 or 72 hours from somebody?

ERIC COLE: That's a good question. I got a lot of texts. But a lot of 'em were from old friends and stuff that I hadn't talked to in a while. So it was kind of cool to hear from them that, you know, even though I haven't stayed in great touch with 'em, they still have been following me. It's just really cool to have that background support. Whether I knew it at the time or not, it's kind of nice to hear from them.

Q. Making such a splash over the weekend do you ever get the feeling that you're an overnight sensation 10 years in the making?

ERIC COLE: I don't know about that. But it's something that I'm excited about it. It's a cool experience for me. Doing a press conference is something I've never really done before. So it's one of those things where if you play really good golf, this is kind of the stuff that comes with it. I like playing really good golf, so I like this stuff too.

Q. Can you pinpoint perhaps something you've learned the most after your experiences last week?

ERIC COLE: That's a good question. I would say I probably learned that you don't really have to play perfect golf to have a chance to win. I think I already knew that, but the front nine on Sunday I really didn't hit it well there for a few holes, a few-hole stretch. I hung in there and to have a chance to win when I wasn't playing my best was pretty cool.

It was just a good firsthand experience of what people say, where you don't have to play perfect golf to win, and to kind of experience that was really neat.

Q. All those years on the mini-tours, how many of those years -- were you making a profit on that or did you have some years where you lost money? I mean, just talk a little bit about that.

ERIC COLE: Sure. So I tended to be one of the better mini-tour players. So as far as like entry fees and getting it back, like I always, I pretty much profited every year from that.

But there's a lot of other expenses when you're driving around and stuff like that. So if you include that stuff, I would say there's probably a couple break-even years in there for sure where it's really tough to pay all your bills at home and stuff.

But I've been really lucky. I've had people help me out from the country club that I practice at, Tequesta, and other individuals. So it's one of those things where you need a little bit of help and a little bit of luck to get to the PGA TOUR, in my case.

Q. How complicated were those tax returns with all those itemized deductions?

ERIC COLE: Yeah, it's not easy. The guy that does my taxes, he's a friend of mine, Neil Rinehimer, he -- and I don't do a great job categorizing it, so he's got a tough task every March.

Q. What was your biggest paycheck -- outside of Korn Ferry Tour, what was your biggest check, the Frank Fuhrer?

ERIC COLE: Yeah, that would probably be it. It's a section event run by the Tri-State where there's -- that's a great event for a mini-tour player. There's a bunch of added money that Mr. Fuhrer put into that purse. So that would definitely be it.

Q. You talked about the struggles with injury and some of the things you went through on the process just to get to this point. Was there ever a point that you ever considered giving up the game of professional golf?

ERIC COLE: Yeah, I would say there were a few points where I thought about it. I caddied for Sam Saunders for probably six months at one point and didn't really play a lot. And then the back injury, I was kind of giving lessons and teaching and it definitely crossed my mind that this isn't the end of the world and I could teach golf. That's something that I didn't mind doing. I kind of enjoyed it, especially like younger juniors and stuff. I got a lot of thrill out of that.

And I think that might have helped my game a little bit to say golf isn't the most important thing. If I don't end up being some great golfer, that's not the end of the world. Life still goes on. So I definitely considered it a few times, but I'm glad I stuck it out.

Q. Your friend Brad Adamonis holed out on 18 yesterday to qualify for his first-ever PGA TOUR event. Your thoughts on him being on the champs TOUR?

ERIC COLE: That's awesome. I didn't know that. That's exciting to hear. Brad's a great guy and we played a lot of mini-tour golf together I hope he does really well on the Champions Tour. They got to look out for him, for sure.

Q. What's been the experience of your parents on your career?

ERIC COLE: It's been big. I was always around them going to their tournaments and stuff from a young age. So I kind of saw what they did and thought that was something I wanted to do. I've leaned on them for advice, whether it's golf course stuff or off-the-golf-course stuff, travel or where to play, what to do. So I've leaned on them a lot. They both have been an inspiration to me about how I kind of want to pursue this as my career.

Q. You've been coming to this course for 20 years it sounds like, off and on. How much tougher has it gotten?

ERIC COLE: It's definitely gotten tougher. It's so firm and so fast by Saturday and Sunday in recent years. But I think if you look at the list of champions it's a really, really hard test, but it seems to bring the people who are playing the best to the top of the leaderboard. I think that's something that all the greatest courses and greatest tournaments in the world tend to do. I think that, although it's really tough, it's overall a really good thing.

Q. What do you remember from those days playing West Orange Country Club, I guess you were playing it every day, and just how that molded you into the golfer you are?

ERIC COLE: Yeah, sure. Before I started practicing out here when I was 14, from probably 10 to 14 my mom got me a junior membership at West Orange Country Club. I spent pretty much all day every day out there, in the summers especially. There were a lot of pros that practiced out there too. Deane Pappas and a bunch of other guys. So we had a lot of really good games. Kind of taught me a little bit of like, you know, hard work and grinding it out and stuff like that. I think a lot of those attributes that I might have I probably got from being around West Orange at a young age.

Q. Going back to this course. You played this course hundreds of times, maybe even more. But what is the perhaps the biggest difference, from your caddieing

days for Sam, what's the biggest difference in this course between any other week of the year and the first week of March?

ERIC COLE: You're saying the difference between when I was playing it growing up versus the tournament week?

Q. Tournament week.

ERIC COLE: Yeah, it's a lot different. So the greens are obviously a lot firmer, but the biggest difference for me is -- the rough is higher too -- but the fairways are so much firmer.

So when we were kids, one, you're a kid, so you just hit driver on every hole. Two, it's just, the ball doesn't roll like it does in the tournament. So it wasn't even an option. Every hole was a driver. It was just, you know, a foregone conclusion.

Then by the time the tournament rolls around and especially the weekend, seeing, caddieing for Sam and watching it on TV and stuff, those shots that are just automatic drivers turn into like 5-woods and 4-irons because the ball's running 30 and 40 yards on the fairway. So that's probably the biggest difference.

But it's a great course and it was always in good shape when we were growing up. So the look of it is pretty similar, but the firm fairways is a big difference.

Q. Knowing both sides of that, is that going to be an easy adjustment for you this week or perhaps a little tougher because you played it both ways?

ERIC COLE: Yeah. I mean, it's just something to pay attention to more than anything. It's just something that you have to know going into each hole. Like kind of how far you want to hit the ball and that distance is the club that's going to go that distance is pretty variable. One day it might be a 3-wood and the next day it might be a 4-iron just because of how firm the fairways get. So it's just something to pay attention to and something that my caddie and I just got to stay reminded of.

Q. What were the emotions like driving in here knowing, hey, Thursday, this is real, man, 20 years later you're playing in the King's tournament?

ERIC COLE: Yeah, it's awesome. Like I said, I've always been around this tournament. Caddieing in it is still a really cool experience, for me, for Sam. Playing in it is just something that I'm just so excited. I'm so ready to go for Thursday. It's going to be cool.

My mom's going to be here again like she was last week. My fiance's coming up. So it's kind of a cool thing to have two semi-home tournaments back-to-back is something that probably doesn't happen too often. So I'm kind of relishing in that.

Q. What was it like to have your mom there? Everybody knows her story and you say she's an inspiration, she overcame a lot in her life. How did that inspire you?

ERIC COLE: Oh, sure. Yeah, she is an incredible woman. I'm lucky that she's my mom. Everyone has some kind of hardship or something that you have to deal with in your life. The way she dealt with it just kind of proves her character. I think that's something that's true for anybody, when you have to deal with something that may not be the easiest thing it's how you handle it. Yeah, I'm just proud of her, I guess.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Eric, thank you very much for your time and best of luck this week.

ERIC COLE: Thank you.

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