

KitchenAid Senior PGA Championship

PGA Frisco

Frisco, Texas, USA

Tuesday, May 23, 2023

Gil Hanse

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Gil Hanse is joining us now at the 83rd KitchenAid Senior PGA Championship. After years of hard work, preparation and a lot of effort, the first major championship here at Fields Ranch East is upon us. How does that feel for you?

GIL HANSE: Incredibly exciting. A little nerve-racking. We were saying it's not every day you open a golf course and have a major championship be hosted on it.

We love a little feedback. I guess we're going to get some this week, and we'll see how that goes. But we're very excited, very proud. Jim Wagner, my partner, and I are really proud of what we've done and really excited. Took a ride around with Roger Meier, the director of agronomy, and the place looks great.

Q. Players here feel their first-tee jitters on Thursday. Take us inside a little bit as an architect when the curtain comes down and here's your baby, right?

GIL HANSE: Yeah, it's an interesting feeling because we've been fortunate to work on a lot of restorations of classic golf courses that have hosted major championships, and while we're fully invested and that's our work, it's not our design because we believe strongly that what we're trying to do is put Tillinghast back into Winged Foot, put Maxwell back into Southern Hills.

Here it's just us. It's our ideas, our thoughts, what we believe about golf architecture, what we think ultimately will provide a good test of golf for the best players in the world. Not that there's more at stake, but you just feel a little more of a tingle, I think.

I think as we go through it -- I guess the closest thing would be the course in Rio for the Olympics, just the enormous sense of pride there for golf to be back in the Olympics and that competition and that project and the things that were overcome in building that golf course.

I'm expecting that we're going to feel a similar sense of pride. We're going to feel probably a similar sense of relief if all goes well, which we expect it will, and we get a great champion on Sunday.

Q. As you're standing there with your feet in the dirt back in '19 when you're breaking ground, what's your goal here? What is it you want to create as a test?

GIL HANSE: Yeah, it's interesting because we -- most of our architecture focuses on playability and design and what we're trying to do to challenge golfers, whether that be resort golfers or the best golfers in the world. We're going to get to do both here.

So we tend to really enjoy sinking our teeth into that aspect of it. But this project was so complex from the standpoint of it's not just an 18-hole golf course. It's a world-class resort. It's another 18-hole golf course. It's the PGA of America's headquarters. It's practice facilities, short game facility.

From a land planning perspective, there was a lot more going on here as to the full campus and the design that Beau Welling, who did a great job on the West Course, was very involved in from a land planning standpoint. Then throwing on top of that, the difficulties of this site as it related to engineering.

Panther Creek is a great feature, but when Panther Creek gets angry, it takes bites out of our golf course. We had to armor the golf course and make sure we weren't going to suffer significant damage during a tournament because all the major championships here are going to be in May and June, and guess what, you get thunderstorms here in May and June.

We had to figure out how to get the golf course above the 100-year floodplain level, and then we had to figure out how all that ties in to make those holes look natural.

So you've got all this extra stuff happening, but at the end of the day, when we dug our feet into the dirt here, it was all about what do we think is a compelling test of golf, what do we think are interesting golf holes.



A lot of that has to do with variety. You see a lot of -- you see super long par-4s, super short ones, but just different -- we feel like not only are we looking at it from a scorecard, like okay, a 490 versus 350, it's really what are the questions we're asking you to solve.

I've had a few comments and conversations with some of the players here, and probably the greatest compliment we could get is they said, I haven't figured this out yet, and from an architect standpoint, you really don't want golfers to figure out -- you want them to eventually figure it out, and hopefully they get the right answers and the answers can be solved, but you'd rather there be some mystery and some figuring out.

As I said to David Toms, I don't want to say that this is a great golf course, but what I'm saying is if you play a great golf course, if you ever walked off any great golf course after one round and gone, yeah, I got this, I know exactly where to hit it every single shot -- no. There's nuances, there's strategy, there's subtlety. So Jim and I feel like that's really an integral part of what we're trying to create.

So you've got the bigger scale landscape you're trying to tackle and make sure it's going to stay in place. You've got some of the worst soil ever that we've had to deal with. I'm pretty tall, but we'd walk out here in the mud and I'd get like three- or four-inch lifts on after about 10 steps. We had to figure out how to put sand cap on.

There were a lot of different layers to this, but at the end of the day, what we're most excited and proud about is what we think is the strategy and the subtleties and the nuances that hopefully every round these guys play on this golf course they'll come to a better understanding of it.

Q. Is there a stretch of holes that you consider kind of your signature stretch or maybe lend the most excitement?

GIL HANSE: Yeah, I think the holes that we really enjoyed building were more of the natural ones. I've said we found eight holes, and we had to create 10.

I think holes 2, 3, 4 and 5 were just naturally there, and we had to embellish them and work around on them, but that stretch of golf I really love. I love the way they sit in the landscape, I love the questions they ask, and I think they're some of the prettier golf holes on the property. And same on the back when we got to 13, 14, 15 and 16, that stretch of holes.

There, I just ruined the surprise. It was the eight holes we found, and the other 10 are the ones we had to create.

But from that standpoint those holes have a great natural flow and feel to them. There's a difference.

One of the things we really like about this course is that there's a really nice flow and pace to it. You start off here and it'll be interesting to see how it happens, you've got two par-5s in the first three holes. Both of them should play into the wind. They're very different golf holes, but a lot of your scoring for these types of players are on par-5s.

If you walk off of 3 without being 1-under or 2-under, you're probably going, wait a second, what just happened. We think there's scoring opportunities, then you've got to kind of hang on in the middle, and then we feel really good about the finishing stretch where 17 is the shortest par-3 on the course and 18 is very reachable if you decide you want to go for it.

So we'd like to see positive things happen at the end, and I think that flow and pace, not only feels good as it moves through the property, but it also I think will feel good in an overall round of golf.

Q. Darren Clarke mentioned that he could easily visualize a Ryder Cup here because of the way the holes can be set up differently for match play. Did you have that in mind, or is it just the final product a result of that's what you ended up with?

GIL HANSE: I think Jim and I design with a match play mentality all the time. We love that style of golf. We love that feel. Now, we understand that in American golf, most of the time you're writing a score down, but almost everybody is still playing a match. When you're out with your buddies playing golf, you're probably playing a match. When you get together obviously today in a pro-am you're playing a match.

From that standpoint I think it's important that -- we like the swings that can happen, emotionally in match play. We like the swings that can happen from the standpoint of scoring.

You've mentioned flexibility in the setup of the golf course. One of the things that we're most proud about this golf course is that flexibility. It is purposely set up with these massive tees that you can basically tee it up anywhere between 100 yards back or forward and have all these opportunities, and they lay in the landscape, they sit there kind of as a big piece of ground.

If we put little tee pods in and they would just feel out of scale and out of place, and it would also then limit us to smaller areas, so what we did was we created these tees

that have all this sort of meandering flow to them but all these flat spots in and amongst there so that Kerry Haigh and the team has incredible amounts of flexibility on how they want to set up the golf course on any given day, and we hope within the setup of the greens and the green complexes and hole locations, that furthers his ability to move things up or move things back based on the challenge that he wants.

Then you've got the grassing of golf course. All through the green is Northbridge Bermuda. Kerry wanted to set up the golf course with the rough lines where they were. He asked us, we came in, we just looked at them more from an esthetic standpoint. But he now has the width that he wants to challenge these players. He can change that width in '25 to challenge the ladies in a different way. He can change that width in '27 to challenge the men. The golf course has a ton of flexibility in it, and it's purposeful.

We've learned enough over the years about major championships that yeah, I could stand up here and talk to you all and take credit and hopefully get patted on the back on Sunday evening, but this week, our job is done. I don't have anything to do with this. It's up to the agronomy team and it's up to Kerry Haigh in how they set it up, and if we've done our job, we've given them multiple options and different ways to set up the golf course, and then he can use that any way he sees fit, based on weather, based on challenge, based on players.

That flexibility in our minds is a key component of design, and if we do get a Ryder Cup here, I would love to see -- I'm not sure Kerry will still be setting up golf courses then, but if he is, I would love to see what they came up with because in match play there's so many different things he could do with this golf course.

Q. I wondered what it was like for you from the point where you felt like we've done everything we can do to you're waiting for the player feedback, that time in between as you kind of brace for what that feedback is going to be. What's that like?

GIL HANSE: You know, I think we feel confident enough that within what we believe in golf architecture, whether that's right or wrong, we've done a good job with this golf course. We think we've set up a compelling test and what we think would be interesting for people to watch but also for people to play. So we feel good about that.

But you just never know exactly what you're going to get from a feedback standpoint.

As I said earlier, it's a little nerve-racking, but as I said, we fully expect that the outcome is going to be a good one.

I've always said this, as well, when it comes to major championships. So many people get fixated on score as being a barometer for whether a golf course is good or bad. We don't. We get fixated on who wins on our golf courses. We want to see a really great champion crowned on golf courses that we've had a hand in designing or restoring, and I think that's more telling about the quality of the golf course because as I said before, our job is done, and if somebody goes out there and shoots 22-under or somebody goes out there and shoots 5-under to win, it's not an indictment of the golf course if the scoring is low. It's basically saying, hey, the wind didn't blow, golf course was set up well and these guys played great and they're really good players.

If it's 5-over, it's not a validation of the golf course; boy, that's a tough, hard golf course. We really just feel like we want to see a great competition. We want to see exciting shots. We love to see players think their way through our golf courses, and I think what I'm hearing already is that's definitely the case.

Then at the end of the week, hopefully we get a great champion.

Q. From a resort standpoint, you're a good player. How do you feel the courses complement one another? Do you feel they do?

GIL HANSE: I think they complement each other well, and you're way too kind to me. I am an average, every-man golfer. When you asked about validation, the biggest thing to me was when I played the golf course. Like I played it back in October, and I thought, all right, I'm a 10 handicap; I didn't lose a ball, I got around it no problem. Did I shoot my best round ever? No. But it was playable.

That's really what I'm thinking as a resort guest means, yes, you're going to find trouble out here, so the only validation we've had so far is from a very average golfer, that an average golfer can find his way around this golf course, which I think is important, ultimately, for the success of this place.

But I think what we're shooting for is there's an understanding if you're going to Whistling Straits or you're going to Pebble Beach or you're going to Pinehurst No. 2 that it's going to be a hard golf course. Those are hosts for major championships. The public has access to them. Bethpage Black. You don't show up there and go, I feel like today I'm going to shoot my best round ever. You go there with an expectation, hey, it's tough, and hopefully I'm going to hit some memorable shots.

We feel like the East Course will offer that because golfers will come here and understand, hey, I'm playing a course where they're playing major championships.

The West Course has plenty of challenge in it, but it's more fun, and Beau has talked about that. It's just sort of more of a rollicking test of golf, go out with your buddies -- it's more than hit-and-giggle. It's a better golf course than that, but it's the golf course that you want to just go and go out and enjoy it.

I think they complement each other very well from that standpoint, that they offer two distinctly different tests of golf but still both rooted in the same site, and I think they sit comfortably next to each other. I really do.

Q. I remember years ago when you'd work at a TPC Boston, you talked about how you can keep the best players uncomfortable sometimes when you hide the bottoms of the flags. Will we see a lot of that this week and moving forward here?

GIL HANSE: You will. Jim and I feel comfortable using obscured vision as part of the defense of a golf course.

Now, what we tried to do is if you hit to position A, you're going to see it all. You're going to basically get to see what you need to and you're going to put yourself in a position, but there are going to be times when you don't get yourself in position A and you're over here and now I can't see what's going on.

We believe, obviously going way back to the Scottish links, that's always been a part of the challenge of golf. But these players we're going to see this week, the women golfers, the men on Tour, they're so good that it's difficult for us to challenge them physically, make a golf course too long, make it too difficult from that perspective. But the mental aspect from an architecture standpoint is we can make them feel slightly uncomfortable.

We don't want them to feel uncomfortable all the time; like if they've hit a great tee shot, we don't want them standing there going, okay, I put it position A, now what do I do. But if you get yourself out of position, if the mental -- if we're hiding things a little bit from you, we feel that's totally fair.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.