

Cognizant Classic

Wednesday, February 28, 2024

Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, USA

PGA National Champion Course

Camillo Villegas

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'd like to welcome 2010 winner of the Cognizant Classic in the Palm Beaches, champion Camillo Villegas into the media center. Camillo was named chairman of the PGA TOUR Player Advisory Board council for 2024 this morning, and will join the policy board as a player director on January 1st, 2025.

Congratulations on your election as PAC chairman. What did it mean to you to hear the results of the vote?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Thanks, Ally; Hi, everybody. No, very excited to be honest. It's something I've always wanted to do. It just happened that this is the time to do it.

I'm curious, I'm excited. The PGA has been a very special place for me, very important institution not only for me, but my family.

Once again, I'm just curious to know a little bit more what's going behind the scenes, and as an analytical guy add my two cents. I have a lot to learn. Once again, very curious. I will give it my best to try to represent the players and the PGA TOUR, to make what I would consider the most logical decisions for the game of golf.

Q. Making 18th start at the Cognizant Classic in the Palm Beaches. Three more than any other player since you joined the PGA TOUR in 2005. In addition to the win, why has this always been such an important tournament on your schedule?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: I guess you're telling me I'm getting a little older, playing more than anybody. But, no, special place.

After growing up in Colombia, going to the University of Florida just down the road, and making a Jupiter, Florida my home, the Honda Classic and now the Cognizant, which by the way I'm very thankful to the guys at Cognizant for the seven-year commitment to this tournament.

I mean, Colombia is my home, in my heart, but just Florida and Jupiter keeps growing here after year after now

spending 17 years here.

This event keeps going, keeps getting the support from the fans, keeps getting the support for charity and what Jack and Barbara do for Nicklaus Children is touching and special institution in my heart and my family's heart.

Once again, very excited to be here. The golf course I had a chance to play yesterday. It's in good condition. It always gets tough here. Always gets tough.

So I've been working hard. I didn't get to the best start this year, but once again, I'm looking forward to a special week in what I call my home.

Q. I couldn't help but notice your eye roll when she mentioned that you've played this tournament more than anyone else. Is it crazy to think that you're at that point where you have been around more than half your life it seems like?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Oh, yeah, I do. It goes fast. Trust me, as an athlete you go in circles. I've been an athlete that has gone up and down with my career, which is, believe it or not, the most normal situation.

Rory just left this room and those careers are not very normal. Mine is a lot more normal.

But it's very interesting. You learn from the ups. You learn from the downs. You enjoy the process. That's what I've tried to do.

I'm 42. Like we said, I'm not one of the young ones out here anymore. I remember when they were talking about the young guns and it was AK and myself and Sean O'Hair and the other guys.

Yeah, we're in our 40s now. Even though that's just a number, yeah, you do think about it. You do think how much longer, especially, man -- I was thinking how much longer last year. Last year was a crazy year for me.

I was probably -- I was having to go to second stage of Q-School and my hard work with my swing changes paid



off and happened to get that second place in Mexico, going on to win in Bermuda, and then it was very special.

I bought time to continue working what I'm working. I know it's the right thing. I totally changed my team last year, my process, and my swing. It paid off.

So very happy to be back with the big boys, and, yeah, just excited to keep adding years to this journey.

Q. As the game continues to grow and players like yourself on the TOUR, Latino players, what are some of the initiatives that players like you and enthusiastic fans like ourselves can do to grow the game in the Latino and Hispanic community?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Yeah, like I said, I grew up in Colombia. Played all over South America, Latin America. It's special. The game is not the biggest in our countries, but it continues to grow.

I think what the Korn Ferry TOUR is doing having several events is very important. I mean, you got Panama, you got Chile, now Argentina, Colombia. That's what it takes.

I remember when I was a kid and I would look at the guys, and it starts with your countrymen. Then you turn on the TV and you watch the stars on the PGA TOUR. Then you turn on the TV and you're watching the majors.

That's what lights the little fire.

So I think when you continue to do that, we need to continue to have Korn Ferry TOUR events.

Let's talk about Mexico. They have two PGA TOUR events. It's when those kids show up to those tournaments and see you in person, it just lights a fire to chase their dreams.

I think everybody out here on the PGA TOUR is an example that, yes, dreams come true. We all had a point in our careers where we dream about just playing golf for a living, winning golf tournaments on the PGA TOUR, and here we are.

How many guys this week? 144 guys starting this week, and it happens week after week. To all the youngsters in my Latin community, just keep getting inspired by us; dreams come true. Work hard. They're not easy but they are possible.

Q. With all your experience playing here, just wondering, there was a stretch where the Champion was getting a reputation as one of the most difficult

courses on TOUR. Do you think there was of point where some players started skipping the event because of the difficulty and what they've done to soften the course the last few years?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Yeah, I think you're right. It was not only one of the toughest golf courses of the year, but it was a stretch where it was around a lot of tough tournaments.

I played a practice round yesterday and the rough is down this year. It's going to be a lot more playable, and I think that's a good decision to be honest. The place will play tough, trust me. The greens were not very firm yesterday, but seems like we're going to have good weather the rest of the week. And even with the rough down, it will blow. Trust me, it will blow one or two days.

But yeah, I remember coming to this tournament and looking at scores hitting putts after my round and you see 7-over, 8-over, 9-over, and -- actually I'll tell a good story.

Last year I was working big time on my swing. It was still very, very early in my changes. My golf instructor says, I don't want you to play the Cognizant. I'm like, how am I not going to play the Cognizant? I'm past champion here. It's home. I'm sleeping in my own bed. It's such a special place for me.

He goes, well, trust me, I don't think you're ready to play there. Sure enough, I come here, and first day I shot 82. I was in last or second to last place. He calls me and goes, how are you doing? I had a feeling with everything that we're working -- because he told me, listen, your game is gonna get worse before it gets better.

So I came out here and shot 82 and I think 1-under or over the next day. Yeah, there was a concern in him of like, man, that's a tough golf course and you got to be in control to play out here.

Q. Wanted to see what's your go-to post-round meal? Maybe arroz con pollo?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Well, you know what? I try to -- I don't know. I've been eating a lot of steak lately. I love steak. The most important thing -- just changing a little topic -- you're out there for five hours. You got to have nutrition. If you're feeling hungry when you finish your round that means you're not doing the right things while you're playing.

We're always eating and keeping the energy up.

It's always nice. I'm home this week, and trust me, one the nights will be arroz con pollo.



Q. Now you're a part of the leadership of the PGA TOUR. Is it congratulations or condolences?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: I think congratulations. For sure. Because even during challenging times, hey, life is not easy, man. You go try to run a business, any business you're running, and it's challenging. Try to be an athlete out there and it's challenging. You got to work hard.

I think the game of golf is in an interesting situation. I think the rope is pretty tangled up. It needs to be untangled. It will get untangled. How long will it take? We don't know. We wish we had a crystal ball. I truly believe the game of golf will win.

I'm very excited to be part of this group. I know it's going to be a lot of work. I know it's going to be a big commitment, big responsibility, but that's kind of how I have handled my life. I try to do the best at everything I do and won't change anything for this new opportunity.

For me it's an opportunity to learn, analyze, and add my two cents. Therefore, it's a congratulations. Plus, I'm honored. To be honest, I'm honored because I was going against Kevin Streelman, and Kevin, I have so much respect for him because he was the guy I would vote for every time I had an opportunity to do it in situations.

Here I have my peers electing me over him, a guy that I respect a lot, so it makes me proud. I'm proud of myself and looking forward to this new opportunity.

Q. I love all that. The big question hanging over all this is how can SSG make money from this enterprise and be incentivized to put more in? What is your answer to the question how does the TOUR evolve and adapt so it could be a more profitable business?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Well, I wish I had an answer to the question. I think the question is more than a question, it's a topic. There is a lot of angles and different avenues we have to analyze in order to come up with a solution if that's what we're trying to get.

But trust me, SSG, they're not dumb. They're smart. They've been successful in everything they've done. They saw an opportunity.

So once again, I haven't had a chance to talk with them, but I'm curious to see why they're in it, what are they thinking, how can they improve the product that we have. Because for sure there is always room for improvement.

And I think more important is how we get more people

looking in the same direction with the same purpose. I think that's what will make this tour stronger. And the game of golf stronger in SSG's investment.

Q. Are your peers coming do you now and bringing you ideas saying I think with should do this?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: I just got elected last night, so I got a bunch of texts, congratulations, by the way, positive texts. And I came straight from home here. I'm sure I'm going to get more guys to approach me.

Again, let's be honest. 2024 is going to be a learning year for me. As the chairman of the PAC I'm not sitting on the policy board. My goal is to use 2024 to learn the most, to be as prepared as I can when I have to sit with the big boys there, the guys that are actually making the big decisions.

It's going to be interesting. But like I told you before, I'm excited. I'm going to give it my best. I'm going to try to be as analytical and reasonable as I can be and add my two cents.

Q. Based on your experience, what advice would you give a first-time winner on TOUR? There has been a lot of first-time winners, young kids. What advice would you give them as far as how to handle everything coming at them?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Yeah, winning on the PGA TOUR is a life-changing experience. With that comes commitments, responsibilities.

But I think it changes the player's expectations. It can change them for good and for bad. I've been on both sides of the equation. When I won my first tournament on the PGA TOUR in 2008 my expectations went up. Couple weeks later I still had the confidence and went and won the TOUR Championship.

That's an example of raising your expectations for good.

I can tell you when I got in the top 10 in the world my expectations got very high and I was waking up sometimes in the middle of the night seeing if I was going up or down in the world rankings.

Those expectations might have become a little bit unrealistic. I don't know if that's the word, but maybe a little bit too much pressure on myself. Started getting to me and then I started going the other way.

So for those first-time winners, just be very conscious of your expectations. Not saying they shouldn't go up. They

should. You just won on the PGA TOUR. But there is a process behind just the -- how a player evolves, keeps getting better, as long as you focus on the process and not the outcome.

So I think that's the best thing you can do.

Q. This is the Cognizant Classic in the Palm Beaches when you're not golfing, what do you like to do for fun? Whether it's go to the beach, out to eat, other sporting activities?

CAMILLO VILLEGAS: Well, as Adam Scott texted me this morning, he goes, enjoy 2024, because come 2025 you'll be a lot more busy.

So I guess I might spend a little more time on my bicycle this year because that's my passion. I love riding the bikes. A little bit of everything, road, gravel, mountain bike. Just good energy being out there pushing myself.

Obviously fitness is a passion. Being with my family and my wife and little one is very special. I have to be very, very honest, we just did Mia's Miracles year-end board meeting last week, and to see this Mia's Miracles Foundation growing, the support has been great to just keep being inspired by what Jack Nicklaus and Barbara Nicklaus keeps doing for Nicklaus Children and all the different projects they help.

To see my wife excited about bringing smiles to those in need, that has become a big passion. I never thought I would have the opportunity to do it, especially the way we're doing it.

But, hey, we're turning our tragedy into something very positive where we can help. Not only that, but it's opening our hearts to new stuff. That's become a big passion.

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