

Golf Channel

Wednesday, August 12, 2020

Steve Burkowski

Notah Begay

Justin Leonard

U.S. Amateur Preview Media Roundtable



JEREMY FRIEDMAN: Thank you all for hopping on our roundtable media conference call today. We're going to be talking all things U.S. Amateur this week. On the call is Steve Burkowski, our resident amateur and college golf insider who has covered a number of these U.S. Amateur championships in our previous deal with the USGA, along with Golf Channel analyst Notah Begay and 1992 U.S. Amateur winner Justin Leonard.

The three will be on our call this week. Live coverage of match play starts tonight, and it goes tonight through Sunday. It's going to be uninterrupted coverage similar to what last week's U.S. Women's Amateur was, presented by Rolex. We're also going to be streaming a bonus hour of live coverage starting at 6:00 p.m. eastern tonight on Peacock, which is NBC Universal's new streaming service. So this will be the first golf event that will be streamed on Peacock, so we're excited about that. So that will be Wednesday through Friday.

A couple of housekeeping notes. This call is being transcribed, will be made available to you guys this afternoon.

I'll kick things off. Steve, we'll start with you. Since you've covered the amateur game and the college game is a huge passion of yours, obviously, so on behalf of us just talk about how excited you are that we kicked off our partnership, our renewed partnership with the USGA and the fact that the U.S. Amateur is there in beautiful Bandon Dunes this week.

STEVE BURKOWSKI: Well, Jeremy, thrilled to be back covering these USGA championships. I figure my math takes me about double digits of U.S. Amateurs I've been at over the years. Started last week with the Women's Amateur going extra holes with Rose Zhang and Gabi Ruffels, so what a way to sort of return to our relationship with the USGA.

And then to come out to Bandon Dunes, it's the seventh

USGA championship they've had at this resort but the first U.S. Amateur at Bandon Dunes. For those that have not been here, it's worth the journey. For those who have been, to come back and see this magical piece of land on the coast of Oregon is phenomenal, and it's all wind dependent and weather dependent on how this golf course can play. It is unique. It's a lot of fun to watch. They finished up the playoff earlier this morning 18 for three, so we're set; match play is off and running.

To go back-to-back weeks, I couldn't think of a better way to return our commitment to amateur golf and working alongside the USGA. A lot of fun, and it's going to be a great five days of golf in primetime. That's a win-win for everybody.

JEREMY FRIEDMAN: Justin, as a past champion at Muirfield, talk about your experiences competing in this event back in your amateur and college days, and what you're excited about being at Bandon Dunes this week.

JUSTIN LEONARD: I played three U.S. Amateurs back in the early '90s. I played at Cherry Hills in 1990. I missed the Amateur in '91. I wasn't able to make it back to qualifying, and then the win in '92 and then played again at Champions in '93.

You know, I look back so fondly at all my memories playing the U.S. Amateur. It certainly opened doors that I didn't think were possible to open, towards my professional career, and just gave me a big boost in what I was trying to do and a belief in myself.

To be back here covering this event for the first time, I'm beyond excited. And then to be here at Bandon Dunes, it really is an amazing property.

Just talking about specifically the Bandon Dunes golf course, it should be fascinating with the strategy. There's so many different options. There are options around the greens that I think can be confusing at times, and I think the guys who do well through match play will be the ones that really commit to whatever they decide to do because it creates some doubt in your mind around the greens because of the way that they're shaped rolling off the greens. Most of the areas are closely mown, and so you'll see guys using putters, using hybrids or 3-woods, bumping wedges into hills, and you'll see guys that are going to try



and fly it on the green.

Really creates for some compelling golf and beautiful scenery, and then on top of that, we've got the best amateur players in the world who, as we've seen here very recently over the last year, chances are you'll see a lot of these players playing on the PGA TOUR very, very soon.

JEREMY FRIEDMAN: Notah, similar question. We were all up there in the Pacific Northwest at Eugene Country Club four years ago for the NCAA championships. Talk about your excitement, as well, being able to cover the U.S. Amateur at Bandon Dunes this week.

NOTAH BEGAY: Well, I think it's a collective effort in the sense of the USGA package coming back to NBC Sports and the Golf Channel. I think that through what Golf Channel has done for college golf and having the chance to visit with Casey Martin, Conrad Ray, two teammates of mine that now obviously coach at Oregon and Stanford, but them just telling me what the platform has done for the amateur game, for the collegiate game, it is remarkable.

We saw record ratings last week for the U.S. Women's Amateur, which I think is fantastic. It's great to see the female golfers getting to showcase their talent and people tuning in to watch, and I think we're just kind of on this upward trajectory in terms of Golf Channel's ability to give our viewers what they want. They want to see golf. They want to see high-quality golf. They want to learn the personalities, get to know the players.

With guys like Steve Burkowski, who is second to none in terms of his expertise in understanding and knowing and being in the know with regard to college coaches and teachers and the players themselves and firsthand experience in terms of what it takes to win a U.S. Amateur in Justin Leonard, in my opinion this is the hardest tournament to win because not only do you have to survive 36 holes of stroke play to get in to the match play session, but then you can't be off your game. You've got to win six consecutive matches.

Many a good player, many a PGA TOUR winner have gone through their career not even coming close to winning a U.S. Amateur. That's just how hard it is.

STEVE BURKOWSKI: As we alluded to, this is a very informal round table. We're happy to answer anything you throw our way.

Justin, I sort of want to circle back to you, the victory, 1992, every golf course, every venue is different, but when you recall your run to the championship and taking home the title, what were the keys to you, for a long week, the

head-to-head battles, six different times? When you think about it, how were you able to be successful by the end of this very arduous week?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Well, it was interesting in thinking back on it in '92, the golf course was playing very firm in August, different from what you tend to see when the Memorial was held there.

I loved the conditions of the golf course, deep rough, very firm fairways, and then we actually got rained out one day, and it really softened the course up, and I remember thinking, this may not suit me very well. But there was still a -- it went from just trying to hit the fairways to then trying it put it on specific sides of the fairways to give myself angles.

I just had a great week, and I had a good summer going into that point. But there specifically, I just remember feeling very comfortable with what was going on with the whole atmosphere, with the golf course, even though it changed kind of mid-tournament from being hard and fast to soft. I just remember the putting green early in the week and thinking, okay, as good as these greens are and as fast as they are, I should be able to make a lot of putts, and sure enough, that came true.

STEVE BURKOWSKI: Notah, for you, some success making it to the quarterfinals. You were part of this particular championship in the day. How different is it now, a quarter of a century later, when you look back to what you did in the mid-'90s to what these young men are going after here this week at Bandon Dunes? How much has it changed?

NOTAH BEGAY: It's changed quite a bit. I think as a general rule, the level of play is just higher, I think, because of YouTube and because of Golf Channel. Players are getting access to a ton more information. There's training apps that you can get subscriptions to, there's teaching apps, there's platforms that talk golf 24/7. So from very early ages, these kids that want to immerse themselves in the game can do that, and consequently, the quality of play, the maturity, the composure, the strategies of players that make it to these types of championships is that much better.

Some pretty darned good players are going home today, and it's not because they weren't good enough. It was because 36 holes isn't a lot of golf to determine who the strongest players in the field are. But if you're off for six holes or even nine holes, you might find yourself on the outside looking in.

I just think that the disparity between the field strength



when Justin and I were playing in our U.S. Amateurs to now is that much better.

Q. Burkowski, this is kind of to you. I know you were there last week and kind of seeing another championship this week. I'm just curious about the vibe out there because I know there are not spectators, the testing is going on. I know a lot of the college kids probably are wondering what does the fall season look like, if it's going to happen. I'm just sort of curious, how does it feel different than a normal year?

STEVE BURKOWSKI: For a lot of the reasons you just sort of said. Last week at Woodmont -- for these championships, players that have made it are allowed two guests, so it might be a mom and dad, some have been pushing their own cart, maybe a parent or a friend caddies. So from that point alone, the fans, the fanfare, the applause, the ups and downs that go with it, it's different, and I think we have seen that in professional golf for the past couple of months as everyone is working their way back into this new world of golf in 2020.

From that standpoint, unique, as some of the ladies said last week and some of the guys this week, with a chuckle and a grin. They're like, we usually don't get a ton of people at college events to begin with, so it's not completely a new situation for them, the testing by the USGA before you arrive, another when you arrive, the daily temperature checks. I think it's just sort of part of a new routine, hey, give yourself a little more time to realize you have to go through the protocol, and maybe big picture of what college golf might look like. Asking some of the players last week and again this week, I think we're all in that level of uncertainty. The ACC pulling the plug on men's and women's golf for the fall; we heard what's going on with the Big Ten and Pac-12. I saw Alan Bratton, the Oklahoma State coach, this morning at breakfast, and he's like, we're still going until we're told we're not going because the Big 12 still plans on playing football, and let's be honest, football is going to really impact every other sport on the collegiate level.

So it's just that unique reintroduction of playing competitive golf, and you and I have covered it for so long. It's different, but I think these young men and women are doing a pretty good job of sort of keeping the blinders on and just realizing what's ahead of them, so hopefully that gives you a sense of being on property the last two weeks, what they believe, what they feel, what the environment is like.

But I'll circle back; it's great to be playing golf again because there are a lot of other sports that have a lot of question marks still remaining.

Q. I was looking at the transcript from some of the players last night, and Justin, you touched on it a little bit earlier about how this course requires some different shots and maybe a little more knowledge, but I'm curious if you think this opens the door to maybe some different winners. I know there's a few older guys who made the bracket. What do you think the demands of this golf course and the ability to shape shots and hit some creative things around the greens, what does that do in terms of how it might shape the bracket and the way we whittle down to a champion?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Well, the wind is the biggest factor here, and it's supposed to be windy all week, more so in the afternoons than the mornings. The mornings are actually quite pleasant, and that's when we saw the bulk of the lower scores. The wind seems to start picking up late morning, and I think you're going to see the players who, A, they're ready to kind of battle that element. It's not really necessarily about shaping your shots from right to left or left to right, it's more about being able to keep the ball down because when you're playing in a 30-mile-an-hour wind it doesn't matter really in which direction you shape it. It's not a true links in that it doesn't go one direction out and then one direction back in, but it's very much like links golf from the standpoint of needing to keep the ball down, needing to judge what the ball is going to do, not just the first bounce but the second and third. And then really just kind of controlling your temperament, realizing that you're going to get the odd bad bounce here or there, and a lot of it depends on what you do after that, because it is going to happen at some point.

So the guys that are willing to kind of take that adversity head on and look at it as a challenge versus the ones who maybe get frustrated by it, I think those are the guys you're going to see that continue to move forward in this tournament.

Q. Shifting gears to the broadcast, heading to Bandon Dunes this week, it's a new course. Obviously a lot of golf fans know Bandon Dunes, but it hasn't really ever been shown on TV. What's the biggest challenge that comes with showing a new course to the world on TV?

STEVE BURKOWSKI: That's a great question because the vistas that we have all seen on property are second to none. Again, consider the fact that we're maybe about six weeks removed from partnering back up with the USGA, so it isn't like we had the opportunity to maybe do a site survey six, nine, 12 months in advance. But when you have Tommy Roy in the big chair producing, longtime NBC golf producer, best in the business in my opinion, he's got it figured out, along with Doug Grabert, our world-class

director.

Not to get too technically jargon filled here, but we've got a lot of spider cams. There's going to be a lot of movement because the terrain here at Bandon Dunes doesn't necessarily allow you to put cameras and towers everywhere. I guess it's maybe sort of that Chambers Bay feel of wow, this is not something we've visually seen before, so it's going to be a lot of moving around, trying to showcase the golf, the beautiful scenery all around.

It's a little bit of everything in terms of a lot of people are going to probably tune in tonight saying, I've always heard about it, I want to see it.

It's the planning from Tommy and Doug and everybody else to facilitate a world-class broadcast while putting this unbelievable place on display. Hopefully that gives you a little bit of insight into how Tommy and the team is going to go about it, but I know Notah and Justin can attest why TV is always a fluid and moving situation. We've got a blueprint in place, a plan ready to enact to hopefully wow people. We're going to show some quality golf and then just sort of look around.

I remember being here, I think it was Pac Dunes, Pacific Dunes in '06 for the Curtis Cup, and Dan Hicks who was going to be hosting our coverage, it always sticks out to me 14 years later, he's like, it's Pebble Beach without the houses. That is how impressive these views along the coastline are going to be.

You know, a little bit of everything, but what we're going to be able to show for the next five days is going to be pretty impressive.

Q. And you touched a little bit on the fact that you guys just took over the rights from FOX for the USGA. I imagine it was a bit of a scramble to get everything set up. If you can just kind of take me through the preparation process, how do you get ready to host a tournament from a new venue in six weeks' time?

STEVE BURKOWSKI: Well, we work hard. You know, and I don't want to -- Tommy and Doug have been doing this and our lead producer and director for a quarter of a century, so they obviously were in that far left lane, hit the gas, how do we get up to speed, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Coos County that we're in here in this part of Oregon.

Ultimately it came down to the USGA presenting to them, this is what we're going to do, this is how small our footprint is going to be. Without them saying yes, we can go ahead, I'm not sure this championship would have even happened,

let alone TV. So it really started from the USGA, as they shared with us yesterday, April and May, hey, this is how we would like to go about it because the state of Oregon, I believe the governor said no sporting events until September, but he was leaving it up to each individual county to maybe make exceptions.

So it started with that, and then in the three or four months and then the six or seven weeks that we knew we were going to do this, it's planning, it's a quick site survey, it's trying to understand -- I'm going to go back to what I said shortly before, this course is not your typical back and forth and throw it here -- you get out there, and it's a challenge. And I know Tommy and Doug have come up with the best, most efficient plan, again, as the footprint here across the board is just smaller. Tommy and Doug would know much better than I, but that's sort of the Cliff's Notes version of how we made this happen in such a short time.

NOTAH BEGAY: Burko, if you don't mind me jumping in, you talk about footprint, there's also the blueprint. The USGA has been doing this for quite some time, and they take diligent notes on what they expect, what has transpired, what they like, what they don't like, and so there's a very clear set of expectations and strategies that they want to implement at every single venue. I think one of the things that has worked in our favor in terms of preparation from Tommy Roy's standpoint and Doug Grabert is not only their 30-plus years of experience doing this, but the Open Championship presents similar sets of challenges as -- in setup in terms of capturing views and trying to find tee shots and getting your cameras in certain areas to make sure that you can capture as much of the beauty -- we're not going to get it all, but we're going to capture as much as we possibly can, along with demonstrating the abilities of these world-class amateur golfers.

So that's really, I think, been a benefit to us because the terrain and some of the links-style challenges in terms of infrastructure and operations that go into these sorts of things, we've had to answer those similar types of questions over in Scotland and England in covering the Open.

I think that's why we've been able to get it off the ground, and I think you're going to see us hit this thing without missing a beat is because NBC is prepared, but also the USGA was equally prepared, as well.

STEVE BURKOWSKI: It's a hand-in-hand relationship for sure.

Q. Does it make your lives as analysts and as on-air talent, does it make it harder that it's a course that you



guys don't really or the viewing public doesn't really know?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Well, I think it adds to our list of duties, and it's really a fun -- it will be a fun story to tell over these next five days is to help people understand a bit more about Bandon Dunes, about the strategy of playing this golf course at such a high level.

I'm really looking forward to telling that story. A typical week I'll spend a couple hours on the golf course, even if it's a golf course that I've known before, because I know -- I'm well-versed in reading a yardage book, and I like to get out and see the greens and how things are playing.

You know, I've been on the golf course the last two days for probably a total of six hours, and I've got a couple more hours to go. There's a lot to learn about this place. There's a lot of nuances. But it's amazing. It truly is.

I think that's part of the story that we're here to tell is how the players need to try and play this golf course and the different options that are available.

Q. Justin, you touched on the players. Is a course like Bandon, you mentioned about some of the mid-ams, the mid-amateurs that are playing in this event, as well. Can a course like Bandon be one that would potentially allow some of these mid-amateurs to be more competitive since you can overpower it given the wind conditions out there?

STEVE BURKOWSKI: I think so. I'll jump in first. You look at Stewart Hagestad, former Mid-Am champion, closer to 30 than 20. He has, quote-unquote, a real Monday-to-Friday job. He shoots 6-under yesterday coming in at Bandon, 5-under on the back nine, so from my quick view from 30,000 feet, absolutely. Kevin O'Connell, another past Mid-Am champ, has made it to match play. As far as a 7,400-yard, carry it 300 yards in the air, I don't know what Notah and Justin think, but yes, I think it now opens the door to everybody. There is maybe no, quote-unquote, style of play or someone that hits it 330 that has a clear defined advantage.

JUSTIN LEONARD: I fought that battle. In amateur golf I was one of the shorter hitters, continued on through my professional career. This is the type of golf course -- and I'll tell you, whenever I went over to play at The Open, I felt like that advantage of length was diminished because the fairways were so firm, because it was more about the elements and controlling not only where your ball lands but where it ends up because those could be in a lot of cases two very different places.

So I think length is mitigated to some extent. Certainly on some of the longer holes into the wind, it could be a bit of an advantage. The par-5s for the most part play downwind, at least two of them do, and the other two are kind of a cross wind. So most of the field can reach all four of the par-5s, excluding maybe No. 18. And then you've got -- yardage, you can throw yardage out the window this week. There's the 16th hole is 375 yards, and it was blowing so hard Monday afternoon, guys were hitting irons to the green and even beyond it with their tee shot.

I don't think it necessarily suits a certain style of play. I think it's just the guy who's willing to take on the elements, take on the wind and the challenge that that provides, and the ones that seem to have a sense of the moment during the match and take advantage of it.

NOTAH BEGAY: Real quickly on that point, I think that an older, more mature player is going to deal with some of the unlucky or lucky bounces that take place. Your opponent might get a very lucky bounce, and a younger player might let that affect them, whereas an older player maybe able to just maintain and understand -- maintain a certain level of composure and focus and realize that that's just going to happen out there.

And as far as length, regardless of how far you're carrying the ball, once it hits the ground you don't really have any control over where it's going sometimes. The ebb and flow of the lucky and unlucky bounces, I think the reactions to it do favor a slightly older, more mature player.

There is a scenario in my mind where a mid-amateur could win this thing.

STEVE BURKOWSKI: It's going to be a lot of fun to watch, guys. I know that.

JEREMY FRIEDMAN: Thank you, Steve, Notah and Justin.

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