

Marathon Classic presented by Dana

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Toledo, Ohio, USA

Mike Whan

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome inside the virtual media center here at the Marathon Classic Presented by Dana. Thank you, Commissioner Mike Whan, for joining us today.

MIKE WHAN: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Here we are at the Marathon Classic, the second event as the LPGA resumes. I know there's been a lot of hard work behind the scenes, but what have you thought now that we have one event under way?

MIKE WHAN: Well, I'm really glad we had one event to work things out before we had to work it out in front of sponsors and other tournament people.

But one, I mean, between -- we couldn't have picked a better two places to start. One, Inverness has hosted so many big events before that working with that team was pretty seamless. Usually when you play an event someplace for the first time there's a lot of kinks to be worked out. But those guys, they not only know their club, but they know tournaments.

And then coming here with Judd and his team, this is like -- as my kids would say -- coming home from college. You know where everything is. They know us. We know them. Marathon has been unbelievable, as has Dana, and I'm really glad we found a way.

We had some long nights and some probably longer mornings on the phone in virtual conference calls and text messages. We just had a lot of wrinkles along the way. We thought we were going to have fans and pro-ams. Then we thought we were going to have fans and no pro-am. Then we thought we were going to have a pro-am but no fans.

It was funny. There was a spreadsheet we all had and would share all the time, and it had seven different "what if" columns. I don't even know what column we're actually playing, but one of those columns obviously was this one.

It's good to have partners that have been with us for a

while and can figure out how, too. I mean, anybody thinks that there is an owner manual about how to play professional sports in 2020, they're wrong.

We're not in a one-city bubble where we can figure it out here and then take it on the road. It's going to be different in Scotland. It'll be different in Arkansas. But I'm really excited.

Mostly I'm excited to see how happy our players and caddies are to be out here and how serious they're taking the protocols. It really lifts my spirit to see that we're taking this serious, and that we understand that even if the virus doesn't scare you, it scares the rest of us, so it's good to see that we're getting through it.

THE MODERATOR: What was it like for you last week to see all of the protocols that you and the LPGA team enacted come to success at the Drive On Championship?

MIKE WHAN: You know, it's funny. In my world -- you know, usually I walk into an office and I see everybody so I know what everybody else is doing. In this time I have a conversation with Heather, I have a conversation with Liz or I have a conversation with Vicki Goetze-Ackerman, and I don't see what happens after the conversation. When I walked on site at Inverness, my fear was how much of these conversations made it down to the different levels, and when they started telling me about the protocols, which was really kind of exciting, when somebody says, here's what happens when somebody comes in the parking lot, it was exciting because usually I know all that's happening. You sit outside my office I'm going to have a conversation with Heather. But I hear her having that conversation with you.

In this case I was kind of flying a little blind. Yeah, it was nice to see. Like I said, not only nice to see that our staff had it under control, it was nice to see between our suppliers, our caddies, our players and others involved in the event that everybody was kind of understanding of it.

It's not convenient, so everybody wasn't taking the more convenient route; they were following the policy. Maybe golf is lucky that way. Golf is a game of rules and you call the rules on yourself, so it's nice to see people understanding the rules and playing by them regardless of who's watching.

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THE MODERATOR: What were some of the conversations you've heard from players as we gear up for this second event back?

MIKE WHAN: Most conversations start with thank you, which is amazing because as you know I'm the wrong guy to thank. There's a lot of people to thank but it's not me. I'm heartened by the fact that people are so appreciative. I think a lot of people want to know like what our life has been like the last 120 days and that's not going to benefit anybody's golf game, to try to understand what that experience has been like.

And I just think there's a heightened level of appreciation. I think all of us maybe took this a little bit for granted by the time we got to March 2020, and I think everybody realizes that it doesn't matter what professional sports you play, your sport is not a given right now, and continuing whatever you have on paper is not a given right now. I think just the appreciation has been -- it's funny, usually every conversation starts with some kind of awkward how do we say hello to each other which leads into a thank-you which leads into what were you doing in your off-season.

It's been good. I think usually by this time of the year, by August, we're a little sick of each other in a normal season; how you doing and keep walking the other way. It's just neat to see everybody kind of reengaged. It feels like the first event of the year.

Q. Mike, I think you guys have completed, I don't know, 500, 600 tests when you cleared the pre-travel ones, as well, had a handful of positives. Coming into this and seeing what's happened like in other sports, does it exceed your expectations of what you thought would happen these two weeks?

MIKE WHAN: Yeah, I mean, listen, I'm a little cautious to put out a flag and talk about a victory lap. I mean, we're two weeks in, three weeks with Symetra, and we've had a share of positive tests, and we've got people in quarantine, so there's nothing -- I've said this to my wife every night on the phone. She'll say, how many tests did you have yesterday? 210. How many positives? None. You know, well, that's great. I'll think, yeah, that's not great but there's still somebody just down the road in quarantine, somebody else is in close contact quarantine.

I never feel like you win in this process, but you're right, we've probably had closer to 1,000 tests all in, and certainly the numbers are low, but geez, we're a long way from claiming victory and a long way from -- these Whoop bands, the downside of them when they tell you in the morning what percentage of sleep you didn't get, and so

it's really fairly depressing for me to wake up every morning it'll tell you how long you were in bed but how many of those hours you were in bed you actually slept. I think I knew that already in COVID times but actually having those factors is a little rougher.

Yeah, I'm excited to know that we're having such a strong result, but in my world I don't spend much time with the people that got a negative test result. I spend my time with the people that had a positive test result, and those never make you feel uplifting.

Q. You've always been kind of the ultimate realist; are you still operating under the premise or the thought that events are still going to be canceled like you said a few weeks ago?

MIKE WHAN: Events still will be canceled. There's no doubt about that. I don't say that because I think we're going to have this huge COVID outbreak. I say that because events that are in October and November that I talked to back in March said, hey, we're good, we're October and November. But now if you're in October and November, you're not feeling as good as you did in April.

Yeah, as dates get closer to certain customers, they'll be less able to do this. I mean, we've got four events in Asia. I don't have to tell you, but crossing borders right now and getting quarantine releases in four or five different countries throughout the world is probably optimistic. Where we'll get approval and where we won't, I don't exactly know yet.

We've got some events sponsored by customers that would really like to bring a lot of top executives in from other parts of the world. Can't really do that without quarantining here, you can't do it without quarantining at home. A really good pro-am and a really good tournament might not be worth a month of quarantine time. I'm realistic enough to know that. And listen, I'm going to lose sleep over that, but I've told people all along not should you lose sleep over that. I've told people in every email I've sent since March 15 that "change" is going to be the word of 2020, so I'll keep telling you where we are and I'll keep telling you a week from now what's changed.

I'm not just trying to be a realist, I'm not trying to scare anybody. I'm just saying that I've got a schedule on paper. Do I think we're going to deliver 100 percent of that schedule? I don't. Can I tell you exactly where those off weeks are going to be? I can't, which is probably pretty frustrating for some of our media and TV and player partners, but that's the world we're in right now.

Q. Why do you think the protocols have worked so

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well in terms of the players respecting them compared to what has happened in team sports? It seems like everybody understands what the protocols are and they follow them.

MIKE WHAN: Yeah, I mean, like I said, I'm a little nervous answering a question why do I think everything is working so well. We're in week two of the LPGA and finished one week in Symetra. Let's not claim victory just yet. We've got a long way to go, and I think one of the things that happens in these new rules and new orders is it's easy to kind of get away from it over time. You start feeling like you're secure and then I found myself last night, everything is closed, I got back late, nowhere to go to get dinner, and so I just went to bed, didn't go looking for a place.

I'm not sure I'll do that in week 4, and I was telling myself, you've got to do that in week 4. The reality of it is we're just getting started. I think the really good news for me, somebody just asked me at a meeting I was just in, on a virtual meeting, they asked me where are your players on this mentally. I said, listen, some of them aren't here and may never be here. They may stay home, not play, play a home tour. That's great; that was one of their options. But if you're here, I can promise you two things are true. You're excited to be here and you're nervous about being able to stay here, not just personally but for our Tour.

I think we've got a really good mentality. My players don't have five-year contracts with a two-year trade clause. Nobody is going to play out the fifth year of their agreement this year. You get paid when you play. You get paid when you make cuts. Your sponsors see their logo when you're out here playing.

My players know that these weeks aren't givens and this year isn't a given, so this is important to them. It's important to them to make some money. It's important to them to move the needle for their sponsors. It's important to them to move the needle for the LPGA. And I think because of that responsibility, because of that lack of security net, you've really got to take extra precautions.

I think that probably comes with our business a little bit more than maybe some other team sports where you're in the fourth year of your eight-year deal and 2020 may not be as important or even next week as important as it is out here.

And the other thing is we were saying this maybe before we came on air, golf is kind of a game of rules. If you play this game you know the rules, you call the rules on yourself, even when nobody is looking. I think it's kind of built into our DNA that these are the rules we're playing by. If you want to keep playing, this is what it's going to take. I

think if you're a professional golfer, that's long been part of who you are.

Q. You've been to a lot of LPGA tournaments on a Sunday, and I'm curious what it felt like being there two days ago now out on the golf course, what was going through your mind? And during the trophy ceremony, how did it just feel different to any other event you've been at?

MIKE WHAN: Well, first, it's probably the most I've -- the most golf I've watched really in 10 years. Usually when I'm watching for an hour or two I'm really thinking about the thing I've got to go to next or whatever we're going to talk about with the sponsor later or where are we contractually with something or I'm looking about security, so it was a really relaxing day for me.

It was fun to watch -- it was a major test, it really was, so it was fun to watch players not only play that golf course but think their way around it. It was really weird for me because we still announced players on the first tee and I was one of the only three people standing there, so I felt the desire to clap, but that would have probably been even weirder.

When I saw -- I remember Yui hit a shot out of the -- standing in the bunker with a hybrid with the ball above her feet, I felt like screaming, but if I would have screamed and I was the only one, I probably would have scared some people. It was really strange to be a spectator when there wasn't other spectators around.

Trophy ceremony was fine for me. To me it was really neat to see -- I liked seeing Danielle taking pictures with the people who really put on that event like Dennis and Becky and the rest. While we didn't have a sponsor to take that photo with, I knew who worked hard enough to make sure that was a reality. Seeing that was great.

At the end of the day it was -- I've talked a lot about one of the reasons we picked Inverness; obviously it was local, and the second it was a great preview for what's coming in September of '21, and if you didn't feel like Sunday afternoon felt like a preview for what could happen in the Solheim Cup, that felt like match play to me. It felt like America versus Europe, and I'm sure it felt like that to them.

I was excited because every once in a while, every once in a while in my life and not too often, a plan becomes a reality and what actually happens is kind of what you envisioned, and that was what we envisioned: An incredible Sunday, made for TV, maybe a showcase event for Solheim Cup on maybe one of the better venues that

we'll ever play, let alone play this year. That's as good a golf course as we've walked.

So I was excited to see it come through, and it wasn't -- maybe it looked easy from a media perspective or writing about it, but I remember all the virtual calls to get there, and so it was exciting to see all of us celebrate it a little bit.

Q. My second question is about TV; strange times requires a little bit more outside the box thinking sometimes. I am curious given how the schedule keeps shifting and tournaments are later in the year than usual, have you thought at all about moving the tournaments to like a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Sunday, Monday, Tuesday to not just since there are no pro-ams and no fans now just to have more exposure?

MIKE WHAN: Yeah, it's a good question. If I'm being totally honest with you, the no fans for the next six or seven weeks is probably a two-week-old scenario. And what I mean by that is it might be easy for you to say a month ago I could have told you, Mike, you're not going to have fans. But each one of our sponsors and each one of these events with each tournament operator has been kind of holding out, like let's hope we can have pro-ams, maybe we could have a small footprint of fans, and I think we hold out until you can't hold out anymore.

So while it might be easy for us to say three weeks ago, hey, you're not going to have fans at ANA, I'm not really sure anybody was willing to make that decision until much later because if we could, we wanted to. We wanted to be able to celebrate this in terms of whatever was considered a healthy footprint. But I think knowing that that's probably unlikely for quite a while, I think that probably brings some new opportunities into play.

We haven't really gone deep into those discussions just yet mostly because we can't go there until everybody is on the same page with no fans, no pro-am, and because as you probably know, for us when we have kind of a string of events like we do, if somebody wants to play and finish on Tuesday, not only do they have to make that decision, but the next three events have to make that decision because then is the next one good with you not showing up until Wednesday, is the next one good with you not showing up until Wednesday, and until we sort of know what we can do in Asia, that can kind of mess everybody up.

If you said you have one event and you're going to play it and there's no events around it, will you finish on a Wednesday, probably pretty interesting. If you have seven events in a row, it becomes a little bit more challenging, just given that a lot of people in a lot of places including TV

contracts and local supplier contracts have been built around existing dates.

Q. But you're not completely opposed to the idea maybe?

MIKE WHAN: Yeah, no, actually I'm not opposed to the idea at all. I would tell you that those decisions couldn't have really started until this last week, and really now it gets into if one says yes can we get the other three that follow to say yes around it.

I mean, you and I have talked about this before: Generally a really good Tuesday, even though Golf Channel doesn't want me to say this, for us, a really good Tuesday or Wednesday is still not as good as a really bad Sunday. So while it really makes sense from a media perspective, it really makes sense strategically, you can write about the fact that LPGA is playing on a Tuesday and nothing else is competing with it, we've played Wednesday tournaments where we get a lot more hours of coverage, but the average viewership is still not better than the Sunday no matter how bad the Sunday is that we gave up.

So that's a real world we're living in when people want the most media value they can create, although COVID times could really test that, when usually if you finish on a Tuesday everybody is at work and trying to watch it. Now Tuesday finish could have a real significant difference, and probably worth assessing in the middle of COVID times.

Q. Mike, as all this goes forward, how will COVID-19 and the schedule changes affect the planning for 2021, or is it still too early to talk about that?

MIKE WHAN: No, that's a great question. So on the one side, we feel like the medical group that we're working with has consistently felt that we would have some good vaccine options by the end of January, kind of broadly available. But that's always a plus or minus 30 days.

But at least we're in that kind of Q1 range of -- and everyone -- pretty much everybody we're talking to from a medical perspective feels like there will be some answers, whether that'll be a lifetime vaccine or one- or two-year vaccine, I feel like with all the vaccines in the marketplace that are all being tested all over the world that it's probably likely we'll have some quality Q1 answers.

We've got 21 as we've currently got it slated, and we're in the middle -- probably about 30 days of what we're calling 21B, and 21B is what if we started later, what if we weren't crossing borders as often early in the schedule but more later in the schedule. And as you can imagine, that's a Jenga puzzle that is incredibly enjoyable because now

you're moving everybody's date and everybody's location.

We'd pretty much be the core schedule kind of from May 15th to September 15th, but that before and post window gets moved around quite a bit. I'm hoping you'll never see 21B. But if we get ourselves to December 1st and we feel like 21B is the better way to go, then at least we'll have 21B kind of pre-agreed-to by all of our groups where we can still play the same amount of schedule, same amount of purses and same amount of TV in '21 even if we don't get started until later in the year or at least we don't get started in terms of fans and pro-ams until later in the year.

The answer to your question is your timing is pretty good. We're about 30 days into it. My guess is we'll be working on that probably until late September in terms of making all those things work because it really involves countries, sponsors and tournaments and an awful lot of TV adjustments.

But the problem is I know that probably the PGA TOUR is working on a plan B, so might be the NFL and so might be the NBA. So every time I think I've really got my plan B figured out, it wouldn't take too many moves from Jay or Silver or anybody else to make me have to reshuffle mine. But we'll definitely have an option that says if starting later or at least not crossing borders later is real advantageous, how would you do that, and like I said, that will be one we'll probably sit on until the final day.

THE MODERATOR: The last thing I want to ask you, Mike, is how excited are you to be able to watch the LPGA again here at Highland Meadows and looking forward to Scotland, as well?

MIKE WHAN: Well, what excites me is how excited the players are to be back, and I have said this from the beginning, and I knew this when we watched it last week because a lot of people said, how can you start on a course that hard, that good, and I said if you think 250 of the most talented female golfers on the planet aren't ready to go after 120 days off, you're wrong.

Like I've talked to enough players during this, and for maybe the first 30 or 60 days a lot of people set the clubs down, but because they haven't known when the starting gate is, I feel like I've had a lot of people ready to run for quite a while, and if you give talented golfers that much time on a range with their coach and really to assess their game and work on what they think are the shortcomings that are keeping them out of the winner's circle, I expect fireworks fast.

I think we got them right out of the gate last week, and I expect to see it for the next few weeks playing them. I

think we have a lot of players that have the potential to be playing their best golf all at the same time. That usually doesn't happen in August. We're dealing with people taking breaks and people with injuries and people going back and reassessing with their coach. But I think we have a lot of players that could really be at their best right now, and that could be really exciting for the game and I think exciting for the fans.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone, for joining us here today, and thank you again to Commissioner Mike Whan.

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