

# U.S. Open Championship 2022

Thursday, June 9, 2022

**Dan Hicks**

**Paul Azinger**

**Justin Leonard**

**Notah Begay III**

**Tommy Roy**

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the NBC Sports U.S. Open media conference call. At this time I would like to turn the conference over to Mr. Jamie Palatini.

JAMIE PALATINI: Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to the NBC Sports U.S. Open media conference call. In a moment, we'll be joined by members of our broadcast team, including producer Tommy Roy, and Paul Azinger, Justin Leonard, and Notah Begay. We hope to have our commentator Dan Hicks join us as well.

NBC Sports is going to present more than 100 hours of the U.S. Open from The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts, across NBC, USA Network, and Peacock comprised of championship coverage, featured groups and featured holes and 40-plus hours of studio coverage with Golf Central Live From the U.S. Open on Golf Channel, starting on Monday, June 13.

We'll begin with opening remarks from each of our speakers, a number of interesting connections to Brookline, as you all know. We'll start with our producer Tommy Roy.

TOMMY ROY: Thanks, Jamie. Appreciate it. It's a real honor to televise the U.S. Open and to do it with our great team. My goal is to give the viewers the best seat in the house as if they were right there on the tees, the fairways, and the greens themselves, experiencing the pressure of this cauldron and the ultimate reward for one player at the end.

To do this, we'll do it through a robust technical facility setup, but never losing sight of the fact that this golf event more than any other requires story-telling, as it is an Open with many unknown qualifiers in the field and each having their own special story.

I still believe that every player who has earned the right to play in this field deserves the right to be shown on TV. So we'll do our very best to get all 156 players in the field on the air, and yes, that includes the LIV players.

What a venue and its ties to the history of our game. We'll be all over that, I can assure you, being in one of America's great cities.

So really looking forward to next week, and I'll turn it over to Paul Azinger.

PAUL AZINGER: Thank you, Tommy. Well, being a professional golfer for 30 years turned broadcaster and TV guy, now having landed here at NBC, I'm amazed at what goes on behind the scenes. When Tommy Roy says he's going to get all the players on TV and can do that, it's really only a feat that probably only he can pull off.

Honestly, it's pretty chaotic for us on Thursday and Friday, but you know what, it's the right thing to do. The effort that goes into scouting a course like Brookline from the network's perspective, and now being deep into it and seeing what they do blows my mind. 100 hours on the air. Then when you have all the Internet feeds and what have you, it's such a sophisticated and complicated thing, it's a miracle to me it ever comes to pass. I don't know how it happens, but it does.

It's an honor and a privilege to do it. I've done several U.S. Opens now actually. I wish I could have won one, I really do. I had a couple of chances. I had a decent chance right here at Brookline. I had a terrible front nine on Saturday in 1988, and it really cost me the championship.

But this is a really fun golf course. One of the great things about the U.S. Open to me is that they travel around and players have to come to an event where everything is extreme -- the width of the fairways, the depth of the rough, the speed of the greens -- and the fact that it travels to these golf courses makes it a mystery to the players. Some come in weeks early to figure out how can I conquer this championship? And others don't. They try to prepare in the nick of time because they just qualified.



In the end, isn't it the greatest reward for any golfer to win a United States Open? It is. I'm thrilled to be a part of it. I love my broadcast team. There's a couple of them still on the line here, so I'm going to turn it over. I know Brookline is a fabulous place. It's not an easy course to learn. It's hilly. It's really hilly. There's some quirky doglegs. Maybe there won't be a lot of drivers off the tee. It's a great second shot course.

So I can't wait. I don't know anybody who knows it on our broadcast team better than Justin Leonard, who had a thrilling moment there that will last forever. I'll turn it over to Justin now.

JUSTIN LEONARD: Thank you, Paul. Brookline, the history there going back to 1913, the fact the 11th hole is going to be used for the first time in major competition since that U.S. Open in 1913 won by Francis Ouimet in the playoff. It's cool to bring that touch of history back to it.

The routing's changed quite a bit since we were there for the Ryder Cup in 1999. I was going through a yardage book last week, not one from '99. I don't have those anymore. Those have long been cleared out.

Current day, the big holes have gotten bigger. There's still some great short holes. There's a lot of areas where the fairway's obscured off the tee, maybe not completely, but in some part, and it just plants that little seed of doubt in a player's mind when they're standing over a tee shot.

There's a lot of options. You can take on some risk off the tee, create an easier second shot, but with that risk comes the possibility of having to chip the ball out back in the fairway or not having a second shot.

Just so cool how the change has been made. The 3rd and 4th hole, how they share this meandering fairway obscured by some rocks. Then the middle of the golf course has changed quite a bit as far as the routing, but it seems to make a lot of sense to host a U.S. Open with this current routing that will be used next week.

Then getting down to the last four holes, a lot happened there in '99 and the Ryder Cup. Those holes are going to remain the same routing. Some minor tweaks have been made to those, but I expect the rough to be thick and deep. I expect we're going to see a real U.S. Open. The green complexes are small, and within those green complexes, the areas that are pinnable are very small as well.

There are some areas you can use the slope to feed the ball into the hole. There's a lot of false fronts. I think this test is going to be, it's going to require a very high level of proficiency from a physical standpoint, swing mechanics

and all those things, but also the decision-making, understanding when to take on risk, understanding when it's time to maybe play a bit safer shot, because the penalty, if you get on the wrong side of the green or wrong side of a hole location, it is severe, and as it should be when you're deciding who's going to win the U.S. Open.

With all that, Notah Begay is on the call. He's going to be down on the ground doing a lot of things for us next week. I'd like to hand it over to him and hear his thoughts.

NOTAH BEGAY III: Thanks, J.L. Well said. I really love the championship for one reason and one reason only. It's the single most democratic major event that we have in golf.

We've been talking and focusing on inclusion and DEI concepts in corporate America, nonprofit over the past two years now, but the U.S. Open has always been an inclusive process for anyone that has been willing to put the time and effort into the game, have their dreams focused on playing in this championship, possibly winning it, and then surviving an 18-hole qualifying and then sectionals.

Like we've seen in the past few days, players like Fran Quinn, Michael Thorbjornsen, a young player out of Stanford, working their way and playing their way into our nation's championship, I really embrace that part of this championship. I get down on the ground, and I really love being part of the atmosphere because it's not just the usual suspects, which are great and contribute to a wonderful storyline and really accelerate our ability to tell stories around their own personal pursuits of winning a U.S. Open, but it allows us to really dive in.

That's where I feel like we're the best. We really do our homework, we do our research, and we really care, genuinely care about the 156 persons that made it into the field. And why it matters, it's because our executive producer, our team, and our entire production staff care about their story. We do anything and everything we can to bring the great, wonderful highlights to air so that we educate our viewers.

We try and articulate just how difficult. Just hearing Paul and Justin explain the intricacies of navigating a traditional venue, which is a major convergence between modern golf and old traditional design, it just tells you that that story-telling is difficult. But we do a wonderful job of being able to dive into the minutia of the field, the venue, and pull out what we feel is a very valuable story line that embraces the game and everybody that chooses to take part in this game.

JAMIE PALATINI: Awesome. Thank you, Notah. I believe Dan Hicks has joined us. Dan, are you on?

DAN HICKS: I am on, Jamie. Thank you very much, Jamie. I'll be brief with my opening comments. It's been very nicely covered by the rest of our team.

This U.S. Open got into my DNA. Everybody that's involved since it first came to NBC in 1995 at Shinnecock, when Corey Pavin hit the fairway, went up the hill, and Johnny uttered the comments that he did, just a great call, shot of his life. It just became a part of who we are.

Even though we were out of it for a few years, it just seemed like it never left. I'm so looking forward to another U.S. Open at The Country Club. I had a chance to visit a few weeks ago to do some research. Even though we've been there before for some other events, we did the U.S. Amateur there, it looks dramatically better.

I'll tell you, if you haven't had a chance to see it, with the golf course restoration with Gill Hanson's team with the U.S. Am and the upgrades to the clubhouse, the locker room, et cetera, it's just going to be a tremendous U.S. Open. I know we say it every time, but it's really going to be special with that history.

And I'll add that The Country Club, with all that history and the fact that Francis Ouimet won there in 1913, that really launched golf in America, and we'll get into that a little bit throughout the telecast.

In this particular time that we find ourselves in, the world of golf and what's happening today in London and the divisiveness that it has created, I'm sad with that. But at the same time, I'm so looking forward to getting the focus back, even for just a week, if we can get everybody away from all this talk, for what makes the game great.

It's the history, and it's the quest by these players to be a part of that history, and I really look forward to diving into that 100 percent full-time next week.

JAMIE PALATINI: Danny, did your research include taking your golf clubs?

DAN HICKS: I did not. I was so immersed in trying to figure out what the new routing is going to be, I did not take the golf clubs. But Justin mentioned this little par-3 11th hole. I think it's going to be fantastic. They're going to put that hole on the back edge there, and it's just going to be a departure from the monster par-3s that seemingly we've been in the habit of seeing in major championships.

This place has got charm. It's got history. It oozes

character, and it's just going to be a great venue again.

JAMIE PALATINI: Awesome, Dan. Thank you very much. I recognize, as Dan referenced, a number of notable topics in the world of golf right now. We ask the media, before we open this up, that you do your best to keep the questions to the U.S. Open next week.

**Q. Hi, everyone. Two questions on two totally different topics. Tommy, any technical things you want to point out that we may be seeing next week for the first time or any cool things to watch for?**

TOMMY ROY: I would say we have tracing ability on all the shots, except for 1 and 11, and there we have speed shots for that opening tee shot. Particularly the 11, the short par-3 that falls off on all sides, that's a much better way to cover that shot.

Bunker cams at 5 and 16. 130-foot wire cam behind the 18th green. Scorpion crane that can see 15, 16, 17, 18. The front of the 8th green slopes way off, so balls are going to be spinning back. So we've gone to the robo onto a tree to see that. Live drone, airplane, our hole models, our virtual graphics. The Ross virtual graphics that we used in the Super Bowl and the Olympics, we'll have that this U.S. Open.

Pinpoint wind technology, pinpoint greens technology to calculate the breaks. We have the 4D replay system at the 12th tee that has the AD8 cameras there and a couple Super SloMos, X-Mo, et cetera, et cetera.

Again, lots of technology, but the key thing we need to pay attention to is the story-telling, which happens to be right in our wheelhouse.

**Q. Then for Paul, Justin, or Notah, whoever wants this, Dan referenced the 2013 U.S. Amateur. Lo and behold, Matt Fitzpatrick shoots 64 today in Canada to start off his RBC Canadian Open. How much of a confidence boost is it to, A, play well the week before and then, B, know that you're going to an event next week that you've won at before?**

PAUL AZINGER: Are you trying to handicap Matt Fitzpatrick? Do you want us to handicap him for you?

**Q. If you want, Paul, go right ahead.**

PAUL AZINGER: He's so good anyway, but it can only serve him well to play great and then go to a place where he's going to be very confident, great memory. So heck yeah, he's going to love it. If he keeps it up -- I don't know, maybe if he wins, he'll have a let-down, but if he's going in



there with any kind of confidence at all, I would watch him like a hawk.

JUSTIN LEONARD: And I think there's value to having played the U.S. Amateur there because in a lot of ways, the USGA tries some things with the golf course and keep those notes knowing that the U.S. Open is going there. Although it's been, what, nine years now, the routing will change some, but he'll have a familiarity there. He'll understand the things that he'll need to do around the greens.

Yeah, I certainly like the guys -- not many will have that kind of an advantage. I don't know what the total number of guys who played in 2013 at the U.S. Amateur that will be at the U.S. Open, but it can't be more than eight to ten guys. But, yeah, I think in this day and age, everybody's trying to find their advantage, a way to give themselves a little bit of an edge. And I'm sure he's going to think of that as an advantage, and that's as important as actually having one is the fact that he thinks he has one.

NOTAH BEGAY III: On the back end of that, I think one of the most intriguing things about the venue is the number of blind shots the players are going to be dealing with. It's not something that we love, but certainly it's a part of the design, and championship golf at that highest level requires you to hit as many shots as you possibly can with absolute certainty.

Being able to get rid of any doubts around potential lines that you can take, maximizing the width of the fairway because you know where those boundaries are because you've played there, and you not only played there, you played there with success.

So to Paul's point, any time you've had success at a venue and you're pulling into the parking lot, you feel better. If you were to come off a successful week in Canada, you would feel even that much more confident about your ability to contend.

**Q. This is a question for the group. The U.S. Open has a tradition of being the toughest test in golf. What unique test do you think Brookline will present to the players next week?**

JUSTIN LEONARD: I think it's unique. As Notah just mentioned, the number of shots that players hit where you can't see everything -- the 3rd hole, the fairway's obscured from you because of a big kind of rock outcropping on the right-hand side; the same thing down the 4th -- that happens all over the golf course.

Just the guys who really put their time in in the practice

rounds and get comfortable off the tee and understand kind of their strategy and how they want to go about doing it. There's going to be holes where guys are going to hit driver or be more aggressive. There's other holes where some players, like the 9th, they're going to lay way back at the top of the hole and not hit in the penalty area on the right and play more conservatively.

Just the difference in strategy, but really I think the U.S. Open is about committing. Whatever a player and a caddie decide to do, they've got to be 100 percent committed to it.

**Q. Paul, Notah, any comments from you guys?**

PAUL AZINGER: I'll say that Brookline is a very strategic course. I think it will keep the players off balance. You have to drive the ball in the fairway, and you're going to see a variety of clubs off the tee at Brookline, I feel like, and different philosophies maybe on how certain holes are going to be played there. It is a masterpiece, it really is.

You're going to see a variety of strategies taken on Brookline, but the key to me, all U.S. Opens, generally the rule has always been put it in the fairway first. Bryson kind of maybe put an end to that for a little while by saying, hey, look, I'm going to take on the golf course with my power and hit it as far as I can, and he came out on top at Winged Foot. I don't know if that will work here with all the uphill and downhill and stuff.

Inevitably what happens in these U.S. Opens, the winner has an incredible short game feel that week. Geoff Ogilvy even at 6, 7-over par winning at Winged Foot had an incredible short game that week. Mickelson stayed alive because of his short game. It's going to come down to that. We're going to see a dramatic highlight reel of short game magic, whoever hoists the trophy.

NOTAH BEGAY III: Yeah, that's 100 percent true with regard to surviving a U.S. Open. I mentioned earlier sort of this crash of modern golf and the mindset that young players that are coming onto the TOUR arrive with. Covering the NCAA Tournament on the men's side last week and just seeing just how just much power -- and we understand. We've all talked about it over the last ten years, but it's front and center now where, if you're in college and you're not seeing 120 miles per hour, you're losing ground.

I think that mindset is not going to do you well at The Country Club. I think it's going to be difficult for players that week after week trying and hit it as far as they can to get the shortest club into the green because that's what is dictated on the PGA TOUR for the most part from week to

week. That's not going to be a sound strategy.

It's very difficult for the modern player to back down because they feel like they're not maximizing the statistics. They're not opening up these different opportunities that all of these various algorithms have spit out over the last 10, 15 years.

The player that can pick and choose -- like Paul said, you've got to pick and choose when to push the gas down, when to push the envelope a little bit. And then as Justin stated, you have to know when to hit less club to find the fairway because you will not access any of these hole locations if you're coming from the rough.

**Q. I wanted to ask something for all the players and then a quick thing for Tommy. Kind of on the back of what you've just been talking about with the golf course, and also I guess maybe thinking a bit about the Old Course, but players, it seems like right now are really on this show up Monday, learn the course, have the caddie kind of do a lot of scouting thing and play nine holes a day.**

I'm curious how you feel that current mindset -- and it may change now that Justin Thomas did a scouting trip at Southern Hills and won -- but that's kind of the thing. Do you think that's going to work at The Country Club? Then I guess I'm kind of curious too about the Old Course and how you -- I know I'm getting a little ahead of myself, but I'm curious what you all think.

NOTAH BEGAY III: Great question. I always felt like the more rounds, the more looks you can get at a venue, especially ones that aren't regularly seen on the PGA TOUR schedule, is a huge advantage. But history has proven that players aren't willing to take scouting trips just to define start lines off tees or boundaries with regard to when and where they can be aggressive.

One of the things that was critical to Tiger Woods' win at St. Andrews was he had old notes from the first time that he went around St. Andrews -- you know, where TV towers were located, buildings, churches, hotels -- and because the terrain is so flat there, sometimes you can't get a good bearing because all of the dunes kind of look the same after a while.

But he was using landmarks to frame tee shots for himself, and then he would frame those tee shots based upon wind direction and take notes on that. Then he would study them every night before he would go out just to make sure he had a good understanding of -- regardless of where the wind was coming because the wind direction would shrink some fairways and would make other fairways bigger -- he

wanted to know exactly what club to pull out of the bag off those tees.

Point in case, he didn't hit it in one bunker all week, which tells me, number one, you're hitting it really well, but you also have a good approach to navigating yourself around the venue. And I think that's sort of similar to anyone that's had a look. If I were playing in the field, I'd call Justin Leonard and just kind of pick his brain to see what he thinks they need to do to get around that place because he's got a pretty good feel for it.

JUSTIN LEONARD: My phone is not ringing off the hook, I can tell you that (Laughter).

It's kind of a fine balancing act between -- you know, it's a U.S. Open. It's going to be difficult. So the players feel like going out and playing a six-hour practice round two or three days in a row is too much, and I understand and appreciate that. But playing the front nine one time and think you have an understanding of The Country Club, I think that's naive.

So I think the scouting trips are important. Obviously these players have to manage their rest. With all the devices that are available to you for recovery and all those things, finding that balance. I think, one, you have to play The Country Club at least twice, 36 holes, to really be somewhat comfortable off the tee. I don't know if you'll ever really get there as far as being comfortable, but it certainly helps.

I know that when I've been over and played a new golf course or go to play links, it's like after the second day, I feel somewhat comfortable. But it's really that third day where I'm seeing 18 holes for the third time that I'm really comfortable off the tee, and I don't have to have my nose in the yardage book quite as much.

So the guys that took a scouting trip, I think there's an advantage. And the guys who -- you know, their caddies -- this is a big week for caddies, as is every week. But playing a new golf course where there's so much going on off the tee, it's important for caddies to be able to help players define, okay, here's your left edge, here's your right edge with this club in these conditions. And understanding that you're going to have to be able to make adjustments on the fly. Those things are important and very underrated as far as what a caddie brings to the table.

I think players are going to need -- it's going to be a long week regardless, but they're going to need to put some time in the golf course. Same thing with St. Andrews for the guys that haven't been there before. The guys on the PGA TOUR have gotten so much younger, there will be a

lot of guys who haven't played St. Andrews. To get out there and define your tee shot by the left edge of a grandstand or a TV tower or a steeple off in the distance, it's a little disconcerting at first.

Certainly, I think the European players understand it more than most of the American players do, but these two next major championships are going to require a lot of homework from these players.

PAUL AZINGER: Well, I'll just say that I pretty much always believe there's no real shortcut to success, and if you're not going there early -- you know, I said this in the opening. One of the great things about the U.S. Open, one of my favorite things is that the event travels, and it travels to really phenomenal golf courses. Look at what's coming up in the future of U.S. Open venues is incredible.

But it's kind of you've got to get there early if you're in -- and not everybody has that option because some of these players just qualified. But if you're a serious contender, I've always believed that you can't hope for this or wish for it. You have to prepare to win the U.S. Open, and I think getting there early is so important because you can then know that you have out-prepared everyone who didn't get there on time.

To me, on time is getting there at least once before the event, maybe twice; playing with a local caddie and the best member at the club; utilize everything you can to gain an advantage in preparation for an event like this.

Not everybody can set up like that. I'll tell you one great story. Tony Jaclyn's son qualified, Sean, for this event, and it will be his first ever PGA TOUR event, and I just told him, I said, this is an interesting golf course, Sean. If I was you, I'd go on the Internet and start looking at the holes and start studying this course. Francis Ouimet is a heck of a story, but if Tony Jaclyn's son wins the U.S. Open, it's a pretty good one too. You might want to wrap your mind around that.

What's the first thing I tell him? Start looking at that golf course. That's the key. So if you're not doing that, I think that you are hoping and wishing. If you do get there early, you, like, have an intention.

Look, Dustin Johnson didn't play Oakmont before Monday or Tuesday, and he won the tournament. So not everybody's the same. That's just my feeling on that.

**Q. Tommy, real quick on trying to show all the players, can you just tell us, is that something you -- do you start out with a game plan, or is it you just start covering golf and Tommy Randolph keeps a list and**

**you check off names? How do you do that?**

TOMMY ROY: Yeah, we do check off the names. And by the way it starts with Brandt Packer, who's producing the mornings each day. He's keeping track of it as well.

But yeah, it's trying to get as many of them in as possible, and then some of them slip through the cracks. We're trying to find them and get them on the air in some sort of meaningful way. Just showing a shot, you can do that, but I want it to be a good shot, some sort of a meaningful shot so that the guy gets a little bit of love on the air.

By the way, I wanted to say one thing. We're talking about the 11th hole. In my opinion, it's going to have a huge impact on the outcome of this championship, but wait until the world sees the 15th hole next year at LA North. This thing is shorter and even more diabolical and spectacular. And I know you had something to do with that, so it's the way to go with that.

**Q. Phil's got such history with the six runners-up at the U.S. Open. What do you expect from him next week? How do you think he'll handle the pressure? What do you think the response will be from him being in the event to begin with?**

PAUL AZINGER: Hey, that's why we watch.

NOTAH BEGAY III: That is why we watch. We want to see what's going to be the response. This is a major thing that's going on. It's a major disruption to the sport. I don't know how the American golf fan -- especially in Boston, there's no telling how that reaction's going to be. I think it's going to be much anticipated.

PAUL AZINGER: That's for sure.

JUSTIN LEONARD: I think the response will be mostly positive because he has been a fan favorite for so many years.

But that Boston crowd, they're going to let you know how they feel. Not everyone, but a lot of people in Boston, they like to not only attend these sports, but they become active participants. I'm sure there will be some participation by the fans in Boston, both positive and negative.

I'm really more curious where his game is, just because he hasn't played competitively in so long. U.S. Open test with thick rough, he's had a lot of success at U.S. Opens, and certainly it would be a remarkable story if he does get in contention, but it's going to require very sharp skills and skills that Phil Mickelson doesn't always shine with as far as hitting fairways and being extremely strategic in that

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sense.

So I think we're all curious to see both how he plays and how he's received.

DAN HICKS: I think if Phil gets in contention, he'll be cheered on very enthusiastically. I think it's just a natural reaction in sport because people know he's been chasing this U.S. Open forever. It's the final piece of a grand slam puzzle. It would be an unbelievable story, with everything that's happened with him in the last several months. I think, if there was any negative kind of reaction, that would be totally drowned out by people watching what was happening in front of him.

So I think it's in large part due to how he plays. And let's face it, Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson are the two biggest -- you never know what they're going to do. Look at what Tiger's done. I would not be surprised if Phil gets there next week and hangs around the leaderboard. He lives for that kind of thing, no pun intended. He lives for weeks like next week. He absolutely, that's been his whole DNA his entire career.

So I wouldn't be surprised, first of all, if he is. If he is, I know the Boston crowd -- and we know especially now in the NBA Finals, you get a feel for how vociferous those guys cheer, the fans cheer -- I think they'll be on his side. It will be something you can't take your eyes off of if he plays well.

NOTAH BEGAY III: I think Dan brings up a great point. We've had athletes throughout history end up in jail and do things that were extremely controversial, but if they have success in their respective sport on the field, the public seems to be very forgiving with regard to that.

I mean, look at Tiger Woods' struggles off the golf course a number of times, and all seemed to be forgotten when he became the Masters champion back in 2019.

I think this is a slightly different take on the whole thing. Those were personal choices that athletes made that had an adverse effect on their lives. Phil's choices have kind of fractured the locker room, so to speak, and lent itself to sort of more deeper ethical thought as to how athletes do utilize their time to support various types of initiatives related to the promotion of different ventures that have ties to things that not everybody agrees should be promoted.

So that's the first thing to overcome is there are going to be people in the locker room that don't agree wholeheartedly with what is happening now with the Saudi or the LIV Tour.

Also, Phil's always been one of the favorites amongst

spectators, and he feeds off of that energy. That might not be the case starting out. Now, I agree with Dan, if he does get in contention Saturday, Sunday, I think that will all shift back behind Phil. But initially starting, not everybody there is going to be a hundred percent supportive.

As Justin stated, they will speak their mind,

And that's going to depend on whether Phil can sort of fight through all that and let his game do the talking. The fact that he's been on the shelf for the better part of the beginning of this whole year, I just don't see that happening.

PAUL AZINGER: I predict that, if Phil's missing the cut, like on Friday afternoon or something, it can get pretty rough on him, though. I just think -- this is a big step these guys have made. They've changed the game forever probably.

But I agree, he is so popular, Notah. You're right, and people do forgive. If it's Phil Mickelson -- I've always loved Phil Mickelson. He's always been great to my kids. I'll always appreciate him for that. I don't necessarily agree with everything he's ever done, that's for sure, but if he does get in contention, it would be a miracle, I really think. A minor miracle that that guy could get in contention with all that's been going on. But we'll cover it fairly, I'll tell you that.

**Q. What did you learn about the championship makeup of Jon Rahm, the way he finished off the U.S. Open last year? And what have you seen from him in the last few months that makes you think he possibly could defend the title?**

PAUL AZINGER: I don't know if we've seen a whole lot from him. He's played okay, but definitely not Jon Rahm standards. He's definitely slipped a little bit. We've all seen that.

From last year, that tournament was up for grabs. Really any number of tremendous players could have won that tournament. If you go back and look at it, Bryson's there for a while. Then it looked like Rory McIlroy and then Oosthuizen.

For Rahm to come out on top and the way he did it under the circumstances with all those great players there, the enormous pressure on Rahm, it was just such a massive step for him as a man and as a player to hole those two putts at the end of the golf tournament. And to put on that kind of short game -- which is never his strength -- but to put on that kind of short game display there at the U.S. Open and to hold that trophy was a real battle of nerves

and will.

I think everybody has so much respect for him. His legs and the way he's built, he just reminds us all of Jack Nicklaus when he was young. He's got that kind of power and that big, long swing. I just feel that Rahm is mentally a real testament to what players have to become to win huge events.

Rahm epitomizes what hard work is all about and intestinal fortitude because he made putts when he had to. And it's not his strength, and I really respected him for that.

**Q. Just wanted to follow up on Adam's first question there. I'm wondering, how do you guys approach covering the Phil and the Dustin Johnson situation heading into next week? How do you guys face that as sort of journalists and people in the media covering the tournament?**

JAMIE PALATINI: Tommy, you want to start with that?

TOMMY ROY: Yeah, I'm glad to. Bottom line is no matter what player we end up showing, if they're coming off a significant finish in an event the week before, we're going to mention it. Obviously whoever wins in Canada, we're going to show him. We're going to mention he won in Canada.

If we show a LIV player who won last week, that will be mentioned. That's being journalistically sound. We're not going to shy away from something like that. But in terms of getting into fracturing the game of golf and all that, we're not doing that. This is U.S. Open week now and not talking about that stuff.

DAN HICKS: Yeah, I think there's one way to cover it, and that's what Tommy said, journalistically. If a guy's in contention, you cover him. You mention that he's part of the LIV Tour. You cover that because that's been obviously a gigantic talking point, and then you see where the championship takes you from there.

That's the great thing about live sports. It's unscripted. We don't know what's going to happen. Sitting here right now, we can't predict what the field is going to be. If hypothetically Dustin Johnson is coming down the back nine looking for his third major championship, there might have been things that happened during the week that we'll have to deal with. Maybe it's something that Dustin Johnson added to his whole reasoning why he's playing over there or whatever.

It's a reactionary type of thing, but in the basic, basic journalistic ethics, you cover the people that are playing in

the U.S. Open, and you cover them appropriately depending on where they are on the leaderboard.

JAMIE PALATINI: Thank you everybody for joining today. We really appreciate it. We're going to have a transcript available on this call for NBC Sports later this afternoon. Our comprehensive coverage next week begins at Golf Central Live From the U.S. Open and Golf Channel, Monday at 1:00 p.m. Eastern. Coverage begins next Thursday, June 16th, across NBC USA Network and Peacock.

Thank you everybody for joining. Have a good day.

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