

The Ryder Cup

Tuesday, 26 September, 2023

Rome, Italy

Marco Simone

U.S. Team

Zach Johnson

Press Conference

MATTHEW JOULE: Very pleased to be joined by Team U.S. Captain Zach Johnson.

The team is out on the course playing their first practise round. What are you looking for from your team at this stage of the week?

ZACH JOHNSON: At this stage of the week, my hope is that they are waking up. We are still in kind of the acclimation period I think, given the travels, and we don't start competition for three days. So I'm confident that they will be acclimated shortly, but it's good just to get our feet on the ground.

It's good to get the guys out there and start feeling the golf course. It will change, you know, as time goes on a little bit. I mean, the forecast is pretty consistent. Does not feel like a weather -- a normal weather Ryder Cup week, at all. But it's spectacular, so thank you, Italy.

Yeah, just get out there, get used to each other and get a feel for the golf course. So far, only played four, five or six holes, but the guys are anxious to get going.

Q. Two unrelated questions, one of which is regarding the first tee and first timers. Obviously we talked yesterday about how large that grandstand is. Is there a message that you mentioned to the guys that have not gone through it before based on your experience, and also, do you recall your first tee experience?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yes. Some of the veterans have spoken about it, obviously, and some of the vice captains and myself. I mean, I'm very confident in saying that I think it's -- I mean, I haven't been in every -- to every massive or, you know, high-weighted sporting event, but I would say it's one of the best spectacles in sports.

I think if you can understand that not many people get that opportunity, that's a pretty awesome opportunity. So relish it, savour it, want it, embrace it, all of that. Knowing it's not



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going to be easy, but at the same time you can kind of flip that. You can kind of flip it mentally and say this is where I belong, and there's a reason why it's big, because this is the best sporting event in the game of golf.

Q. Luke was telling us, he was off the reservation to the right on his first tee shot in a Ryder Cup on one. Do you remember what years what you did and what your feeling was?

ZACH JOHNSON: Sure. I'll try to make this brief. I sat out that first session, Friday, which would have been four-ball back then. I forget the year. Doesn't matter.

But Tom Lehman, said, "You're going to play in the afternoon so get ready. Sleep in, go to the gym, do whatever you need to do."

My wife went to the first tee -- and prior to that, obviously, the veterans are saying, we did this, we were going to do this, we changed. You hear all the stories of out their nerves are going, and they are unsettled. And my wife comes back and goes, "It is so loud out there."

I'm like, "Great."

And she goes, in a really simple, yet profound manner, she's like, "They quieted down a little bit. The guy grabbed his club, put a peg in the ground, put a ball on it, hit it down the fairway and found the green."

It's still just golf. I mean, it is. If you can get to that point from a focus standpoint, it is still just golf, but it's also -- it's the best. It's the most awesome spectacle in our game.

Q. Unrelated, on Justin Thomas, he was a controversial pick because of his form this year, but his Ryder Cup form has been good. Regardless of what he's done on tour this year, this is a completely different animal, and all that stuff goes by the board, so to speak, and why do you think he's so made for this?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, that's part of it. There's a lot of elements involved when it comes to all of our guys and the



picks in particular. Obviously the six guys are in, but all the elements go into that equation.

Recent form kind of goes both ways. We look at it both statistically and subjectively. It's not just the last two or three months. There's a lot of other factors involved there when it comes to the objective.

And then obviously subjectively, he has all the intangibles and the innate ability to rally guys around him and be a leader vocally but also without having to say much.

There's a lot of, I'd say, invaluable elements when it comes to J.T. and this event, and I can say this in full confidence with our six guys that made this team: Those guys were, you know, adamant they wanted those six other guys to help complete their team, and J.T. was one of them.

I'm not saying that that was my persuasion to pick him, but that was part of it.

Q. I'd just like to ask, reflect a little bit more on Whistling Straits, two years ago. Obviously an unusual Ryder Cup in the sense there were so few traveling fans. How much of a factor was that in that context, and what are you doing to prepare the guys that have never experienced a more normal Ryder Cup, especially away from home with so many fans against you?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah, obviously they are substantially different as an American, right. Obviously our fans were there in full effect. Easier to travel, given limitations, given the COVID hurdles. Goes without saying, extremely unfortunate. Extremely unfortunate we couldn't play it in 2020. But I can see how that was unfortunate for The European Team, not having their contingent more readily around them.

You know, we've talked to the guys. They know that this is a whole -- this is an entirely different animal than Wisconsin. What happened there, certainly the result of that, and then everything that goes into it, we learn from it.

But it's done, and this is an entirely different team and an entirely different venue, obviously an entirely different continent. It's going to be more trying. It's going to be more difficult. Want it, love it and get after it because this is where you belong.

Q. Can you explain to me why most of the media they say about the U.S. Team are favourite, and these team captain, they say 50/50, say something different, we are favourite and why.

ZACH JOHNSON: What? I'm sorry.

Q. Most of the media say the U.S. Team are the favourite.

ZACH JOHNSON: The media is saying we are the favourites? Well, the media knows everything so that makes sense.

Q. Why do you think they say this?

ZACH JOHNSON: I have no idea.

Q. Can you say something different so you don't say --

ZACH JOHNSON: I'm not going to speak on behalf of anybody else, let alone the media.

I appreciate them and know they are doing their job. I don't know what media you are referring to because I really try to ignore the noise, no offence. I appreciate it all.

The way I see it when it comes to favourites or this, that or the other, we are not the favourites when we step onto the first tee because of the crowd. We are not the favourites because of what's happened and transpired over the last so-many-odd years, and they have got a really, really good team playing well.

So hey, I love that. Our backs are against the wall, and that's the way we are going to approach it.

Q. Zach, are you guys the favourites (laughter)?

ZACH JOHNSON: I'm still trying to figure out your question from yesterday.

Q. It's easier. It's not about the Roman Empire. I was reading about Tom Watson's first captaincy in 1993, and there's a story that he spoke with Roy Williams, the basketball coach; the idea being he wanted to consult somebody. Curious, you've been a vice captain, but is there anybody else beyond those guys that you look to for advice?

ZACH JOHNSON: Yes and no. I've thought about that a lot, obviously. I've learned a lot from a lot of other, I guess you'd say, coaches or leaders, regardless of what genre they are in, you know, whether it's sports or business or whatever it may be. I'm trying to gather as much as I can and retain as much as I can, implement some of the things that I feel like could be beneficial.

Some of it's actually just for me and my own mentality, approach and focus. But I think I've done that from afar,

not necessarily direct. I think you can learn so much just from reading and watching and experiencing it that way rather than actually firsthand discussions necessarily. I'm not saying that that can't be beneficial. I just didn't pursue that.

And part of my rationale for not really pursuing that is one of we've got a pretty good foundation, I think, laid within Team USA and how we go about things. There's a responsibility there, but more than that, I think less is more. These guys know what they are doing, and so if I were to introduce something from some other expertise, it could just -- it could be cloudy or it could fog something up and it just doesn't need to happen.

Not saying that it's not worthy or has merit. I think we just kind of know the simplistic view of letting these guys have access to all they need to do, Monday through Thursday, so they can be ready Friday through Sunday is really just that simple. Does that make sense?

Q. It does. You may have already just answered this, but the follow-up would be now that you are in the captaincy, is there one thing you can pinpoint as saying, this is a hard thing I didn't expect about being the leader of the team?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, there's a lot of things that were difficult that I had to kind of navigate up until this point. A lot of things that surfaced that you didn't expect, but I think The PGA of America would probably say the same thing.

But nothing of any -- I mean, I don't need to be specific with it. I think when it came -- when I was put in this position, the difficult things that came right to my mind were how do we formulate the team, are we going to keep the same system. I am not on the Ryder Cup Committee currently, but those that are essentially kept our system the same. And obviously I'm in it now; who plays and who doesn't. Those are the difficult situations that arose right off the bat. You know, I was ready to tackle that.

Things that have been unforeseen other than those -- those aren't unforeseen. Those are the things that are known. You just control what you can control. That's the bottom line. I know that sounds cliché, but it's the truth. There's only so much I can do given what this is all about, and that's fine. I mean, I know my role. I'm here to serve, number one, and take all the burden off them as much as possible so they can go play.

Q. How do you approach getting ready for foursomes? Do you actually have the guys practising the format, or do you only talk about it? How much did you do that when you were here a couple of weeks ago, and

still, how much is the ball really a factor in those decisions?

ZACH JOHNSON: The ball, is that what you said?

Q. Yeah, because it's not the same golf ball they are using?

ZACH JOHNSON: The first part of your question, yeah, we've advised them to play some alternate-shot, maybe even modified, so you get more reps in. You're both teeing off, and then you're switching. Does that make sense?

I mean, there's ways you can go about doing it so you can get more reps in on the golf course, which helps you for singles, which helps you for four-ball.

But yes, we told them, hey, it may be wise, and it could help speed up your practise round a little bit if you want to get some more practise in or physio work in or whatever it may be. They are in tune with that, and that's something new. They have done that in the past. I did that in the past. I did that when I was playing.

What was the second part of your question? Sorry. Oh, golf ball.

We were discussing it actually the last couple days. It is a part of the equation. But there's ways -- well, with three practise round days and arguably a practise round trip, there's ways to get used to somebody else's golf ball off the tee, and that's really what it is, right. If we are playing together, I'm probably going to tee off with your golf ball more times than not so that we can have more control with your iron play or your wedge play or whatever it may be with your own golf ball. That's kind of the unwritten rule, right.

But these guys know what they are doing. I mean, there's some guys that were like, I really don't care what golf ball I play. Or I like that guy's golf ball, I'll just play it. These guys know what they are doing. I don't need to coach them on how to go about doing that.

Q. (The one-ball rule is not in effect?)

ZACH JOHNSON: Right. Correct. The one-ball rule is not in effect.

Q. As a former Open Champion, you have Brian Harman on your team this year. Despite being a rookie, do you have an opinion on how much winning The Open Championship and having to play your first Ryder Cup in Europe helps him?

ZACH JOHNSON: Brian is a good friend, No. 1. No. 2, I've had a lot of discussions with Brian prior to my captaincy even about these Cups. Because I'm close enough to him, I live near him, we've played a lot together over the years. We kind of approach things in a very similar manner. He's got great team that he's assembled that I know well. I just know how goes about his work.

I just I feel like he's cut and made for these kind of teams. I say that. Doesn't mean you're going to play in them all and it's really difficult to make the teams.

Yeah, I think his win over -- I think anybody's win in a stage of that magnitude can be extremely beneficial. You know, I didn't watch every shot inside the ropes or even outside the ropes that he hit during The Open, but it's pretty documented that there were some things kind of jeered and whatnot, and that's to be expected, given where it was and who he is and who he's not, right.

Knowing Brian, that's probably more fuel to the fire, if you will. He has that ability and that talent, that mentality, to kind of make that be a positive. I think he's truly made for these events.

What does Brian do well? What does he do poorly is an easier question because it's an easy answer. I don't know if he does anything poorly. He just does everything really, really consistently well.

Q. It's been a while now since the U.S. pod system was first introduced. What do you view as the strengths and weaknesses of that approach for today's player in 2023?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, I think there's -- yeah, the quote, unquote pod system, was obviously implemented by Paul Azinger, a good friend, and somebody I've talked to.

We've nuanced it probably more so than -- there's more fluidity and versatility in our system now than there was then. Not to say that we wouldn't re-implement the exact sure that he did at some point. I don't think we will, per se.

But I think there's merit to it. That's really merit to it if you've got a team that doesn't know each other all that well and maybe doesn't play practise rounds together or hang out together outside the ropes. I think there's probably -- this is an assumption, but I think there definitely would be a lot of positives if that was the case. Given our 12 guys, I mean, these guys want to change things up and play and roll and kind of just see who -- you know, they just want to be around each other on and off the golf course.

We are taking a version of it probably and kind of making it

our own and letting these guys be comfortable as given the fact that it's a pretty uncomfortable situation.

Q. (How is it different from the past years?)

ZACH JOHNSON: I think all years have been more fluid since 2008. I wasn't on that team. I've read and been told by those that were that it was like you're staying in your four for the whole week, not only playing, but eating, etc., etc., etc. We're not going to be that structured.

And again, I'm not dismissing the point of that or even the merit to that. But I think since that point, it has not exactly been exactly like that.

MATTHEW JOULE: Zach, thanks very much for your time.

ZACH JOHNSON: That was easy. Thank you.

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