

U.S. Adaptive Open

Sunday, July 17, 2022

Village of Pinehurst, North Carolina, USA

Pinehurst Resort & C.C. (Course No. 6)

Dennis Walters

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Dennis Walters. Dennis, we're here at the inaugural championship. I know how much this means to you. Talk about what it feels like to be here this week.

DENNIS WALTERS: I've been trying to come up with a word. Wow, great, awesome. Doesn't even come close. I'd say this is one of the coolest, greatest things ever, and I think this is way more than a golf tournament because I think that what's going to happen this week has the ability to change the lives of a lot of people. By that I mean if you're sitting in a wheelchair, I think one of the last things you'd be able to think you could do would be to play golf, but if all these thousands or hundreds of thousands or millions of people with disabilities see this, then I think the USGA has a golden opportunity to show others what's possible.

I think it has the power to be way more effective than any golf tournament that I can think of, and I think that's -- there's a real purpose here, and that's it.

Q. For you once we had announced our intention to do this at the USGA, you knew you wanted to be in the field. Talk about what that process has looked like from a golf perspective for you.

DENNIS WALTERS: Well, the day after they announced it, I called up and I had one question, and the question was can I bring my dog, and they said, is it a service dog, and I said, yes, it is, and it's actually a legit service dog. They said, yeah, we think that's okay. I said, okay, I want to make this clear: I can have my dog with me on the cart during the U.S. Adaptive Open. Mm-hmm. I said, okay. I'm filing an entry. And I don't play golf. I hit golf balls every day, but I hit them off three-foot high tees, I hit them through fire. I hit them while they roll, and with funny clubs. So all this is a totally foreign land for me.

I don't putt. I didn't putt. I didn't chip. Bunker shots, nothing, none of that, hitting off the ground, nothing. I had to start -- I wouldn't say I started from scratch because the swing that I use for my trick shot shows, that's my driver



swing, so my drives are fine. I started from the hole working back to where I figured I'd hit my drive.

It's been quite a challenge. It's way harder than what I do. Normally I go practice, I practice for a couple hours, go home, take a nap, whatever. Here it's all day. It's all various things.

The shots you hit on the range mean absolutely nothing. I'm the only person that gets paid to look good on the range, okay, but this is not the range. Playing golf and doing what I've done for the last 45 years over 3,000 performances is a very small portion of what I do. I mean, it's -- everybody said, oh, this will be easy, it's a piece of cake, you hit the ball great. No, it's way different. When you're strapped into a cart and you've got a hanging lie and got to hit a 5-wood to an uphill green, that's a challenge.

It's one I've embraced, and I've gotten a lot better. I'm not near as good enough as I'd like to be, but that's golf. So here we are. Tomorrow is the big day.

Q. I'm just curious after you get in the World Golf Hall of Fame and you spend a career talking about dreams and I'm sure maybe that was a dream you hadn't even considered, but when you get in the World Golf Hall of Fame, are you thinking, what's next, and then this pops along?

DENNIS WALTERS: Well, that's the way it turned out. That's the way it turned out. I'm 72 years old. I'm pretty much an old man. Most of my friends this age are either cutting back or they're quitting playing golf. For me, I'm just starting.

I think for a person of my age to have this stimulus and these challenges is -- I think it's cool. I think it's refreshing. I think it gives me something new to work on.

All these thousands of golf courses I've performed at, I've only seen the practice tee or the first tee to do the show. Now I've been playing -- I've played Oakmont, the Chicago Golf Club, Shore Acres, Inverness, just in the last few weeks, and I've done shows at all these places but I've never played the courses, so I've been doing that. That's interesting. I'm learning something every day, which I think is good for anybody, but again, someone who is older, I think it's a great thing. It keeps you active. It keeps your



mind in gear.

When I found out about this, I was intrigued about it. It's like a historical event. It's like this is 1895 and you're Horace Rawlins. That's the way I look at it. There were 11 competitors then, okay, there's eight now, but it's the same thing in my mind. This is the first one. That's why I wanted to be here.

But I'm telling you, if they wouldn't have let me have my dog here, I wouldn't have come. I would have come to do a show, that's it. I wouldn't have played. Because we're never separated, and I'm not -- I would be very unhappy and so would he.

Q. Can you tell us about that first round that you played?

DENNIS WALTERS: Yeah, well, it took me about six weeks before I decided I was okay enough to go play. I started with trying to hit one-foot putts and I couldn't make them all. That's how bad it was. Chipping, dumping them in the bunker, blading them across the street. It was ugly. It was ugly for a while. Finally one day after about I think six weeks, I said, you know what, I might as well go try.

I played nine holes, and I actually hit the ball pretty good. I actually thought hitting the ball from the dirt would be hard, and it's not easy, but that was the least of my -- I got that more quickly, and I started with a long putter.

The first thing I decided, how am I going to putt, because all my shots I swing the seat out. Now, if I have 30 putts, that's 30 times out, 30 times back. I said, I don't really think I'm going to have enough energy.

So what I do is when I putt, I face the seat this way and I started out putting like this, and that was -- it was so cumbersome and so awkward. I eventually got where I got a shorter putter, kind of the same way, but you know what, I'm kind of -- I'm not facing like this. I have to like lean over so I'm like sideways. You know, putting is difficult anyhow, but this way to putt, it's really tough.

I should be doing better at it because I've been practicing it, but still, it's one of those things that we'll see what happens.

Q. Would that have been your first round of golf since the accident?

DENNIS WALTERS: No. When this first happened to me -- I actually played a lot of golf when I started because I didn't have any shows. So I played. I would play -- I'd probably play four or five times a week in my 30s. But

once I started to get enough shows, I really didn't play a lot.

I played some in the winter, but I would tell you for the last 20 years I might go out and play 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9, and that would be about it with my friends, just kind of yukking it up once or twice a month. I had enough to do. I'd get up in the morning and I'd try to book shows and try to do my correspondence, and then I would have lunch, go practice for a couple hours, come home, it's almost time for dinner. That was my day until they announced this in December.

I'm working 10 times harder than I would. But it's -- I don't know, this is a very -- this is like being in a foreign land as far as I'm concerned. It's like trying to climb Mount Everest.

I have gotten better, and that's encouraging. But I've played one round that I played like I was capable of doing, so there is hope for that.

Q. Do you remember your last truly competitive round of golf? When that would have been?

DENNIS WALTERS: I remember the last shot I hit. The last shot I hit I was in a -- I had a buried lie in an uphill bunker and I had about a 25-foot bunker shot, and I took out half the bunker and knocked it up for a gimme. That was the last shot I hit.

Now, about a couple weeks -- I haven't really, except for two warmup tournaments, I haven't played in a tournament in 48 years. I wasn't driving in the bunkers. Every one of these guys I'm playing against, they just drive in the bunker. I was kind of intimidated by the whole thing. But every time I did that I had to take a one-shot penalty. I said if I go in the bunker and knock it out, I save three or four shots a round. So I started doing that a couple weeks ago.

About the third time I tried it, I was playing with a pro at one course and he was a little sketchy about me going in a bunker but then another guy joined us who was like the president of the club. He said, just go in. So I drove in there, and I hit a bunker shot. It was like perfect. All the sand went up on the green, it goes up about six feet from the pin, stops, and I said, whoa.

So then I went up there and made the putt. So it was like my first sandy in 48 years. Then I had my dog take the ball out of the cup.

Q. What course was that?

DENNIS WALTERS: It was at the Chicago Golf Club.

Q. When you schedule shows now going forward, now



that you're sort of playing again, will you insist on making sure that you get to play 18 at some of these famous courses?

DENNIS WALTERS: No, not when I'm on the road. If it's a famous course, yeah, maybe. But if I'm on the road, like I'm going -- the last show I did was in Michigan on the 29th of June. So that's it. I'm not going to do any more until after the tournament. So I have something on the -- I'm going to rest on the 21st. I haven't hit my trick shots in three weeks. Except when I broke my leg, I've never done that. So I'm going to hit my trick shots for the 22nd and the 23rd. The 24th I have a show in Norfolk and then the 27th I have one in Maryland. Then I'm going to New Jersey and I have 12 during the month of August. I have a busy month of August.

But it still leaves me -- I want to play the two courses I grew up and learned to play the game on. That's where I -- I'm definitely going to play those two courses.

Q. Which are those two?

DENNIS WALTERS: The first one is called Jumping Brook. It's in Neptune. I was born in Neptune. Now I live in Jupiter. Then I want to play the Hollywood Golf Club, which is magnificent. If you ever get to New Jersey, play the Hollywood Golf Club. It's magnificent. Our course was a goat ranch, dandelions in the fairway -- I laugh when I hear these guys on TV say, he's got a flier lie. If you've ever hit a ball out of wet clover, that's a flier lie.

I went over to Hollywood, my buddy was -- my friend was the assistant caddie master. I played in this tournament. They had the state caddies' tournament, so we want to play in that, and the caddie master -- I played good that day, so the caddie master wanted me to come over there. Anyhow, I went over there. When you die, the golf course in heaven can't be better than this.

I snuck on like three times and the pro kicked me off, and he said, you can't play here unless you work here. So I said, I really want to grow up -- when I grow up, I want to play on Tour, so could I have a job. So he gave me a job picking the range. We picked it by hand with a sand wedge and a yellow basket. I was bouncing balls off wedges long before Tiger Woods was even thought of. So I'm hitting them up here and catching them over here.

That's my favorite course. I love that place.

Q. You've made a career, decades, out of sort of finding ways to inspire people and kind of putting on a show for people. Does an event like this change that dynamic at all, to have all these people out here doing

these amazing things and doing it in a way that's going to be on television and where people -- and the goal for people to aspire to like you talked about? Does that change that dynamic at all?

DENNIS WALTERS: Well, let me put it to you this way. In every one of my shows, a part of the message that -- the show is basically in three acts. The first act is my dog, the opening act. Kid says, what's with the dog. I said, he's the opening act. I said, every famous entertainer has an opening act. I said, even Frank Sinatra had an opening act. He said, who's Frank Sinatra.

Then the second part of the show I tell my story. When I tell my story I tell people if they take one thing away from this show today, please take this: If you have a dream and it doesn't work out, that's okay, because the solution is simple: Get a new dream.

Now I tell people -- all the shows I've been doing since this was announced, I tell people in addition to doing my shows, I'm trying to re-learn and learn how to play golf, and so guess who has a new dream. I've incorporated that into my show.

The other thing is I have played in two of these adaptive tournaments, and I'm completely fascinated and absolutely amazed at what I see. I mean, it's phenomenal, the way that every one of these folks can play golf. It's phenomenal.

They're basically doing -- they're proving what I've been trying to say for 45 years, and I've been trying to show -- I try to show people with every swing I make that golf can be a game for all, every single person, and this proves it. I've also been trying to show people what's possible, not only in golf but in life itself.

When I was laying in a hospital bed 48 years ago, I never actually thought I was getting out of that hospital bed. I said, if I get out of this thing, it's going to be a miracle. But I promised myself if I do get out, I ain't quitting, I'm not giving up. And I'm going to try to find a way to play golf. And I did. That makes me extremely happy because I maxed out on what was possible. I'm laying in a hospital bed 48 years ago, you're going to tell me you'll travel the world and this journey will take you from this hospital bed to the World Golf Hall of Fame. You can't make that up. The odds on that are infinitesimal. No, they're actually huge -- the opposite of infinitesimal. There's not a number high enough to calculate the odds on that.

The other thing I wanted to say is I've played in one other USGA event, 51 years ago. If that ain't a record, I would like to shake hands with the person who beats it.

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Q. What was it?

DENNIS WALTERS: The U.S. Amateur, 1971. I finished tied for 11th. It was medal play. They took the top eight players, and I missed going to the Masters by two shots. I'm still mad about it.

Q. Where was that?

DENNIS WALTERS: Wilmington, Delaware.

Q. Is Augusta on your bucket list to play?

DENNIS WALTERS: I've actually played there. I didn't play all the holes, but I did a show for the members at Augusta National. It's tied for first. Over 3,000 performances, tied for first, off the first tee at Augusta National and at St Andrews. Those are my two favorite spots of all time.

When I went there, they said, Dennis, what would you like to do. I said, well, I'd like to play the par-3 course, and I'd like to play all the par-3s on the course. Then I want to have lunch under the tree.

So we go over there, the waiter goes, what would you like to have. An Arnold Palmer, what else? Best Arnold Palmer I've ever had. Guy says, what would you like to have for lunch? Ribeye hamburger it says. Best hamburger I've ever had.

So I said, okay, so in the morning I did a show on the old range because I figured I'd never get to do a show. This was before I actually did the show. So I did the show for our caddies, the person that had me there, and my dog. Then we went out, and the member that had me there announced me on the first tee and I hit a couple balls off the first tee, went over to the 10th tee, then we went and played the par-3 course, the par-3s, had lunch. Anything else you want to do? I said, yeah, I want to go fishing in Ike's pond. So I did that. It would be a better story if I said I caught a five-pound bass, but I didn't.

It's like the time they made a video of me for the PGA of America, the distinguished service award, 2008. Guy said, who would you like to have in this video. I said, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Tiger Woods, never dreaming that they would be in the video, so they're in the video. Then they made a documentary about me last year. It's on Peacock. You can plug that. It's an Peacock. Just type my name in the search box. They said, who should we get. Well, we can have Arnold Palmer on film and we've got Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods and Gary Player, and Barbara Nicklaus.

Q. What breed of dog is Gus?

DENNIS WALTERS: He's a not-sure.

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