

Golf Channel

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Paul Azinger

Brandel Chamblee

Preview: FedExCup Roundtable Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Thanks for making the time to take part in today's call. Before we get going, I just wanted to quickly run through a few items of note. First I want to mention that this call is being transcribed, so we'll plan on distributing a transcript to each of you later today. If for some reason you don't receive it, just send me a follow-up email and I'll be happy to get it to you.

Secondly, I know many of you have taken part in one of our what we call roundtable-style calls before. We really appreciate media keeping their lines on mute unless you're asking a question and also really appreciate your patience in just doing your best not to step on one another while trying to ask a question. We should have plenty of time to get to everybody. Hopefully we'll have some time for a few follow-up questions, as well.

With that, I certainly want to welcome in Paul and Brandel and thank them for making the time to chat with you guys today. Paul will be working as NBC Sports' lead analyst for both the BMW Championship this week outside of Chicago as well as next week's TOUR Championship in Atlanta. Brandel will be working in studio for Golf Central pre- and post-round coverage during both the BMW Championship and TOUR Championship, and NBC Sports will carry exclusive live tournament coverage of these final two FedExCup Playoff events airing across both Golf Channel and NBC over the next two weeks.

With that, Brandel, Paul, before we open things up for questions, I hope that each of you might be willing to kind of offer up some initial thoughts as we prepare for the second leg of the Playoffs this week. What has your attention heading into Olympia Fields?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, I'll go first because I know you can cover every topic. I've been sitting at home for four or five months squeaking a tournament in here or there. I just have noticed that all the best players pretty much have come out and played the best golf. There's been a few surprises, but there's been some great performances.

Justin Thomas and Dustin Johnson sitting 1-2 on top of the FedExCup list going into a very difficult golf course, a U.S. Open style course at Olympia Fields. Maybe a little bit of a surprise would be Webb to me and certainly Daniel Berger and Bryson-turned-brute is just kind of -- I guess Tiger paved the way and he's kind of, I guess you could say, on steroids, without saying steroids. But he's really blazing a different kind of trail of brute strength.

By the time you get to the 72nd hole, it generally comes down to great touch and finesse, and I just think the game is fascinating. We're going to have two completely different courses to finish off the season, and what DJ did last week I thought was just an unconscious week. He led the field in par-4s, par-5s, par-3 scoring. I think he was 20 shots strokes gained or something -- 20 shots clear of the average of the field, and that doesn't happen very often. Can he do that? That's a strategic, difficult golf course. I don't care who you are.

Brandel, you've been there. You know that's not that easy, and I want to see if he can keep it going. I think it's going to be an intriguing conclusion to the weirdest year ever.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, last week was, I think, an answer to a question that's been posed to Zinger, to myself innumerable times over the last four, five or six years of who is the best golfer when they're hitting on all cylinders, and it was always sort of a debate between Dustin Johnson and Rory McIlroy, going back to the WGC Mexico last year. I saw Rory shortly afterwards and he said, I played really well, I just got beat by great golf.

Having seen what Rory can do when he's on top of his game, winning Canada last year in a blowout, winning a couple of majors by eight shots early on, it will be an ongoing debate. Rory's game has sort of fallen off. He's gone seven events now without a top 10; that is the longest streak he's ever had on the PGA TOUR or a world tour anywhere since he turned professional golf without a top 10. It's almost as if he's playing somewhat distracted.

Meanwhile I think Dustin Johnson, I don't think there's any other conclusion you can come to other than the fact that he took the criticism or the slights I should say of Brooks Koepka at the PGA Championship to heart and played the type of golf that everybody dreams of. It was the best performance and the widest margin of victory since 2006



and Phil won the BellSouth by 13 shots, I think. Best performance in 14 years, distanced himself from the field.

Then as we head into the TOUR Championship, BMW and the TOUR Championship, everybody is sort of positioning for that No. 1 spot. I'm intrigued always by the TOUR Championship. Going back to 2010, there hasn't been a single leader in the FedExCup go on to win the FedExCup. They have, on average, if you think about this, the leader after the BMW at the TOUR Championship, the leader has finished higher than 13th on average. So middle of the pack.

If you're talking about the effect of the FedExCup on the very best players in the world, it's almost as if it sort of equates to the leaders in major championships, first-time major championship leaders. It definitely has impacted the best players in the world at the TOUR Championship, and that's compelling. I mean, they wanted to create a format that got the attention of the very best players and paired them together and assured that they would show up, and they've done it. I don't know how we could ask for any more in such an unprecedented uncertainty of this year.

Q. Brandel, I follow you on Twitter. This morning there was kind of a back-and-forth with some guy who said 30-under was a joke and that they were making kind of a joke of the game and you had a very nice comeback, and I just wonder what you guys think about that. I mean, 30-under and winning by 11 is pretty darned impressive, but does it say anything about the state of the game?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Well, and I think there was something to this effect on Twitter. I'm curious to see what Zinger thinks about it. But golf is at least the only sport that I'm aware of where the better someone plays the more the game is opened up to criticism that it's become a joke. It's almost as if we can't just celebrate the brilliance of these athletes, we have to say that they've obsoleted golf courses, which I could argue until the cows come home is not true and that the equipment -- and this is the argument that makes me giggle the most, the equipment has made it difficult for the very best players to separate themselves from the world. Well, isn't that funny because a guy just won an event by 11 shots, and in this period of unprecedented growth in technology or change in technology you could say, Tiger separated himself more so than any other player in the history of the game, and the other only player in the last 100 years to win multiple major championships by eight shots or more is Rory McIlroy. That is the only one, and it all happened in an era that people love to say technology has made it hard for the very best to separate themselves. I can argue quite to the contrary.

I think we sit back and applaud what Dustin Johnson did, and it was not a blight on the golf course or the technology. On the contrary, it was all credit -- if I can quote Colin Montgomerie here, all credit to Dustin Johnson.

PAUL AZINGER: I'm glad to hear you say that because I 100 percent agree. As I said in the opening, that is a really hard course. It's a technical golf course. It's very strategic. You have to hit every club in the bag, and there are plenty of places to bail out if you're not hitting it well. I think Dustin Johnson just went unconscious.

Last week I guess I pulled out my old wooden driver. I was with Phil Blackmar and he's into all that and the technology, and I have no doubt, I've used my driver from 1987, my wooden driver, I used it for several years, played great golf with that thing, and I eventually went to metal in about '91 or '92 maybe, but I'll tell you, there was no joy whatsoever in hitting that wooden driver compared to hitting my metal driver. If you want to go back to that, you go right ahead.

Brandel is right; what Dustin Johnson did is historic. You have to look at it as historic. I just look at it as man, all Tiger could muster was 3-under, all J.T. could muster was 6-under, and this guy shot 30? You've got to look at that as the performance that it is.

Look, the game has changed. I have no doubt the single greatest change to the game of golf is the one club that can destroy your game, and that's the driver. More swings are destroyed looking for another 10 or 20 yards because of the driver, not a wedge, not a 9-iron, not a 6-iron. Drivers ruin swings, but that's the club that brings the joy, and quite frankly, I've said it before, it take a lot of guts to make a mockery of a course because you're flying it over doglegs hanging a ball nine seconds in the air, and that's what we're watching, and believe me, it is completely different than what we did.

But you've still got to make putts, don't you. He made a mockery of a very difficult golf course with great play, and I think it's historic.

Q. This is kind of a word association: When I say "Olympia Fields," what are some things that immediately pop to mind?

PAUL AZINGER: I hate to say this, but I've never been before, but the only thing that pops in my mind is Jim Furyk. That's all I've got for you, buddy. I'm sorry. U.S. Open.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I immediately think playoff and

epic choke from Bobby Jones. Everybody talks about what Bobby Jones did there, but he had a seven-shot lead in the 1928 U.S. Open and then over the next four or five holes lost it and eventually went into a playoff with Johnny Farrell. Incidentally enough, Johnny Farrell ended his career with 22 wins, same as Dustin Johnson, and then he proceeded to beat Bobby Jones in that 36-hole playoff by one shot, birdieing the last two holes. So epic playoff, sort of an epic choke by Bobby Jones that not too many people talk about, and then another great playoff in the 1961 PGA Championship where Jerry Barber made a 60-footer on the last hole to tie and then eventually prevailed in the playoff by one shot hitting a great shot out of the bunker on the last hole.

When I think Olympia Fields, yeah, I think about how soft it played in the 2003 U.S. Open, but more than that, I go back and think about what a big factor it played in history and some of the most epic playoffs of all time.

Q. One other thing that the golf nerds might love, someone was pointing out to me today that guys with unusual swings have done well there: Furyk, DeChambeau, if you want to say Jack had slightly one, and then Matthew Wolff thrived there in college. I would assume if you give that any thought it's just coincidence or is it possible that there's something that links them?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, we're in a gambling era so I'm going with all the Daniel Bergers -- I'm going with Bubba, Daniel Berger, all the goofy swings.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: That's a connection I hadn't thought of. I can certainly appreciate it. You know, if we go back to -- I wouldn't say that Jack Nicklaus had a funky golf swing, and I wouldn't say that Bobby Jones did, but sure, I like the connection where you went there with DeChambeau, although his golf swing wasn't near as funky then as it's become. But Furyk has one of the most idiosyncratic of all time.

But yeah, it's a nice connection. I like that theme. I'm not sure I would put any relevance there as to how the course has played out. I think that by and large it's been a golf course that has, for the most part, rewarded without too many instances to the contrary good players, so you don't get too many shocking wins there.

Jim Furyk, I maintain if the solid core golf ball hadn't come along and graduated rough hadn't come along, would have probably been a Hale Irwin type of player. I think he was robbed by course setups in the U.S. Open, sort of acquiescing to longer hitters and how inaccurate they were for a period of time. I think he would have been robbed of

a couple of U.S. Opens, at least in my view.

It's great that the USGA has gone away from graduated rough and back to more traditional setups in the U.S. Open.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the TOUR Championship format. It'll be the second year where the guy starts -- the FedExCup leader will have a two-shot lead starting Thursday. Two shots starting Thursday with 72 holes to go doesn't seem like a lot, but J.T. has talked several times about how much it affected him and how he would handle it differently this time. I'm wondering if you have any theories on why something that seems so small, a two-shot lead on a Thursday can have such a big effect on a guy.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I'd just say, look, as I stated at the top, you go back to -- with the exception of 2007, 2008 and 2009 when the leader of the FedExCup -- mind you, it was Woods, Singh and Woods who were leading so it was the top of the food chain, and Woods was nowhere in sight in 2008, and Singh filled that void beautifully, they went into the FedExCup and the TOUR Championship as the leader and won.

But they reconfigured the points, and going back to 2010, as I mentioned, the leader of the FedExCup generally finishes in the middle of the pack on average. Now, even Justin Thomas last year, he started the week -10, right? He would have finished -- if it were straight medal play, he would have finished ninth, but he got the 10 shots and finished -13 so he finished third.

But you look at his play and you can say this about almost -- as if they're leading a major championship and they have everything to lose as if they've already got the \$10 million sort of in the bank. It's how it's played out.

Again, if you're looking for a format that's found the choking point of the very best players in the world, you've found it. It's called the FedExCup. These guys make a fortune and they're phenomenal golfers, but if you look, the odds are on second place, second place in the FedExCup has won five, more than any other position in the FedExCup. Leading it has won the three times that I mentioned, but being second has won five times. Being fifth has won a couple times, sixth has won a couple times. The leaders generally speaking have struggled. Again, you and I were texting about this. I think you could reasonably say this is what's known as loss aversion. It's like they've got the \$10 million and they go out and they've played timidly and lost it. I'm looking forward to watching someone go in there with the lead and play as if they're trailing.

PAUL AZINGER: Well, I think the jury is still out on this concept, but I think it's the most intriguing of all of them. Everybody knows exactly where they stand. I don't know half of the stuff that Brandel can remember. Brandel, I am always amazed when I'm on a call with you or watching you and your knowledge. You're great at covering this sport.

I'll tell you what I do know right now is how much their palms sweat when they're out front. Brandel pointed this out so perfectly. The TOUR finally figured out a way to get their attention and have it not be a major championship, and it's a pile-load of money, and the prestige that comes with it.

It changes the way your body feels physically. And then mentally then you have to come into the golf tournament with a philosophy somehow. A philosophy is being forced on you. If you have a two-shot lead going to the final round of a tournament, a lot of guys will change their philosophy or they'll maintain a philosophy, and believe me, a guy can change his philosophy about putting in the middle of a round.

There's a lot that goes on in a guy's head when he has the lead that's different than when a guy is chasing. I think all the guys, even the guys chasing within a few shots of the lead, are all feeling an enormous amount of pressure, and it will build for them, whoever is leading going in. It can be a physical change to the way your body feels, and that's what the guys deal with. You have to deal with it for several days leading into the first round.

So it's very unusual, and I think, again, it makes it something that's compelling as a viewer. It's compelling as a golfer, honestly, because I know what the pressure feels like, and it can be overwhelming.

Q. Paul, about what would you talk with a young Collin Morikawa right now? This guy is off to an unbelievable start. What are some of the things you would coach him through at this point given the fact he's coming off his first major and not only into the Playoffs but into the U.S. Open?

PAUL AZINGER: It's real easy to run for the money, and it's real easy to look for another 10 or 15 yards, and that's been the undoing of a lot of really good players. I would just encourage him to continue the process of just getting better every day at what he's already good at.

You know, if a guy changes his swing, the only player I've ever seen change his swing and have it really looked like it physically changed is Tiger Woods. I don't know how he did it, but for a long while everybody wanted to swing like

Tiger, but Tiger -- and I just hope Collin Morikawa doesn't get into that funk. Jordan Spieth has been accused of looking for an extra 10 or 15 yards and falling into a funk. I just -- it's hard not to want to get better. You've just got to put in the commitment, keep your mind focused, and generally the difference in a guy like Morikawa is physical, not mental -- excuse me, the opposite. It's mental, not physical.

Some guys -- you give Dustin Johnson a lot of physical credit. We all do. But mentally he must be in a place that we should all attain or try to achieve. That's what Morikawa is able to do right now. He's got a cutthroat kind of a look to him and he makes clutch putts, and I would just hope he doesn't change equipment or run for the money or look for an extra five or ten yards like some guys are conned into believing they need.

Q. Brandel, as far as Rory goes right now, he's talked about the kind of lack of focus, the lack of -- his head is not really in the game right now without the fans. Do you buy that when you see these other players, whether it's DJ, some of the other players that have played really well since the return to golf? What's going on right now and what's your sense?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, I 100 percent buy it. Again, to have played so well at the beginning of the year, depending upon whether you're talking about U.S. or world events, seven or eight top 5s in a row, to come back from the lockdown and just play felt completely different. Again, he's gone seven events without a top 10. He's never done that in his career. He's certainly not injured. It tells me that he's dealing with a distraction somewhere. That would be my guess. Yeah, I can dive into the numbers and tell you that his iron play has been indifferent at times and he was dead last in putting this past week at the Northern Trust, and I can certainly -- but that's what he did. That doesn't explain why he did it.

When you see somebody play golf like that, they're either injured, they made a change in their golf swing or they're distracted in some way. He's not injured. He hasn't changed his golf swing, and it just leads me to believe that he's distracted in some way.

Q. You guys talked about obviously kind of sleeping on the lead, and Paul, you touched on having several days to think about sleeping on the lead in this TOUR Championship format. Is a good example perhaps a first-round lead, where a first-round lead makes guys more nervous than the person at home thinks?

PAUL AZINGER: If you're leading the Masters, it's a whole 'nother experience. They used to shift you according to tee

time based on your first-round score. They don't do that anymore. Yeah, any time you're leading a major championship -- but it is different, obviously, heading towards the weekend. A Friday lead is tough, I've got to tell you, on a guy mentally, and philosophically you have to go in there with a lot of self-belief if you've never been there before. Most of the players, you've got 70 left this week and then only 30 remain, so most of these guys have dealt with this kind of pressure. But they prepare for this -- someone is going to have to be prepared mentally to deal with this down the stretch.

You work your whole life to get ready for a moment that could come down to a seven- or ten-footer for all that money, and it builds to a crescendo. The funny thing is as a fan and a family member you're probably getting more nervous. But if the player's mental practice and preparation and skill are effective, then generally they are relaxed in that situation.

We always talk about the pressure situation, the nerves and all that, but sometimes when you get in a situation like Dustin Johnson last week, the whole body relaxes and you're in peak performance. Tiger's body relaxed under pressure, but not everybody does.

That's what's fun about watching it. I can't wait to watch, and not everybody feels the same. I would pick one corn flake out of a bowl at a time when I had the lead because I was so nervous, and Phil Mickelson would eat three waffles, two scrambled egg on top and a Diet Coke. Why he ordered a Diet Coke after that, I'd never know. But some guys just -- they're all different.

Q. Brandel, do you think the pressure increases because it is a season-long competition that's coming to a crescendo versus a week-long competition?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, I think that's a reasonable conclusion. Look, if you told -- anymore if they have great years they make \$4 or \$5 million, but if you told a player you're going to make \$2 million for the next seven years, I mean, that's essentially what they're doing. They're playing for almost a career's worth of money in one week. It boils down to one week. Yes, it's a year-long competition but it comes down to one week, and it's -- I don't think there's any other conclusion you could come to looking at the results since 2010, other than the fact that it has burdened the players. There's been one top 5 amongst -- going all the way back to 2010 amongst the leaders in a FedExCup. One: Chris Kirk finished fourth in 2014. That's it. One top 5.

PAUL AZINGER: Brandel, sorry to interrupt you, but it occurred to me the other day, we probably put -- I don't

know how much more we put toward the Nicklaus and Byron Nelson and those guys but I won this tournament 28 years ago in 1992, and I think first place was \$300,000, and this year it's 50 times more. 50 times. But you know what? I think we played for 50 times more than Byron Nelson, too, and 50 times more than Jack maybe. 50 times more than Jack anyway. I don't know, it seems preposterous, but that's got these guys' attention and it's making them choke.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Right. And you played great, Paul, you'd make enough money -- it was enough money to go live in a big, beautiful house in a gated community, and if they play well now, they make two, three generational times' money. They make enough money for their kids' kids to be set. I mean, it's --

PAUL AZINGER: Thank you, Tiger Woods, and thank you to all the players that came before that kept continuing to pass on a great game, really. That's the one thing Byron Nelson -- Hal Sutton told me that story the other day. He said it brought a tear to his eye that Hal Sutton made the kind of money he did because Byron Nelson felt proud that they took care of the game. Thank you, Tiger Woods. You've taken care of the game for us and look what's happened, and we're a bunch of lucky guys. Hey, they're luckier than we were, Brandel, but we were pretty lucky, too.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I felt lucky to play golf for a living, but you're right, the largest corporations in the world find the game attractive for a lot of different reasons, I think not least that there are no guaranteed contracts, that they start the beginning of the year, everybody starts all square. It's purely based on merit, and I think that's the beautiful thing about the FedExCup, besides the fact that it gets the best players in the world paired together and all playing at the end of the year.

PAUL AZINGER: And it is based on merit. You've got to play -- you've got to get on this TOUR and get enough self-belief and confidence to get to this place where they are, and more power to them.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Yeah, that's why, look, I've got the FedExCup on and they're replaying it on my screen and I'm looking at Harris English, he's hitting a shot into a par-3 here, and he was in trouble a couple years ago. He was sliding down the rankings, sliding down the FedExCup list. He was sliding into that potentially going off into oblivion and looking for something else to do, and now he's sixth in the FedExCup because he fought and kicked and scratched and clawed and figured out how to swing a golf club the way he used to. He's got a legitimate chance of winning the FedExCup and \$15 million, and just a few

years ago, he would have been worried about whether or not he was going to keep his job. Now every door is going to open for him, and he can relax a little bit if, if, he can pull things off at the TOUR Championship. You don't think that's got his attention?

Good for him for turning things around, but it's a great comeback story, but that's what the Tournament of Champions does is it keeps the pressure on the best players in the world all year long, and it ratchets it up every single week in the Playoffs until the TOUR Championship. Again, I realize it's not a major championship, but it simulates the pressure of a major championship.

Q. Obviously I know the CBS broadcast was a couple weeks ago, but curious for any takeaways you guys had from Phil's performance in the booth alongside Faldo, and Paul, curious if that's an opportunity you would welcome, to have Phil come call a few holes alongside you one day?

PAUL AZINGER: I love Phil. I thought he was awesome in the booth. He could do that anytime he wants. He and Faldo went at it kind of like Faldo and I went at it. I think it's nice to have a foil sometimes, and that's kind of how that looked to me. I thought it was hilarious; some of the compelling golf I watched was watching Mickelson in the booth. So I'm glad you brought that up. I loved it. I thought CBS did a fantastic job. You have any idea what the logistics were for those guys to do that broadcast, that came off it felt like virtually without a hitch.

We're going to be different at NBC. We're going to be on-site. I don't know what the bubble is going to look like. I haven't been in it. I look forward to feeling the energy or lack thereof and trying to draw some kind of a comparison if it's necessary. Yeah, I thought CBS was awesome, I've got to tell you.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I'll echo those comments. I thought they pulled it off without a hitch. I thought it was tremendous. I'm sure there's somebody out there that watches more golf than I do but I don't know who it is, and I listen to every word that's said on air and check it and cross-check it, and I find myself pulling for the commentators as much as I do the players. I want them to tell me something I don't know. I want them to tell me something nobody else has thought of, and it's hard to do that because the whole world is kicking and scratching for the same information and they all have the same information, and to bring insights to bear based upon what you're seeing that nobody else has thought of, that's hard, and when someone pops into the booth, and I thought Phil did that -- now, look, he's right off the golf course; he had just played it. He's a bright guy. He's been in it. It's set up

perfectly for him. But I think honestly he could get in the booth and be Tony Romo-esque. He sounded like -- look, he's got a little bit of -- and he'll admit this, he's got a little BS in him. He's got a little -- he wants to figure things out. He wants to give you the needle. He wants to have fun. He's enjoyed -- he enjoys all the smack talk in the game, and that makes for great commentating.

I think he'd have tremendous insight, and any time he wanted to do that, of course, he could do it and be great. That's what I love about Zinger to be to be honest with you. He brings insight. He's got his "isms" that make me chuckle. Even now, picking a corn flake out of a bowl, that makes me laugh; immediately I could see him sitting there picking a corn flake out of a bowl in the morning, nervous as hell. It's tough to come up with those things day in and day out over and over again. Keep me entertained and tell me things I don't know, and I thought Phil was tremendous.

PAUL AZINGER: The thing about Phil was he let the picture be descriptive. This is always my philosophy, and this is what works for the most part: Let the picture be descriptive, you be informative. Man, the second the ball hit, Mickelson knew exactly what was coming next and he let the viewer know, and it was kind of the insight that only a guy who's active can really give, I feel. I think the future in broadcasting and analysts and all that are going to be -- maybe I'm wrong, but somebody like a Mickelson who's really active. He's telling stories about where the caddies are playing on air, and I just thought it was brilliant. I think it's a nice testimony to have somebody that's actively playing the TOUR somewhere in that booth on the telecast. That's when Faldo and I were really -- we jumped in there, we were still playing, with ABC, and I think we had some insight that people weren't used to hearing.

Q. Are any of you guys coming to Atlanta or are you doing this out of Orlando?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I'll be in Orlando.

PAUL AZINGER: I'll be in Atlanta. I'm going to Chicago tomorrow afternoon and then, yeah, Atlanta, U.S. Open.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thanks for making the time to take part and thanks everyone for joining.

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