

Hilton Grand Vacations Tournament of Champions

Thursday, January 29, 2026

Orlando, Florida, USA

Lake Nona Golf & Country Club

Austin Ernst

Quick Quotes

Q. All right, pleased to be joined by Austin after her first round here at the Hilton Grand Vacations Tournament of Champions. Obviously been a little bit since you were out there on the course with us. What was it like getting back out there?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it was great. It was nice to have putts that meant something. Actually had to finish out one footers. That's been kind of different from recent time playing at home.

But it was great. Kind of a mixed bag of good and bad shots which is honestly kind of what I expected a little bit.

Really just speed on the greens was kind of my biggest issue. Kind of early on I said leave them barely short when I had a pretty good look, and then late in the round, 16, 18, just hit a couple long putts very, very hard.

That was just kind of the difference in scoring it better. Would've liked to get it in at even, 1-under, but all in all not a terrible day.

Q. Just talk about the decision to making this year the start to come back and pick up the sticks again?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, pretty easy decision. My maternity was up and I was like, okay, it's kind of now or never. I guess I could have filed for a medical extension, but at that point you're just delaying where I might never come back.

So talked to my husband about it and we were like, hey, go ahead and give it a go. Let's kind of see how it is.

So definitely nice to be back. I've definitely missed competitive golf. Yeah, the decision was pretty easy. Kind of is now or never and I'm glad I came back.

We'll see how the year progresses and see how my neck feels is kind of the only question mark. I think that when I



play well I'll be able to compete, so really it's just can I stay healthy enough to do it.

Q. Just talk about the perspective maybe of coming back out now, a little bit older, a mother now. How has your perspective changed?

AUSTIN ERNST: Completely different. Now I would say golf is not be-all, end-all. One of those easier said than done things, but like truly if I play golf, great. If I don't, I found out that I am A-okay off the golf course.

So it's kind of one of those things when you play for so long, I played for ten years before I got hurt, I don't know anything else. In the back of your mind you're like, oh, will I be okay if I don't play golf?

So having that perspective of, hey, if this doesn't work out, I'm fine, I'm very happy off the golf course, it's freeing. It's kind of one of those ways you always want to play golf, but it's way easier said than done. Even today I kind of caught myself getting a little tight, you know, a little steery at times where it was like, hey, remember, we don't care this week. Let's just freewheel it.

Obviously it's easier said than done, but I think being a mom, too, there are more important things in life than whether I shoot 2-over or 2-under or 5-under. At the end of the day, doesn't really matter, so...

Q. I know you stepped away because of a neck injury, but Charlie has come into your life; just turned two. For you, what was that mental shift to get yourself out of hurt mode, enjoy pregnancy, have this amazing son it sounds like?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think the pregnancy was really a full reset of like, oh, I don't need to go practice. I don't need to do anything. I also started coaching, so I basically went from oh, hey, I'll play -- I think I played ShopRite, KPMG and went straight into coaching. I was pregnant at ShopRite and KPMG.

I didn't really touch a club. Played with the girls I think once. I was like, okay, I'll just let my neck heal, kind of

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chill, and then obviously I like did some -- the training I would do was way different. It was more preparing for birth, and then coming back from that, it was, okay, I'll -- I remember hitting golf balls the first time after giving birth. It's just a weird experience because you're like, the last time I played I had a little bit of a belly. Now I have no belly and no core and I can't feel anything.

It was just like a slow starting process. Also I think my process will be way slower than, say, Allison who came back after four, five months. I knew in the back of my mind I knew I would probably play a couple events because I would have that status even if I just let everything run out I'll have past winner status.

But it was a different mentality of like I wasn't preparing to come back immediately. Then when I decided, okay, I'm going to play, it became more of, let's go play some golf. With the neck I don't hit a lot of golf balls, so it's like, let's go score and play.

Getting back into playing golf is way different than just kind of grinding on the range, chipping, putting, whatever, which I play way more golf now. That is kind of my practice just with my neck and then kind of with my time, how I want to spend it. Then I'll go do short game and thing kind of thing.

The mentality shift was just more of like -- I don't know what the first part of that question was? With being a mother? The change in mentality. My mentality on the golf course has not changed at all. I want to be aggressive and play as well as possible. I kind of turn things off as best I can. I know that Charlie is taken care of and there is nothing I can do for the five hours I'm on the golf course, so I shut it off.

Like right now, I don't know if it's 3:00 yet. He's still napping. I FaceTimed him before the round and I will FaceTime him after the round. But body-wise I think was the hardest thing. One, just recovering from pregnancy, and then, two, like working around my neck and kind of -- I've changed my kind of what I do strengths-wise. A little more mobility, but still do a lot of strength stuff to get everything around my neck stronger.

Now I just don't swing at it as hard. Now I dial it back a little bit more, which has really helped my accuracy. Today I drove it probably the best I've maybe ever driven on Tour. I probably should have been doing this before.

Q. Watching Drew and Grace have so much success last season, how much are you watching them and their partnership from afar motivate you to get back out here?

AUSTIN ERNST: I don't know if that motivated me. I think it's just been fun to see. I've just been able to cheer for them. Any time Grace is in contention that's when I watch LPGA golf. Otherwise I'm like oh, if I catch it I catch it. Any time she's in contention I'm paying attention.

Obviously because she has Drew on the bag, that's who I cheer for because I want Drew to succeed and so I want Grace succeed. Watching them at Evian was awesome. Obviously like you see a major win like that, and especially a finish like that, that's going to motivate you.

But I don't think -- Drew's success, I want him to be very successful. Now, this year when I'm playing I would rather beat them and they can finish second. I'm always going want him to be successful and he is always going to want me to be successful, and it's just part of being a sibling.

But I don't know if it motivated me anymore.

Q. I saw you progress some with Jess. How is that is that motivating you?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it's been great. I think just having another mom that's like -- we just text times about, oh, what's Greyson doing, what's Charlie doing, and comparing notes that way. Hey, is this normal?

But it's fun. We played last week -- I guess would've been two weeks ago. Just there is a mindset shift of, okay, like we both want to be competitive and both want to compete, but like at the end of the day maybe not going to play -- I know I'm not going to a full schedule. Not sure what her plan is.

Now my priorities have shifted and I think hers probably have as well of. All right, what's -- this stage of life, you know, golf is not No. 1.

Q. Will this be the longest you've been away from him?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yes. Because of -- the winter storm is what messed with it. I ended up going to Florida on Friday of last week to make sure I could get out of Richmond. We got to like five inches of snow and three inches of sleet. So I have been gone since Friday and won't get home until Monday morning.

Q. What is the routine for keeping up with home, and is there a part of you that it's hard to...

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it's definitely hard. I definitely miss him. I think it is probably better that he is at home though. I think it would be a tough week here as well.

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Either way I'm going to miss him for the time that I'm not with him.

My usual routine is get up in the morning, he wakes up around 7:00. FaceTime him in the morning for however long he'll allow me to until he's tired of me. He really likes to push the red button on FaceTime.

In the afternoon, he takes a nap. Normally what I've done is come out mid-morning, 9:00, 10:00, whatever it is, and then I'm back at some point after he's woken up from his nap. Like today I'll be back pretty early where I can talk to him for a while. Yeah, just FaceTime. That's the usual. Watch him play.

Q. What was the feeling like on the first tee? Was it like any you've had before?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think it was normal. I don't think I was more nervous. I would say it's about what it has always been. I always get a little nervous. The only time I'm like extremely nervous is first tee at Solheim.

I would say about standard. So kind of got through the first hole; always settle in after the first hole, and then, you know, kind of go from there.

Q. With the depth of competition right now, how realistic or tough is it to play a part time schedule more than once?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, I mean, in all honestly like, I have zero expectation for like what this year will hold. I've come into it as like very accepting of whatever the year is. So if it's -- if there are no wins, you know, I'm -- I would like to win, like I'm competitive to enough to where that drives me, but I'm also -- I don't know, I don't really let myself get to where I'm like, oh, I'm going to have the goal of winning two times or whatever it is, playing ten events.

I haven't really set goals that way. I set them more like process goals of, hey, I want to do this. One, I want to stay healthy, want to make sure that everything at home is good. If Charlie is struggling then maybe you don't see me for ten.

There are quite a few things that at the end of the day, like my golf, I want to play well, but as I said, that's not my -- I would love to play good golf. I know that it will be the rustiness will be the hard thing for me.

So like the coming and playing in a month and a half after I haven't played for a month and a half in Palo Alto, that will be the hardest thing. Everyone else has probably played four, three events at that point. Like I will have played less

golf than most people.

I know that coming in this week I have absolutely played less golf than every single person that's out here.

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