

ShopRite LPGA Classic

Presented by Acer

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Seaview, A Dolce Hotel

Austin Ernst

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: All right, I am here with Austin Ernst, returning back to play since your injury this past year. Welcome back and happy to have you here.

AUSTIN ERNST: Thank you. Good to be back.

THE MODERATOR: Getting into it, what has it been like preparing for this tournament?

AUSTIN ERNST: It's been a little different just health-wise preparing for this one than I'm kind of used to. I can't prepare the same way. I can't practice as much, hit as many balls.

But I've just been really excited to get back to competition. I mean, I played a U.S. Open qualifier last month, but haven't really played tournament golf in over 14 months, so it's cool to come back, see everybody.

I think everybody thinks they're seeing a ghost when they see me. I've had a lot of double takes this week so far. It's been fun to be back out on tour.

THE MODERATOR: I'm sure everyone is happy to see you again. So after this tournament, after going through this week, what kind of is next for you on the horizon?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, so kind of as I mentioned, my health isn't -- I'm playing this week but my health is not at 100%. I'm just not in a place where I can -- unfortunately that I can play full time anymore, so I am semi-retiring.

If this week goes well then I'll play one or two more later in the summer. But I've just accepted a job as an assistant coach at Texas A&M University. I'm excited to get into college golf, into coaching. Still stay in golf, which is nice for me, and still be able to help the younger generation, develop them, and hopefully you'll see a lot of them out here.

I'm sad it step away from professional golf full time, but it's health-wise what I have to do.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations. New things, fun things, exciting things on the horizon.

AUSTIN ERNST: Thank you.

Q. Do you have any previous coaching experience?

AUSTIN ERNST: So this last semester, starting in January I was the volunteer assistant coach at the University of Richmond for their women's golf team. So I quickly got bored not being able to play golf full time, so I kind of tried to figure out, okay, what are next steps.

I kind of knew over the last few months every time I would prep for a tournament I would have a little flare up where I would not be able to play in that event. I kind of knew for a while that I probably wouldn't be able to play full time.

It was a really cool experience for me get to go hang out with the girls, and it was a lot of fun. They won their conference championship. They got to go to regionals; I got to go with them. That was a really cool experience.

So I really appreciate their coach, Kelly Barlow, and the girls for letting me come hang out with them for a semester.

But that's my only college experience.

Q. What kind of did you learn from that experience this past season?

AUSTIN ERNST: You know, I think a lot of it is I can take what I've -- I've obviously played golf at a very high level. I played golf out here for ten years, played college golf for two, and I played high level junior golf.

So I think my area of expertise is more player development, you know, preparing for tournaments, course management. How do get that little bit better, make that next step.

I'm looking forward to that aspect of it. I love golf. I'm one



of those golf nerds that likes golf a lot, so it'll be cool for me to still be able to play a little bit with them.

But really just have the focus on them. It'll be cool. There are ten girls on the team and a lot of different personalities and golf games. It'll be a really cool learning experience for me, too.

But I think they're already a great team, so it will be cool to jump in with them full bore in August.

Q. What kind of coach are you striving to be for those ten student-athletes?

AUSTIN ERNST: A good coach. (Laughter.) I mean, my personality is pretty laid back. You know, they're already great players. I don't have to do much.

I'll be a very positive person for them. I kind of like to breathe positivity into people. I'll definitely do that. We'll see what my style is. I don't necessarily have one.

There is not necessarily one way. I think you have different kids that need to be coached different ways. I'll kind of adapt to the kids.

But I'm just really looking forward to getting started and kind of seeing how everything goes. It'll be a little bit different change of pace, but it'll be fun.

Q. Starting off, what accomplishments of yours as a player mean the most to you when you have a chance to sit back and reflect on it?

AUSTIN ERNST: I mean, I don't know if I could pick one. I think obviously you look back at wins, the three wins. I don't know of the three wins if I could pick one that really stands out to me. I won in a lot of different ways that made me very proud.

And the Solheim Cup teams. Those are probably the best experiences I've had playing golf. Obviously being part of a winning team in 2017 was unbelievable, and then I've played two home Solheims. So being able to play around the massive crowds was awesome.

I think probably representing my country, playing in Solheim Cups, has been the one that stands out. I'm definitely proud of the three wins as I kind of look back on it. Who knows, maybe get a fourth one this week. We'll see. (Smiling.)

Q. What or how would you say the women's game has evolved over the course of your professional career? You were out here for quite a while. How has the sport

evolved?

AUSTIN ERNST: It's way deeper now. When I first got out in 2013 definitely had quite a few players that could win, but now you have even more. Now seems like almost everybody in the field can win. Everybody is really good young.

Even though I won in my second year on tour, you see that so much more. You see the kids. Obviously last week you see Rose. That hasn't happened in 70 years. I don't know if that will ever happen again where she wins in her first start.

You see a lot of that where kids come out early, they've developed earlier. Whether it's technology or coaching or whatever the reason is, they're just so prepared when they come out.

Or even when I first came out. I think I might have been the first of my class to win and I won at kind of the last part of my second year on tour. Now you just don't see that. You see kids come out and win right off the bat. I think Grace Kim won in Hawai'i; two rookies won.

So it's a much deeper game kind of top to bottom. You see a lot of younger talent that I don't think you saw dominate as much as they do now.

Q. How does a young player -- and I'm thinking a junior before she gets to the college level -- avoid getting totally burned out so by the time they get to college age they're just fed up with it and are physically and mentally exhausted? How were you able to avoid that?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think I always took breaks. So I think that's important. You see it now with kids, they specialize so early. That's probably one reason why they're really good, but also why you see them burnout in any sport.

I think you still need to be able to take the time where, hey, I'm not touching the clubs in the wintertime, two months, whatever it is. What I would do on tour even, obviously we don't have that long of an off-season, so I would finish up basically Thanksgiving week. I would put my clubs up maybe until Christmas.

I waited until I had the itch to come back and practice. Normally I made it about two weeks and maybe make myself wait a little bit longer just to give my body the rest it needs. Because even kids now, they're playing in so many more events than you used to play in. I think that's the biggest transition once you get out here, you is play every week.

But you'll talk to people this week that are in the middle of a five-week stretch. When you're a kid they typically don't do that, but they're playing every other week now, which is a lot. When I was a kid I played tournaments in the summer, a handful in the spring, I played high school golf, and then I didn't play any in the wintertime. So I kind of took the winter off; didn't really practice.

Then I had the itch to go back and play and I wanted to practice. Because you have to have that drive to be out here. You're making a lot of sacrifices as a kid. You're giving up things your peers are experiencing, and you're going to keep doing that when you get to college. You're going to give things up. Some of your friends might be able to go to a concert and party but you're out of town because you're at a tournament, or workouts the next morning, whatever it is.

Same thing out here. You're prioritizing practicing, so you better like it or you're not going to prioritize it.

Q. Did you ever play another sport growing up or just golf?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, so I played basketball and softball. Played those until 12, 13, and then I switched to golf. I kind of learned pretty quick I was way too short to play basketball and I'm really slow now.

And my softball swing was way too low. Had a pretty good arm, but I would try to hit it if it was kind of below the knee, so I figured I should probably stick to golf.

Q. Did that help you, playing more than one sport? Did that keep you from getting burned out on golf?

AUSTIN ERNST: Absolutely. You know, when I was -- from the time I was like 6 to 12 I kind of had a season for everything. So golf season was summer and then the fall -- I guess I played soccer for a little while, but I kind of quickly didn't do that one, so I didn't really have much going on in the fall.

And then in the wintertime I would play basketball and then in the spring I would play softball. I still would maybe practice a little bit of golf, those sports had their time.

Also I think I got more a little athleticism playing other sports, and it just got me away from golf. Where now you'll see kids play travel baseball at 8 or 9 or 10. There is not necessarily anything wrong with that, but if you get burnt out by the time you're 12, then you've got a problem.

So I think if you can keep that variety, I think that's very

important. I think you need to have other things that aren't just golf so that you have that diversity, but also go have fun, be a kid.

Q. And are those some of those things you want to carry into your coaching?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it's obviously a little bit different when you get to college. College golf is kind of like it is out here. It's almost a profession in a way at that point.

But there is nothing wrong with if you want to go play pickup basketball, soccer, whatever. You can still go do some of those things.

Obviously you're not going to play it at high level. You're not going to be part of the softball team and the golf team. But I think as a kid it's really important.

Then you still need to have things outside of golf. Like I know at the Texas A&M facility there is a basketball court. There is pickleball courts, tennis courts. So there are things that the girls and the boys can go play where, oh, hey, let's just go have some fun, go play something else.

Q. You talked a little bit about kind of coming to the decision of being able not to play full time. I want to know how hard of a decision that was for you and when did that option become more realistic?

AUSTIN ERNST: It was really tough. I think it was really tough early on. I didn't realize how I guess serious of an injury it was going to be, how long it was going to take. I think when it first happened it -- it happened in April of last year, and I thought, oh, maybe have to pull out of U.S. Open, KPMG, that's probably about it.

And I remember at one point it was like, no, worst case is you don't play anymore. That one kind of hit me in the face.

Q. When was that?

AUSTIN ERNST: We probably talked about that in like June. And, you know, it took someone else saying it to where it was, oh, wow, okay. Because I've gone ten years where I haven't had any injuries. I haven't had anything like this. You kind of think you're invincible.

I think that's when the thought process changed where it wasn't, okay, like I'll definitely be back out. It was, okay, let's put our health first. Let's think about some things. Let's think about life post-golf.

You know, having family. I'm 31 now, so I'm I've got a long

life ahead. Let's not do anything right now to where I can't do things when I'm 40 or 50. You know, kind of order priorities.

I decided that I would still like to play golf, whether it was professionally or not, so what does that look like? I wanted to at least play golf at home with my husband, friends, family.

And then kind of after that, a lot of it was, okay, what are -- how is my health coming along and how alluded to earlier, every time I got ready for a tournament -- like I was going to try to play in October last year; September it was, okay, it flares up.

Wanted to play the beginning of the year at Tournament of Champions in January. Flared up again.

So it kind of seemed like every time I got close it's like I got punched in the face and went right back.

So I think when I really started thinking about, okay, what are next steps, what do I enjoy, you know, I enjoy the teaching side of the golf. Obviously my dad being a teacher. I've always enjoyed that side of it.

I love the sport, so I would like to stay in golf. I think the coaching thing kind of just checked a lot of boxes. I could still be around the game. I could still coach high level players. And I've kind of always enjoyed that aspect, where you can kind of help somebody else along.

So I kind of figured best of both worlds. My husband and I kind of sat down and talked about it. A lot of it is we are going to move to Texas now, so that was a big life decision. That was kind of one of those things, we kind of stepped back and looked and I talked to Gerrod Chadwell, the head coach, and went on a visit. We loved College Station, loved Texas A&M.

So we are really excited to get started there. Yeah, it was a long process of kind of coming to terms with not playing golf professionally full time anymore. It has been part of my life since I was 21, so the last ten years kind of this is all I've known.

Q. What were those conversations like when you shifted that mindset? We've seen you be competitive as ever at Solheim Cup in your wins. To be able to take that mindset to now give it to other people, what were those conversations like with Gerrod about what Texas A&M could do for you?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, I think a lot of it is what can I do for them. I'm going to step in and I just want help them as

much as I can, whatever that role looks like. I got to talk to the girls earlier this week. I'm sure I'll talk with a few more one-on-one.

A lot of my experiences are going to come down to, okay, I've won some high level events. Won the national championship actually at Texas A&M's course my freshman year. When we drove around Traditions Club I had a lot of fond memories.

You know, I can help them through those situations where -- you do need it experience it yourself to figure it out, but at the same time, they have me to, hey, I'm feeling this. What did you feel in these situations? When you were coming down the stretch of an LPGA event to win or when you played Solheim Cup you said you were really nervous on the first tee. What did you do?

It's those situations where I have a lot of knowledge on the game and on playing high level golf and on playing high intensity, high pressure golf that I think will really help.

I mean, they won an SEC championship this year and made it to the semifinals of match play the last two years. They're all great players. It's how do I help them just a little bit more? How do we get a little bit more out of them?

But I'm just excited to work with them and I'm excited to share that knowledge because out here you kind of keep everything to yourself because you don't want to give away your secrets. Out there I'll be able to share it.

Q. I know we'll still see you in some capacity out here, but what do you think you'll miss the most?

AUSTIN ERNST: I have made some of my best friendships out here, so I think I'll miss that the most.

THE MODERATOR: With all this being said, what are your expectations for this week at ShopRite?

AUSTIN ERNST: I don't have very high expectations. I'm going to have a lot of the fun. I don't think it's going to be my last event, so it's kind of a weird way to go into it. Like I don't think it's my last event; obviously could be.

But I'm just going to enjoy the experience. I kind of look at it a little bit different than if I was coming back and I was going to play a full schedule.

I'll kind of freewheel it a little bit more and I think just have a lot of fun. I'm hoping for a fun pairing. We'll see what happens. I don't have very high expectations though. At the same time, I'm still going to try to win.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much. Best of luck this week.

AUSTIN ERNST: Thank you.

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