

# Arnold Palmer Invitational

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Bay Hill, Florida, USA

Bay Hill Club and Lodge

## Kurt Kitayama

### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll get started. We would like to welcome Kurt Kitayama into the interview room, our 2023 Arnold Palmer Invitational presented by Mastercard champion.

Kurt, what a performance you put on out there, what a field that was, competition coming in. Just talk a little bit about what it means to get your first PGA TOUR victory and to do it here at Arnold Palmer's place.

KURT KITAYAMA: It's pretty amazing. Just to get your first win, I think is an unbelievable thing. Lucky enough to have it at a very special place, so that's a bonus.

THE MODERATOR: You move up to No. 6 in the FedExCup standings. Just talk a little bit about how this changes your goals going forward this season.

KURT KITAYAMA: You know, I'm not sure. I haven't really thought about it. I'm sure things are going to be different now, and I'll worry about it tomorrow, I guess.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go right into questions.

**Q. It's a pretty long walk from 9 green to 10 tee, compared to the rest of the course, and I know you mentioned on TV you had a conversation with Tim about that. Can you expand on what you tried to convey to him there and maybe the role he played and his response.**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, I mean, I was putting for triple, and I just told him, I just wanted to let him know how I felt. I still felt comfortable. I didn't feel out of place. It was just one bad swing. He kind of backed me up. He said that, he goes, I know, you look fine. And that helped.

**Q. You beat some really big names to win this, Rory McIlroy Scottie Scheffler, Jordan Spieth. Are you aware of that when you're going down the stretch? Does that add pressure to you or could you stay in your own world and focus on your own game?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Going into the day you know who is near the top and you just pay attention the whole day. You can't ignore it. You got to know where you're at and you know who is there and just embrace the whole situation, I guess.

**Q. I guess it's only been a few weeks with Tim. Can you say how that relationship came about and how much of an impact he might have had for you this week.**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, he used to caddie up at Bandon with my brother and that's kind of how that relationship started. When I happened to make a change, and I was going to give him a call, my brother helped kind of relay that message. He wasn't working at the time for anyone and that's how it worked out.

**Q. There was a leaderboard today packed with a lot of great names, great players. What do you feel separated you this week from that pack?**

KURT KITAYAMA: I'm not sure really. I think just a little bit of luck finally went my way. When it's that close at the top, that's what you need. Anyone probably could have won it. Luckily it just happened to be me.

**Q. At college you were nicknamed The Project. What did you think of that and how far were you at that time from a day like this?**

KURT KITAYAMA: (Laughing.) Really far. Yeah, when I got into school I was struggling, but the guys at the course saw me every day grinding, just working hard, and that's kind of why they nicknamed me that.

**Q. First of all, could you go through the shot on 17, what club you hit there.**

KURT KITAYAMA: 6-iron. We were trying to play left of that pin, actually. I just ripped it and it started leaking little right, but I hit it good enough to cover and it was perfect.

**Q. What are you doing now better, I guess, that you weren't doing two, three, four years ago, not all the**



way back to The Project days, but...

KURT KITAYAMA: I would like to say my iron game has jumped a level, and then my short game has seen a big level of increase, like how I've been kind of managing myself around the greens.

**Q. Where did you pick up your greatest level of self-belief?**

KURT KITAYAMA: I'm not sure. I think just finding those little successes around the world and making it out here, putting myself in those, in contention, you start to really believe in yourself, that you belong out here.

**Q. Have you always believed that you belong out here? When did that flip?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Probably not. Right when I got out of college, I struggled. I don't know, it's been hard. I don't know, you just keep grinding away and you just keep building the level of confidence to finally feel like I belong out here.

**Q. What's JC Deacon done for your game?**

KURT KITAYAMA: I mean, he's done a lot of things great. When I lost my Korn Ferry Tour card, he stepped in and, you know, I was lost. He's come in and helped me so much. I wouldn't be here without him.

**Q. You now know it's a courtesy to let Viktor tap in? I mean, that thing was hanging on the edge. It could have dropped in the cup. What was going on there? Were you nervous, like setting it there?**

KURT KITAYAMA: I thought I was going to set it and it was going to just roll in. It was that close. But it made it a lot easier.

**Q. Wondering about the battle with Viktor out there. You were both struggling at times. He made a double on 8. You made a triple on 9. But just you both managed to fight back. Just curious about the dynamic between you guys throughout the day.**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, I mean, he got off to a little rough start, and then I had a fumble there on 9, and next thing you know we're both, it felt like, way behind, and then he makes a couple birdies in the middle of the back nine, and we look up at the leaderboard and we're right there.

I don't know, it was just a tough day, both of us grinding it out.

**Q. Paul Azinger called you a junkyard dog waiting for a bone after you made that putt on 17. I would say you now are a pedigree, having beaten such a stacked field. Curious, have you ever practiced or thought in your mind that you would have that long a lag putt on 18 to win a tournament like this, and how nervous were you?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Probably not that long. You probably practice the 5- to 10-footers for the win. I was definitely nervous, just tried to focus on speed, and that was it, and try and blank everything out besides that.

**Q. You smiled, it seemed, obviously with relief when it hung on the lip, and then I noticed that a wave of emotion came over you. Was there a moment there where you were able to sort of exhale and realize what had happened?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, when I marked it and walked over to Tim and just, like, a big sigh of relief, really, you know, that this was really happening.

**Q. I heard you say that you realized you were walking too fast and so you slowed down. Can you tell me when you felt that and when you started slowing down?**

KURT KITAYAMA: It happened middle of the back nine somewhere, or near the end. Then right off 18 tee, I felt like I was just walking super fast. And I was like, slow down. I mean, JC was on the putting green earlier and he said, You know, just relax and just make sure to take some deep breaths and walk slow.

So I thought of that and I was able to recognize it, luckily, and just kind of calm down.

**Q. When you struggled to get KFT status, and then ended up going off to Asia Tour, was there ever a point where you thought that this day might not happen for you?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Not really. I don't know, when you're there, you kind of think about progressing over there, and then I played well in Asia and then progressed over to Europe, played well there. Got off to a great start there and had my mindset on playing on the PGA TOUR. So just a different route, but with the end goal is being here.

**Q. So we learned from Xander a few days ago that your nickname is Quadzilla. Just wanted to get your thoughts on that. And then do you have any nicknames for him?**

KURT KITAYAMA: (Laughing.) Yeah, I mean unfortunately, I don't have any nicknames for him, but I'm going to have to come up with some.

He actually took that, one of them, from J.J. Spaun. He texted me. He was all mad that he stole it (laughing.) But, you know, just funny. We have a good relationship. He messes around with me and gives me crap all the time.

**Q. Do you think that playing in Europe and Asia sort of tough end you up as a professional golfer?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, absolutely. It's a different experience, for sure. You just travel to every different country, you're dealing with logistics, food, the culture, language. So like outside of golf it's difficult if you don't know, if you don't have someone there helping you.

I think that just helps you grow as a person and when you get into situations like this, you can, you know, there's tougher things.

**Q. Was there a moment that was particularly tough, like some country where you were really lonely in a hotel or somewhere where you just thought, like, I really need to get myself back to playing in the United States?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Not really. But you know you're over there for a reason, to try and keep getting better, and that was just part of it.

**Q. And then you just mentioned that that sort of resilience, did that help today when you saw those names on the leaderboard?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, definitely. I mean, you're in an uncomfortable situation and whether it's on the golf course or off, you just got to deal with it.

**Q. This win gets you back at the Open Championship at this year Royal Hoyle. As a guy who is a world player, what was that experience like for you last year, and what does that mean to you?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, I mean, last year was special with it being at St. Andrews. The Open Championship is a really cool experience. I haven't done well, but just got to keep trying to get myself back in it and just kind of keep getting better and, I don't know.

**Q. Secondly, as a guy who was knocking on the door trying to get that first win, what's the very best part of having that trophy next to you?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Just having this trophy here, you know, that's the best part. I don't know, it just feels amazing to finally win.

**Q. Is this your first time wearing a cardigan?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, I think so.

**Q. You go to No. 19 in the world. Does that surprise you or do you feel like it?**

KURT KITAYAMA: I don't know. It's pretty special to be in the top 20, for sure. A milestone is top 50, and then to jump up that much, it's pretty cool.

**Q. Do you know how many tours you played on? Korn Ferry --**

KURT KITAYAMA: I've heard, like, around 10 or so.

**Q. Do you know what they are?**

KURT KITAYAMA: It would be, I can probably name off most of 'em.

**Q. Do you want to give it a shot?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Sure. Canada, Korn Ferry Tour, PGA, Europe, Sunshine, Asian Tour.

**Q. ADT.**

KURT KITAYAMA: ADT, Japan, Korea, probably the India one too, I'm guessing.

**Q. You did a PGA India?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Well, I don't know, I don't think if that counts towards the Indian Open or something, but, yeah.

**Q. China?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Oh, yeah, China. I forgot about that one.

**Q. You all done?**

KURT KITAYAMA: I think that's it.

**Q. Do you remember who you beat for your first professional victory?**

KURT KITAYAMA: John Catlin.

**Q. What was the tournament you beat John Catlin?**



KURT KITAYAMA: Asian Development Tour in Malaysia. I forget what city it was. But, yeah, I remember we had a pretty good battle.

**Q. It seemed like were you poised to get the first, your first win just last month at AT&T Pebble Beach. What was the level of disappointment that you struggled on the weekend?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah, that one was very disappointing. I felt like I was comfortable enough in that situation and that things just didn't go my way early and I was more probably mad than anything. It just happens. Just try not to think about it too much.

**Q. How do you get mad, punch a wall or...**

KURT KITAYAMA: No (laughing.) Like, internally, you kind of, you're fuming, really, yeah. (Laughing.)

**Q. You don't seem, it's amazing, and I'm sure you're excited beyond belief. You don't seem overwhelmed by the moment with that big silver thing next to you, and you didn't look the least bit overwhelmed, out-of-bounds shots or not, during the course of the play. Where does that come from and is that an accurate observation that you are rivalling Dustin in terms of pulse right now?**

KURT KITAYAMA: (Laughing.) No, I mean, the pulse is going pretty good still. But just from what I've learned in the past few years and being in these situations. I've been able to control how I feel a lot better. Especially when it's coming down 18 like that or hitting a tee ball out of bounds. You just got to let it go. I mean, on 9 today I felt like I did a really good job doing that.

**Q. Were you nervous at all out there?**

KURT KITAYAMA: Yeah definitely. Definitely felt it a little bit. But definitely not as much as like Honda or the Scottish Open, you know, those first few that I finished high up. Definitely more comfortable today.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Kurt, we appreciate your time and congratulations once again.

KURT KITAYAMA: Thank you.

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