

Valspar Championship

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Palm Harbor, Florida, USA

Innisbrook Resort (Copperhead)

Justin Thomas

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Justin Thomas to the interview room here at the Valspar Championship. Justin making your seventh appearance here this week. Just some opening remarks on being back.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I like this place a lot. I think it's a great, very underrated golf course we play. I think it forces a lot of us to play from kind of some similar areas one more holes than we might find at other golf courses. Yeah, I just think it's a good kind of testament to you don't necessarily need length for a place to be difficult. You have to drive it well out here. The greens are small, and hitting to them, you just need to have control of your ball. It can get windy out here, and in the trees it can just kind of bounce around. So you need to kind of place your way around. And if you're playing well, you can make some birdies, but bogey lurks kind of at every swing. So it's a good week to stay patient.

THE MODERATOR: So far this season in six starts you have four Top-12 finishes. How do you feel about your game coming into this week?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, my game, it's continuing, I feel like, to go in the right direction. Obviously, missed cut last week was far from what I was looking for, but I'm not really looking too much into it. It was just one of those weeks where I had a couple putts here and there, just really one or two bad swings each day, that took away from, I feel like, a majority of really good golf throughout the entire round. But it's also just kind of a funky place. You can get some weird bounces and breaks and lies and whatnot, and it just was one of those years. So, yeah, I had a weekend of no golf because of it.

THE MODERATOR: All right, we'll open it up to questions.

Q. A little bit different schedule this year with the calendar and Augusta being pushed basically out an extra week. Did that make things at all tricky for you to figure out exactly what you want to play and the amount you want to play heading into Augusta?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Not too much. I think I would have -- I debated, I went back and forth if I wanted to take two weeks off before. I definitely didn't want to do three. So this worked out great, because this is clearly a place that I enjoy and like coming to, and so when it worked out in the schedule, it was easy to add. But, yeah, it wasn't terribly tough, it just was more of kind of figuring out what I wanted to do, if I was okay with two weeks off. And then, I mean, obviously Bay Hill, PLAYERS or events I'm going to play. And then I have never played Houston, and I like this place, so it was more of a decision I feel like based off of that than anything.

Q. I know your putting numbers aren't where you would like to see them, but are you seeing gains there that kind of aren't showing up yet?

JUSTIN THOMAS: For sure. I think this early in the year it can be pretty skewed, I would say. Also, my first two events of the season were events where Shot Link isn't even there, just due to the different golf courses. So I had my first in Palm Springs and Torrey Pines, I didn't putt great on Sunday or Saturday, whatever it was, but, so I have five pretty good rounds that were completely taken out of stats. I think the majority of the time stats can be helpful, but I'm starting to realize that they can just be a little skewed here and there, especially this early in the season. But, of course, at the end of the day, I would love to and know that I need to make more putts, but I feel like I'm seeing things going the right way and just want that hole to start looking like a bucket one of these days.

Q. Looking ahead to Augusta, what's the biggest focus priority in your game? What are you trying to clean up and pay the most attention to?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Well, I'll probably assess that after this week. I really think I've, obviously more so at Bay Hill than last week, but I've been playing really well. Bay Hill, I played some really, really, really good golf. I just had a -- I really had a bad last five holes at Bay Hill from a top three or four finish. That being said, you got to play all 72 of 'em, so that just doesn't automatically mean anything different. I can't imagine I'll do anything crazy or feel like I'll need to



revamp or totally start over from anything. It's really going to be just sharpening up. You hit a lot of short irons, not quite as many wedges, so a lot of 8- and 9-irons. So really just some of those 4-, 5-irons, 5-woods, for either of the par-5s or, you know, you have 4. But to me it's always been about short game at Augusta. So it's really going to be a lot of chipping work, a lot of putting works, lag putting. Just trying to feel like, no matter how good or bad I'm hitting it, I can get it around there one or two at the max bogeys or less every day I'm playing I feel like is when I'm going to succeed the most there.

Q. Tiger's not going to be included at all in this conversation. Who is the most dominant player you've seen in your 10 years on TOUR?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Is dominant like my own definition?

Q. Yeah, because I sure don't have one.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Okay. I mean, Scottie's obviously the first person that comes to mind, but when I think of dominant, I think of -- I mean, yeah, it's got to be Scottie.

Q. It's fresh?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's also, I mean, he has, I would think, probably the most wins in the last couple years. It's close. I think of dominant and I think of people winning four, five, six times in a season or going on a stretch. I remember in kind of through 2017 and 2018, like I think I had won like seven events in 30 starts or something like that. Like, it just, those kind of stretches I wouldn't -- in terms of consistency and who is played the best, nobody holds a candle to Scottie in the last couple years. But, to me, dominance is winning and winning a lot and often, and I guess when nobody has had Tiger-like, obviously, kind of things, so then it's whoever's done it the most. So I would say probably Scottie.

Q. So, as you were thinking about that question, how many names were going through your head?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Three. Four maybe. You're going to want me to say them?

Q. Kind of do, yeah.

JUSTIN THOMAS: (Laughing). I thought of myself for a couple years. I won, eight, 10 times in two or three years. I mean, Rory, Jordan, kind of there for a little bit. D.J.

Q. Rahm a couple years ago?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, Rahm a couple years ago.

Q. Did you think of Jason Day at all?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I didn't, just, that was my rookie year was when he was doing that. I watched that probably more than I played with it, if that, you know, than actually witnessed it live, which makes a little bit of a difference to me.

Q. All of which leads me to -- I don't know how many names we hit, probably a half dozen, and all still very capable. Is golf better off with a dominant player -- I was going to leave Tiger out again -- but with a dominant player, or is it better with this group that's probably grown by the year.

JUSTIN THOMAS: It's a really good question. I've thought about it before, too. It's probably not fair to say, but I think it legitimately depends who it is. I know that's harsh, but it's, like, you know --

Q. (No Microphone.)

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, no, I didn't say that, you did. But, I mean, anybody's going to watch, again, you shouldn't compare or use Tiger, but anybody's going to watch Rory or someone like him or Jordan, or whatever, win by seven or eight, just because you still don't know the fun and -- Jordan might be leading by six, but he's still going to have that hilarious conversation with Greller in the trees on 16 of how he feels like he can slice this 3-wood onto the green, when it's not really going to gain him anything, and maybe he pulls it off and maybe he doesn't -- or chips it -- you know, there's the excitement factor versus others. I think it's better for the game -- I know it's motivating for me when it's like this, because I feel like there's a lot of guys that I'm, I mean, jealous of, to be honest, of how well they're playing and all the things they do well in their game where that pushes me to kind of want to do the same. So I guess it just kinds of depends on who you ask.

Q. You just came off the course. What did you think about it today, did anything surprise you, something maybe you don't remember about playing here, and then how does this course help you specifically in your game?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I think this is a ball-striker's course. You have to be in good control of your golf ball. I feel like that's something that's helped me in the past, but it's just a strength of my game, so that's why I like it.

In terms of the course, I don't remember seeing the rough this long in the past, maybe ever. It is very thick, it's tough

around the greens to chip. So that is, that's something that's different, for sure. But it is, it's softer than normal or, I'm sure, than everybody would like, so those two might even out a little bit. Generally, if you give us a softer golf course, we're going to play it significantly better than a firmer golf course. That takes a little bit of the fire away from it in terms of getting crazy difficult, but it's still small fairways and small greens and long rough and you just have to play well. It's a really, really hard place to, if you're scraping it around, to go shoot 3-, 4-under, like some other spots.

Q. You used the word "underrated" about this golf course and a lot of players do. What's kind of on your short list of underrated tracks out here that might not be the marquee names we think about?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, I don't think you could throw Harbour Town in that same category, but it's very similar where it's kind of position golf and forces people to hit from a lot of the same areas. I just think that's -- I think that's why you see scoring so consistent at places like this. You just, you don't have holes, like 6 at Bay Hill, where guys, if you get the right wind, you all of a sudden can take it a hundred yards further down the hole, or whatever it might be.

I'm not sure. It's really hard -- I'm trying to, like, somehow go through the entire season sitting here, but I just like those old school courses. I like Southwind, I like East Lake, Olympia Fields that we'll play sometimes for BMW. Like, it's just such good golf courses, and they're just right in front of you. There's nothing tricked up or stupid or anything about 'em, they're just right there and you just have to play 'em well.

Q. What do you know about Taylor Moore and his finish here last year?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I played with him here last year. I can't remember if it was a couple days or whatnot. I remember -- I don't know if he's still working with him or -- I'm pretty sure he worked with Josh Gregory maybe, or still does, I don't know. But I told Josh, I was like, Dude, he was good. I was extremely impressed. I hadn't played with him, but he just, he -- some guys just make, their ball makes a little different sound when they hit it, and the flight and control, and he was definitely one of those guys. He kind of reminded me a little like of Sam Burns of putting, where it just was, it was kind of efficient and quick and just would get up there, and once he kind of figured out what he wanted to do, and it just was -- he looked very confident in what he was doing and just so happened to win, so made me feel good about how I felt.

Q. I didn't see you every day at, or both days at PLAYERS, on No. 12, but you seemed to be one of the few guys at 10 at Riv who are comfortable laying up and rely on a very exquisite wedge game. When you see more and more drivable 4s, how much -- I know it depends on the hole -- but how much do you basically lean on a strength compared with the temptation of whacking it?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I feel like more and more of the drivable holes, like properly drivable, are so short to where it makes it -- it's hard for people to grasp laying up. Myself included. Like, I mean, you see Riv, it's like 280-something yards, like it's just, it's hard, like it's hard for people to understand or really, when they see me laying up, I've hit 7-iron off that tee before, and I've hit 4-iron or 5-wood or hybrid, whatever, but it's -- not as much as I probably should, to be honest. I'm thinking of a hole we used to play like in the playoffs, somewhere up in, I think in New York, where it was like the green sat way up and tiny, tiny green, and like nobody laid up. It's like everybody hit driver and it was super narrow and it just --

Q. 16 at Liberty, I think, wasn't it? Or 15 at Liberty?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Not at liberty. That is a great hole. I can't think of the name of it. Anyway, so I don't probably as much as I should, it's just it's more of like a -- it's really hard to make 2 if I lay it up versus I could hit driver or 3-wood on the green and make the putt.

Q. You put one in the bunker on 10, didn't you, off the tee this year?

JUSTIN THOMAS: That was last year. Yeah. Fatted a 4-iron. Thanks for bringing that up.

Q. Couple weeks ago you're playing in a 69-man field. Now you're at 155. What's that like?

JUSTIN THOMAS: The practice facility and the range is a lot busier this week, that's for sure. Practice rounds are quite a bit different. Yeah, I mean --

Q. You're not going to finish.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, yeah.

Q. They couldn't do it last week, I don't think.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, at some point -- traffic's busier in L.A. than it is in Tarpon Springs, so there's just more people. That's just kind of the way that it goes. That's something that we've talked about, about slow play. Guys that will complain about it or say that we need to play

faster, it's like, well, at some point you can only go so fast, right.

Q. Too many cars on the freeway.

JUSTIN THOMAS: It's not like every person's hitting the fairway, hitting the green, or if they miss the putt it's where they can tap it in. Over the course of 156 people, you're going to have every other or every third group, every fifth group, whatever it is, to where someone's playing bad, you have to get some rulings, like it's going to take longer.

Q. Seems like -- and we've gone to smaller fields on some of the elite, which we know -- and it almost seems like they're having to over stack, because this is normally 144, just to look out for the boys who aren't getting starts. Is there a happy balance?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I was talking --

Q. Now that you're on the PAC.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I was talking to somebody about that yesterday. I don't know what the answer is. There's definitely going to be, has to be some kind of changes, because it is, it's -- I mean, I remember when I came out, there definitely is the Korn Ferry Tour category, there's a handful of guys that would get in those beginning events, and if you didn't play well, I mean, there was times where guys wouldn't get in nothing but a handful. There's something that's got to be tweaked here and there to where it can, just something can be a little bit more consistent, I would say, to where you're not having to do things like this. Because I don't know necessarily think that's what the answer should be. I mean, it's what the answer has to be right now, I guess, but not long-term, I wouldn't think.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you for the time, Justin. Appreciate it.

JUSTIN THOMAS: All right.

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