

Honda Classic

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Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, USA

PGA National Resort

Padraig Harrington

Press Conference



HALEY PETERSON: Welcome to the 2021 Honda Classic virtual press conference. We are joined here by two-time Honda Classic champion Padraig Harrington. You're making your seventh start of the season and coming off of a T31 finish from Arnold Palmer Invitational. How would you assess your game so far this season?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Yeah, I kind of struggled to get going with having had COVID at Pebble Beach, and then I missed the cut at Arizona, had COVID, and then I went into Riviera and missed the cut there after a quick no-practice round, so those three weeks were kind of lost on me.

I was quite happy to get back into the flow of things. Playing down in Puerto Rico was good, Arnold Palmer I showed some good form at times. I didn't drive the ball very well. I wasn't very comfortable but I was happy with the rest of my game. Probably a week off last week is not what I needed, and hopefully I can get my head around things and be ready to go Thursday. I certainly didn't feel ready today on Tuesday.

HALEY PETERSON: You'll be making your 12th appearance here at the Honda and two-time champion. Is it nice to be back on familiar turf where it's a place that you have seen success?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Yeah, I say I like the golf course. It's a tough golf course, and I think that plays into my hands. I think the wind obviously suits me. So yeah, there are two parts of the course, a lot of difficult shots. You've got to be mentally strong, committed to your shots, which has been one of my strengths over the years, and then the windy nature of the course, again, plays into my hands. Yeah, it's a course I would like to play tournament -- yeah, this is a strange statement. I'd like to play tournament golf on a course like this every week, but I know it would beat you up eventually. It is one of the tougher courses of the year.

You'll be tired -- if you play all four rounds here and get in contention, you'll be tired on Sunday evening because you've got to pay attention at all stages out here. There's

plenty of trouble that can not only ruin a round but ruin a tournament in a very quick couple of shots.

HALEY PETERSON: Speaking of difficulty, how does the Bear Trap stack up against other courses on TOUR like the Snake Pit and the Green Mile and the Horrible Horseshoe?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Where was the Horrible Horseshoe? Colonial, there you go.

Yeah, look, the ones here, obviously the two par-3s are a little shorter now with 17 -- we used to play it as a 4-iron, now it's probably a 7-iron with the forward tee. But there's no bail-outs. There's nowhere to go. You've got to really hit a great shot. With the grandstands and things, it's difficult -- it's a difficult angle to find the wind on. I think that probably is what makes the Bear Trap so difficult, the wind direction, even on 16, you're never 100 percent sure how much you've changed direction, how much it's across or down.

So yeah, there's a little bit of doubt thrown into it, into the mix, and they're obviously very difficult shots with no bail-out. I would think if you went down to it, I think this is probably the toughest stretch, the toughest three-hole stretch, certainly 15 and 17.

I know 14 is right up there, 16, and if you're going for 18, again, it adds into the -- there's more drama, more water. You really don't get away from it here at PGA National. With that front nine through 5, 6, there's a lot of drama and holes that can keep you awake at night.

Q. I've got a Ryder Cup question for you. I was looking at your playing record and you've had a lot of success, but I wanted to ask you a question about the two that you didn't win in Brookline and Valhalla, two very different kinds of losses, one that feels really flukish and one that was sort of a decisive victory that may have rocked the European system a little bit. As a captain now I'd love your perspective on what you learned from each of those two playing losses.

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Okay, have we got that much time?



Obviously Brookline, I was a rookie. As a rookie, you just keep your head down and do your thing. It would have been a very exciting week -- it was a great week for me personally, just so exciting. I'd only just got into the team by finishing second and second the two previous events. But do you learn anything? I think Mark James tried something that week and he really did take one for the team because it will never be done again not playing the rookies before the singles. But he went all out to get as many points as he could going into those singles, and clearly in hindsight I don't think any captain will ever do it again. But somebody had to try it. So pretty straightforward.

I think Valhalla, I don't think there was anything to be learned from Valhalla. It was just a -- I suppose there was, actually. The U.S. were a better team, straightforward, on a golf course that suited them. We didn't gel very well together. We didn't really have too many -- I would have been a senior player there, Lee Westwood, Miguel Angel Jiménez. We didn't really have a leader in the team room. I think maybe not picking Darren Clarke was one of the big mistakes of that Ryder Cup. You do need a personality in the team room. We didn't have a Monty; Darren would have done that job.

I think if you look back, you could certainly look to that pick because it was a little bit missing in that team room. There was nobody -- I had just won a couple of majors. I was too busy doing my own thing to be trying to take over that responsibility, and we were missing that for sure. We were missing a leader in the locker room.

Whether it would have made a difference to the result, as I said, that seemed like a very strong U.S. Team. They seemed to be playing on a golf course that I think Europe would always struggle to beat America on a traditional U.S. golf course, so yeah, I'm sure there was lots more I learnt and that I'm going to keep to myself.

Q. On that topic of having a leader, does it make you feel good Lee Westwood playing so well recently?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Yep, absolutely. You know, these are the sort of things you want. You'd love to have experienced guys who are playing well. You can't just have an experienced guy for the sake of it. You want an experienced guy playing well, and it's great to see Lee is playing well.

I will look at my team and look at the balance and certainly you would probably ask him to do a little more than just play golf that week, but I'm looking at it and I seem to be getting a nice balance so far. The majority of the people

who are going to qualify automatically look like that side of my team is really taking shape.

Obviously Lee playing his way in in some ways looks like he's played his way in frees up another spot for a pick, which would help some of the senior guys because I do have a number of senior players who are unlikely to make the team automatically.

Yeah, everything about Lee playing well is a bonus for me.

Q. In relation to Lee's big move up the Ryder Cup points tab, you must be pleased as a fellow Irishman that Shane has made big leap and also a tiny leap, too with the majors coming up?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Yeah, I don't think he made any leap, though. He finished eighth last week.

Q. He jumped five places on the world table, which is a good sort of boost. I think he's four places outside of the top 5 on that world points table.

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Okay. I think I've been playing with Shane. Shane has been playing probably the best golf I've ever seen him play of recent. He hasn't been putting very well. As I've said about a few players, I'm never unhappy to see a player playing well but not quite get the results at this time of the year because I know they're going to turn around for Shane, and I can see good form there, and when it does turn around, it's going to be at the appropriate time of the year. It's going to be coming into, as you said, the majors, and then following up into the Ryder Cup.

You know, looking from the outside, you just tell Shane just to let it happen. It's obviously very easy to say that, not as easy to do as a player. But he is playing very well tee to green, and I am keeping an eye on him like I am all the other players who are there or thereabouts.

It is strange that Shane would be a rookie, but you do kind of think of him as a senior player.

Q. Also another fellow Irishman in Rory McIlroy, you talk about form at the right time, he's the sort of player that can produce form at the right time. Are you surprised at his revelation last week that he's been trying to copy Bryson DeChambeau and probably that's got inside his head and probably small point why he's not playing so well?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Yeah, look, I can turn around to you and say, we've seen many players on the range doing that, many players, and Rory the same. It's not like I

haven't done it myself, so I'm not going to sit here and pass judgment on him. Right from the get-go I'm surprised in 1996 that most people didn't recognize it with Tiger that he had a tremendous advantage off the tee and try and keep up.

I'm startled, Rory used that tool exactly in 2010 and 2011, and Rory's long hitting and just hitting more drivers allowed the likes of DJ, Bubba Watson, J.B. Holmes, they were all trying to play golf like the rest of us at that stage. Rory came out and starting hitting drivers on more holes, being more aggressive off the tee. That's when you started seeing these guys freeing up and going, oh, maybe we should hit drivers.

What you do see on the TOUR now is pretty much the whole field now hits drivers on holes that -- especially I'll go back to a course like this where I've played over the years. Holes that used to be a 3-wood lay-up off the tee, now everybody hits driver. We all push that risk.

The reason we do it is if one guy is hitting driver -- and Bryson being out there on his own is okay at the moment. If there's only one guy, Davis Love in the '80s was out there on his own. The field doesn't have to worry about one guy. Bryson obviously is a good player, a great player, so they do have to worry about him, but not excessively about his length.

Obviously in five, ten years' time there's going to be 10, 20 guys hitting it like that. I wouldn't like to be a young guy coming out on TOUR who didn't have a lot of speed because he's going to -- if he wants to compete on TOUR for the next 10, 15, 20 years, at some stage he's going to have to hit it up there because there will be, as I said, 10, 20, 30 guys doing it.

But you don't have to do it right now. At the moment 180 ball speed is plenty good enough. Rory has that easily. He's the best driver of the ball in the game. So he doesn't need to worry about it himself. If you're trying to hang around for 10 years, you might have to think about trying to get those 190 ball speeds.

Q. Going back to the Bear Trap, it obviously has a little bit of a reputation with fans and having fun out there. How do you anticipate it being different this year with fewer fans being a part of it?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Yeah, you know, I think they've struck a very nice balance. They had struck a nice balance maybe three years ago we used the back tee on 17 and the crowds were very close, and with a 4-iron in your hand it was a bit over the top. Now we're up a tee box. As I said, it's a 7-iron.

Those are really nerve-racking holes, so to be honest, you don't want it too quiet, so you want the nice ambient noise. I think there will be enough people to create that. Quiet is not good. Quiet is tough. You know, you can hear things if it's quiet or something can jump out if it's quiet. So I think there would be enough people to create a nice ambient noise, which is exactly what you want.

If there was a lot of people, then you have quite a loud dull noise, which is quite good, as well. Like if we were on the 16th at Phoenix, I would not ask -- I don't want anybody to be shushed. I'd rather them to keep making noise, because as I said, once there's a lot of noise you can't pick out anything individually, but this week I would assume there would be a nice ambient noise. Don't worry, the players will be nervous. There's enough tension in them that they will focus in.

It's easier to focus when you're under a bit of pressure and a bit of nerves. I think it will do just okay.

Q. I kind of wanted to ask you, sort of along the Lee Westwood lines, as well, he's almost kind of like a crowd favorite the last couple weeks. What does that boost mean for a European player, when you can come over to the States -- you've had this pretty much your whole career. I don't know if this is a new phenomenon for Lee or not but it seems like it's ramped up in the last couple weeks. How much does that help?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Yeah, I think obviously Lee was at one stage the best player in the world. He's kind of got through that phase that he's now come back as an older player, and even for his non-fans, they respect what he's doing at the moment. They're not looking at him as the opposition. In some ways you have Lee got the support of the -- I suppose the anti-Bryson support, the people who are looking at Bryson hitting it so far, and there's a distinct amount of people that don't want Bryson to do well because he's hitting it so far and they want the game to be back to what I suppose their ideals, and Lee does represent that, more of a nice straight hitter of the ball, good ball-striking, hitting fairways and greens. So there's a lot of people that would have been rooting for the guy, anybody going up against Bryson sort of thing.

But there's also a lot rooting for Lee because of the stage in his career and people are going, wow, we're wishing him well, we'd like to see him get a major, that kind of attitude. Maybe if he was in the pinnacle of his career, maybe if he was 30 years of age, he would be seen as an outsider, but now he's seen as a warm and friendly guy coming over here at his age, isn't it nice to see and wouldn't it be a great

story, and it would be a great story to see him do it.

So yeah, I think he definitely had, as you said, a very nice warm support. Everybody wished him to do well.

The great thing about it, as well, there didn't seem to be any, I suppose, judgment or negativity. They just were going out, let's hope he does well and win. A young guy at the start of the year everybody is looking at and going, what does this mean if he doesn't win after leading. With Lee there didn't seem to be that judgment, it was just, let's see how he gets on and hope he does well.

Q. Going back to what you were saying about distance, I seem to recall there was a point in your career that you were chasing some distance. What happened? What was the outcome, I guess?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: I've chased distance every day of my life. You obviously don't -- the one thing I'm obsessed about is chasing distance.

It's something I started doing, as I said, when I came out as a pro. My very first -- at the orientation, it was called the MacGregor week back then, I remember gaining 20 yards, and this is fabulous. My whole life I've looked to try and stay competitive.

I suppose it definitely has cost me at times. There's no doubt about it. I'd be looking at speed and focusing on my training, at times more than just being mentally sharp at tournaments. So yeah, there was definitely a downside, and I see the addiction of chasing speed and I see the problem of if somebody -- and I see these young guys -- not young guys, medium aged guys go out there, if you're chasing speed and you hit a good drive down the fairway, you're very happy, but you're standing there thinking, I wonder could I hit it five yards further, I wonder what speed that was, I wonder would it have been this or that. There's no satisfaction in it. I would thoroughly recommend to a young guy to do it early so that he comes out with speed and never has to worry about it, but the fact that I have chased it means that I'm 49 years of age and I don't go out on the golf course giving up anything to anybody in terms of speed.

Like I'm a 190 ball speed guy in practice, I just don't bring it to the golf course, which is very upsetting for me, but there's very few people on TOUR who can get 190 ball speed. In terms of one-off practice, I'm in the top 5 percent anyway or top 1 percent I suppose out on TOUR, not in my tournament play, that does annoy me, but as I said, because of the work I've done it means I can still compete with the young guys at 49 years of age. But there are sacrifices. At times, as I said, I have been distracted by

speed and the lack of -- as I said, it really is something you can never be satisfied with.

I don't know, it's a bit of a Pandora's box you get into. And I see the guys getting into it. I could see Rory getting into it. I talked to Rory about it, and I have to say I didn't -- I couldn't have said I warned them away from it, but certainly I would have talked to many players and just said, look, you're going down a road that you might have to go down, you might want to go down, you might make that mistake yourself, but it really is a tough one if you're not long enough and you need a bit more length you might have to do it, but as I said, I -- by the way, I haven't seen anybody in my career gain speed when they're on TOUR except for Bryson. He's the only person. Nobody else has gained speed on TOUR.

Now, I'm not talking about everybody has gained a mile an hour when the new ball comes out or the new driver, but we've all crept up -- when I started doing speed work the first monitor I got was in 2000, 169 was my ball speed. Now I can crack out 192 on the range. If you want to put a few dollars on it, I'll make 192 a little bit of incentive. That's how much I've increased my speed in training. Maybe I've increased on the golf course by 10 miles an hour ball speed.

But Bryson is the only one that is actually in a given year -- I saw Bryson get 189 miles an hour mile speed at Portrush on a cold day on the range, so he probably had a lot of that speed in there, but the fact he can bring it out on the golf course has -- as I say, I can bring it out on the range, I just can't bring it out on the golf course. That is an incredible achievement that he can bring it out under pressure and keep it on the planet because I know when I go for speed on the golf course, there isn't a big enough golf course for me.

Q. Where do you think the line is in terms of speed for the future, and do you think we'll have a point where there will be something done to curtail distance at some point, whatever that may be?

PADRAIG HARRINGTON: Okay, I think -- right. I've got to think this through. One, everybody argues about speed, and the argument always tends to go about whether you like people who hit it long and playing golf with long hitting or you don't. But that argument is just personal opinion. You can't argue, if some person likes it, some person doesn't like it, whether the golf is more fun or not more fun. That is purely down to each individual person. So anybody who's arguing on social media, it's crazy because it's just personal opinion. It's not a factual argument.

I would say, though, golf ball going further means it's more

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

expensive to build a golf course, it's more expensive to maintain a golf course. Golf ball going further definitely slows down the round of golf in terms of it's a longer walk, it takes longer, and that's the biggest issue with golf is the pace, the time it takes to get around. The golf ball going further also slows down the style of play because there's more bottle necks when people wait on par-4s and par-5s. Golf ball going further has meant that some golf courses are obsolete, some of the great courses, and the golf ball -- I shouldn't say golf ball. Equipment going further. And it could be an equipment change. It doesn't have to be a ball change. With the ball going further, equipment going further, it also means that golf -- and I see this at home. Golf is extremely dangerous at home. People wing it off fairways. You go to any regular club in Ireland, guys who are 25 years of age are hitting it 340 in the air and they don't know where it's going. I'm not saying good players, I'm talking just your regular guys hitting it miles, and you can't keep it on these courses because there's doglegs, so it's dangerous, so for those six reasons I think the game should be tailed back.

But the one thing that nobody seems to be getting in the whole of this argument, it's a massive advantage to the long hitters if they tail back the equipment. If they bring it back, it's a huge -- Bryson gains massively if they draw back the equipment. The longer you hit it, if you reduce Bryson by 10 percent, say he's hitting it 350 and he's now hitting it 315 and you reduce a guy who's hitting it 300 and you reduce him to 270, Bryson is okay. He's still that same percentage ahead but it's a lot easier to hit the golf ball on a golf course at 315 than it is at at 345 or 350. It is an incredible advantage to the long hitters if they tail back how far the ball goes.

I'm talking it will encourage even more of a chase of long hitting because it's such an advantage.

And remember, doesn't matter what they do with the equipment going forward. You can't change now. You're going to have young guys coming out who swing a 7-iron at 110 miles an hour and that means that there's no lie in the rough, there's no tree in the way that they can't get over or can't get out of.

As I said, I saw it with Tiger Woods. In 1996 he destroyed everybody because he was faster -- he was a good player and was faster, and Rory did the same thing.

Now we're seeing Bryson, he's obviously getting the limelight for it, and it's very impressive, but it will be -- he should be screaming for a rollback because it would give him a big advantage.

HALEY PETERSON: Thank you, that's all the questions

we have. Thank you, Pdraig, for taking the time to do this and best of luck this week.

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