

Kia Classic

Wednesday, March 24, 2021

Carlsbad, California, USA

Park Hyatt Aviara Golf Club

Austin Ernst

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon everyone. Welcome to Aviara in the virtual interview room at the Kia Classic.

Now we're joined by the most recent LPGA Tour champion and current Rolex Rankings No. 14, Austin Ernst. Thanks so much for joining us, Austin.

AUSTIN ERNST: Thank you for having me.

Q. You been basking in the win the last couple weeks?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it's been nice. It's been nice to be able to enjoy it and have some time off to get celebrate and not have to jump straight back into a tournament.

Q. Absolutely. The LPGA Tour returns this week to Aviara Golf Club for the 11th annual Kia Classic after being postponed in 2020. What's the feeling just to be back here compete in Carlsbad again what seems like two years in the making now?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it's great. It's nice that even in California we have been able to play this year. I know a lot of those events got canceled last year. I really like this golf course. I've played well a few times here, so it's nice to be back.

Q. At this event in particular you mentioned you have earned some solid results: Runner-up in 2017, played the weekend six of your seven previous appearances here. What is it about this course that makes it unique or stand out from others?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think tee to green it sets up pretty well for me. Off the tee I like the shape of a lot of the holes, and it's kind of just fit my eye in that way. I think it's just one of those weeks that you kind of know you're going to get a few bumps on the green here and there late in the day so you just have to accept that.

But I think overall the course just sets up well for me.

Q. I walked back nine the other day. I haven't seen the

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front nine. Seems like a very strategic course. You got to be smart with your placement and maybe your club selection as well.

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, off the tees it's all wind dependant, which I saw we might get a little bit of that tomorrow. But you definitely have some holes that everybody has to hit to a spot and kind of hit up to a green; 13 is that way.

There are a few holes you can be aggressive off the tee and get a little bit shorter club in. It's definitely strategic and kind of where you need to place it on a few of the par-4s and even a couple of the par-5s. You kind of have to layup to the right place and be able to control spin, that kind of thing.

Q. What is the overall key to success at Aviara Golf Club? You've seen some scores here that they can get pretty low here. What's the key to success to find a low score like that?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think ball striking. This week it'll be off the tee and you really need to be accurate. The rough is up and we are going to get the ball in our hand in the fair ways, so hitting fairways is kind of going to be a premium.

Just being able to be aggressive into the greens. Greens are really big but they have a ton of slope to them, so you really need to be able to hit it in the correct kind of section of the green to get good birdie looks.

Q. Now, you earned your third career LPGA title earlier this month at the Drive On Championship presented by Volvik at Golden Ocala. So nice to have just Kia Classic to say this week. You had two weeks to soak it all in and reflect. What did you take away from the time doing so, and were you able to enjoy it a little bit.

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, I was definitely able to enjoy it. I got to celebrate with some friends in Florida and got to celebrate with my future family in Richmond and some friends out there. So got see the future in-laws and we had a good time.

I think just looking back on the win, you know, it was just a really solid week. It was dominant. My game was really good tee to green and on the greens, so that kind of a win



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just gives me a lot of confidence going forward. Just it instills the confidence that what I've been working on is good and I should just keep doing what I've been doing.

Q. Obviously every week you want to replicate the performance you did. How do you? Can you? What's the mindset from a competitor's standpoint when you perform like that? How do you try to find a way back to that same level week in and week out?

AUSTIN ERNST: Golf is weird because you win once a year and you've had a great year, so it's different than other sports. But I think my mindset that week was something that I can try to replicate every week.

The game might not always be there, but I think if I can be that sharp mentally that definitely will help. You definitely can't expect to go win by five every week, but it's a good goal to have. If you did it, it would be awesome. But, yeah, I think mentally I can kind of -- if I could be in that position, in that spot that I was kind of every week, then I would find myself at least in contention a little more often.

Q. I remember your first call. You had your fiancée there to celebrate with you that day.

AUSTIN ERNST: Yep.

Q. Then your brother on the bag. Your first call was to mom and dad.

AUSTIN ERNST: Yep.

Q. What was the bar tab when your dad opened the bill?

AUSTIN ERNST: Actually don't know. They haven't told me. Might have been bad.

Q. Yeah, probably keep that a secret.

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah. It was fun to be able to see them and see everybody back home in Seneca.

Q. Yeah. The win vaulted you to 14 in the Rolex Rankings No. and you're firmly entrenched in the Solheim discussion. There are several months to go until the team is finalized, but how good do you feel with where your game is and how much would it mean to qualify among a strong corps of players for Team USA?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think it would be awesome. I think that's kind of goal No. 1 every year it's a Solheim Cup year. We're all looking forward to Solheim and obviously you

want to qualify and make that team. I've never -- I had so much fun back in '17 when I got to play on the team and we won, which made it even better.

But think you're always looking forward to making those teams. With where my game is, you know, the points and that kind of stuff takes care of itself. You get more points the better you play. So if I can just keep kind of doing what I been doing, that should take care of itself.

Q. You mentioned a second ago you're not going to win by five every week. You've competed or tour since 2013. You've won twice now since last August. You know it is no easy task. Have you ever seen this much depth from a tour standpoint, this many great players competing week in and week out as right now?

AUSTIN ERNST: No, I think the tour is as deep as it's ever been. I think every year we get deeper and deeper. We get better players coming in, whether it's young players or if it's international players. Kind of whatever it is, it seems like the fields get deeper each week and it gets harder to win every year.

I feel like I've gotten better every year that I've been on tour and I had a six-year hiatus of winning from '14 to 2020. So it's hard to win. I think it's harder than ever to win. But it really solidifies when you can do it just how well you're playing.

Q. The Aon Risk Reward Challenge, a year long series pitting the greatest risk-reward hole at each LPGA and PGA tournament. Aon providing matching millions dollar prizes to the male and female that comes out on top. This week it's the par-4, 16. From your experience here, what makes that hole worthy of being the Aon Risk Reward Challenge and what's the strategy for it?

AUSTIN ERNST: Typically the first two days they don't move the tee up, so first two days we're on the back tee and there is a left area of the fairway, but the hole pretty much plays the same no matter what. When they move it up on the weekends you can definitely see some eagles. If you hit a bad tee shot you can make a bogey pretty quick.

They typically make that pin where if you hit a good shot you can get a pretty good look at eagle or possibly chip it in. I think it's a great hole when it's moved. It's a great hole when it's back and it's a fun hole to play. Depending on wind direction you kind of have a hill you can bank it off and get it to roll down on the green.

Yeah, you can definitely see some fireworks on that hole coming down the stretch.



Q. Is that water running along the left sides intimidating at all? When they move that tee up do you second guess?

AUSTIN ERNST: Not really. If you hit it where you're looking you're kind of looking at the right side of the green, there is a little hill that will kind of bank it onto the green, or it should. If you pull it left into the water you really haven't hit a good shot, but I've definitely come close. (Laughter.)

Q. The first major of golf season right around the corner next week. Rancho Mirage and ANA Inspiration. Obviously first task at hand is the Kia Classic, but hard to ignore golf's first major. How eager are you to find that major championship winner's circle one day sooner than later, and how big is Kia Classic to getting good your game in preparation for a major?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think it's -- I typically really like playing into majors. I think it's a really good way to kind of assess where your game is and kind of what you need to work on for the next week. Obviously I'm trying to win this week, but we know exactly what ANA is every year. You really know what clubs you're hitting into all the greens, so it's an easy week to prepare for kind of weeks, months in advance if you want to.

Yeah, I think playing the week before really helps me just know what areas I kind of need to sharpen getting ready for it. Obviously I would love to be a major champion and join that elite group.

Q. How much did the greens at Golden Ocala prepare you for really maybe any green this year and what you could face?

AUSTIN ERNST: I think the firmness of them really kind of prepares you for what next week could be. They can kind of do whatever they want to with that golf course next week, so I think being able to hit as many quality iron shots as I did at Golden Ocala, which seemed like that was where I separated myself the most, that really helps prepare for a lot of difficult golf courses and kind of know how to kind of go about attacking those kind of courses.

Q. And the greens out here are pretty substantial in size. If you're dialed in I would imagine like you were at Golden Ocala, it's going to be a nice week. Just a matter of putting I would assume.

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it'll be kind of picking your spots and where to be aggressive, but you definitely need to be aggressive I think out here with how big the greens are.

You can't really play just hit the green and have 40-footers all day. You get a lot of break and a lot of change in elevation on the greens, a lot of slope, so you definitely need to be aggressive to at least the section of the green where the pin is.

You got a lot of greens that are 50 yards deep or 50 yards wide, so hitting the green isn't necessarily a good shot.

Q. How much of a factor does the wind become out here? I've seen some of our weather reports we can get gusts up to 20, 25. How big of a factor is it?

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah, it'll be tough. I think it'll be tough especially some of the fairways, how they slope kind of. You kind of might need to play back a little bit, or going into the greens, you know, it's going to be tricky on a few of the holes, especially where we kind of have those steep drops, like an 14. If you got the wind coming into you, it's about a ten-yard drop from the tee to the green.

Those kind of holes get really tricky on kind of gauging wind. A lot of it is a guess, so you kind of just have to guess well.

Q. Guess well and hit it straight.

AUSTIN ERNST: Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Well, Austin, thanks so much for your time. Best of luck this week, and look for win No. 2 in a row.

AUSTIN ERNST: Thank you.

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