

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Wednesday, September 15, 2021

Tommy Roy
Dan Hicks
Paul Azinger
Justin Leonard
John Wood

Press Conference

JAMIE PALATINI: Good afternoon or good morning, depending on where you are throughout the continuous 48 states or perhaps abroad. Thank you for joining our NBC Sports Ryder Cup media conference call today.

We're going to be joined in a minute by NBC Sports lead golf producer Tommy Roy, lead play by play commentator Dan Hicks, analyst Paul Azinger and Justin Leonard, and our on course reporter John Wood.

We're incredibly excited to produce the 43rd Ryder Cup, and it's an event that NBC Sports has showcased for 30 years now since it came to NBC in 1991 at the memorable War By the Shore at Kiawah.

Since that tiny amount of coverage has skyrocketed, and this year we're going to present about 100 hours of Ryder Cup coverage next week across NBC, Golf Channel, Peacock, and rydercup.com, when you factor in live coverage, the featured groups, and studio coverage. The studio coverage is going to begin Monday, September 20th, on Golf Channel. And that evening, 9:00 p.m. Eastern on Golf Channel, we're also going to premiere a new Golf Films documentary, Cracking the Code, which details our own Paul Azinger's captaincy of the 2008 U.S. Ryder Cup team. All of these folks on the call could certainly talk about that.

We'll begin with a few words from each of our speakers. We'll start with the man who has been a part of every NBC Sports Ryder Cup production since 1991, our producer Tommy Roy. Go ahead, Tommy.

TOMMY ROY: Thank you, Jamie. I am amazed at how big and all-encompassing this event has become. As



Jamie can attest, we have these weekly meetings with the PGA of America, and we go over things like promotion and marketing and social and digital, sales, press and media, ops and fantasy. That's all above and beyond the operations and the TV shows themselves.

So we have a love affair for this event. It's right in our wheelhouse, where after all these years of dealing with the nuances of team match play, we're scheduled to be on the air for 28 hours over the course of three days, and I'll sit in the producer's chair for every single second of it. I will not be tired at all at the end because every session, all five many them, will have the same intensity and even more energy than the back nine of a major.

Every match is like its own golf tournament. Every point is so valuable and so important. So we're pumped and can't wait to get it going.

JAMIE PALATINI: Thank you, Tommy. We'll take it over to the voice behind the Ryder Cup here, Dan Hicks. Go ahead, Dan.

DAN HICKS: Thank you, Jamie. Echo, obviously, everything that Tommy said. Ryder Cup is an absolute different animal than any other golf event we do and really any other sporting event we do. For obvious reasons. I think our appetites are whetted for this one even more because we've waited an extra year. I think Steve Stricker's been the captain for like 31 months. He's got to be jumping out of his skin to get this thing going, like we all are.

But I kind of compare it to an Olympics. It's one of those events that I think brings in the non -- it brings in more than just the golf fan. It brings in somebody who maybe even never watches a golf tournament. You've got grandparents and parents and kids watching the Olympics, and I think it pretty much mirrors the same kind of reaction you get from a Ryder Cup.

For instance, my wife Hannah Storm is a big sports fan, doesn't watch a ton of golf tournaments. Probably watches more than her usual share because I do a lot of them, but she absolutely loves the Ryder Cup and is actually going to her first Ryder Cup in several years because it's an event that she just connects with.



I'm also looking forward to it because the guy I'm sitting next to, Paul Azinger. I think this event, you're going to hear things from Zinger that are going to really, really turn you on to the event even more. We've been waiting a long time to do it, didn't happen last year.

Sitting next to Zing is something that I've been looking forward to and we've been talking about for a long, long time. With that, I'll turn it back to you, Jamie.

JAMIE PALATINI: Awesome. Thank you, Dan. That's an easy enough introduction for me. We'll send it over to the captain, Paul Azinger. Go ahead, Paul.

PAUL AZINGER: He's right. Dan and I have talked about it an awful lot, and we've been real excited about it. I think Tommy summed up exactly how every captain feels and how he wants to approach every single match with the same urgency, intensity, whatever it is, that that point provides to the captain because Tommy's going to try to capture that.

It is so critical to get off to a good start for this American team. I look forward to being the analyst and to see how they react if they don't get off to a good start or if they do, but in the end, this is going to be, I think, one of the most watched Ryder Cups because of the intensity level.

The fact that the Americans have only won five times in 38 years has us all wondering can this juggernaut of an American team with the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh ranked players in the world on their team, can those best players beat that team?

Because they're going to show up as a bonded team, and our guys are going to show up -- I don't know how they're going to show up. They're going to show up as the best players.

But the fun part for us is we get to document this clash and record it for history. We've got a good team here because Justin's played in the Ryder Cup, Bones has been on the ground there, and same with Woody. Tommy's produced it. Hicks has covered it. Koch and those guys know what they're doing. Roger's been there a million times. I can't wait. We're all jazzed up for it.

JAMIE PALATINI: Awesome. Thank you, Zing. As you did mention, Justin's been in a few of these. He's had a few memorable Ryder Cup moments, I would say. We'll turn it over to Justin Leonard. Go ahead, Justin.

JUSTIN LEONARD: Thank you, Jamie. I was so disappointed, as so many people were last fall, when the last Ryder Cup was cancelled. It would be great to have it

be played with or without fans, just for another escape from what was going on in the world.

Looking back on it, that would have been a huge mistake. The fans are such a part of what the Ryder Cup is, to the people watching at home, to us as broadcasters, and to the players maybe most importantly. Having home crowd fans is the Americans' will. It's a huge boost to what they're trying to do and trying to accomplish and to be able to show off their skills to people in person.

I know in my own Ryder Cup experience, people ask how nervous is it, or was I. I was more nervous in my Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday Ryder Cup practice rounds than I ever was in a major championship. When you've got that bag with your country or your continent on it, you've got your flag or symbol on your sleeve, on your hat, you're coming together as a group to try to accomplish something. There's no words that can really do it justice.

Then on top of all that, in those practice days, you feel like you're auditioning a little bit because you want the captains and the vice captains to see that you're ready to go because you want to get in there and play early. Those matches, as Tommy has pointed out, from the 1st tee on, it feels like you're trying to win a major championship, but even more so because you've got other people relying on you.

It's a great atmosphere. I'm so excited to be there. The fans in Wisconsin, I know, are going to be amazing, and the venue will be incredible, both on TV and in person. So really looking forward to it.

JAMIE PALATINI: Awesome. Thank you, Justin. Last we'll head over to our caddie on the call here, I believe six-time Ryder Cup caddie here for the U.S. team, John Wood. Go ahead, John.

JOHN WOOD: Thank you, Jamie. I think anybody will tell you, if you know me, this is by far my favorite event. It pains me not to be working it as a caddie, to be honest with you, but I'm thrilled to be doing it as a commentator this time.

Hopefully I can bring some of the stuff that really isn't talked about in terms of nerves and emotions out there because there's so much more of that than in a regular event. You're worried about your partners and your partners' caddies, and the captains and assistants who are watching. So there's a lot more emotions, a lot more nerves, and hopefully, I can bring some of that into the telecast.

There's so many story lines coming in, who knows which



one is going to raise its head the highest? Obviously, a very determined European team who is amazing at bonding. They get together, and somehow in this week they raise their games to a different level. Zinger mentioned the talent on the U.S. side, and it's just going to be a matter of that talent bonding together, and if both teams play well, I expect the U.S. to win.

You look at it, and every Sunday at a Ryder Cup, I don't care what the score is, you can have a four or five-point lead, every Sunday there's a point where you look at the board and go, uh-oh, and you think the other team's got a path to victory. So that's fun to watch.

Tommy mentioned we have 28 hours of coverage. I've already petitioned him to work 29 of those 28 if possible. Justin touched on the nervous aspect of it. I've never as a caddie been standing in a fairway trying to add 140 and 10 and gotten confused except at the Ryder Cup. 150, does that sound right? Is that right to you? It's just as nervous for the caddies as the players and the captains.

It's by far my favorite event, and I just cannot wait to get on the grounds.

JAMIE PALATINI: Awesome. Thank you, John. With that, operator, I think we'll open it up to questions from the press.

Q. Paul, I'm curious about, obviously, you have some experience as a Ryder Cup captain, and I'm wondering what your advice would be to Steve Stricker and the U.S. team leadership as far as sort of creating a bond with the current team as it's in its current form.

PAUL AZINGER: That's always the challenge for the captain. I think it should happen naturally when you get there. It doesn't always work that way. But Stricker, every captain is going to create an environment for these guys to be successful the best they know how.

I talked to Steve a little bit. He told me that the things that made him nervous, he was going to eliminate, the inspirational videos and stuff like that. And he was just going to sell the message of preparation really hard and try to get his guys to have an advantage on that course.

If the wind blows, I think they're going to lose any advantage, really mainly on the greens. Everybody can handle the wind tee to green, but on the green somehow Europe makes all those putts in the wind.

I just feel like Stricker has just got to make sure our guys know the course the best. That's really -- in the end, that's it in a nutshell. If those guys, as far as bonding is

concerned, that's a six-month mission, I think in his case. So we'll see what happens.

Q. If you were in the position of being the U.S. captain, what would you say to Brooks and Bryson and some of the guys who have had, I guess, prickly relationships in the last few months?

PAUL AZINGER: I would say, can you guys put your issues aside and then get a yes or a no and then deal with whatever their answer was. I personally feel like Brooks and Bryson can put the globe on their shoulder. Not the globe, but the United States on their shoulder and -- shoulders and carry this Ryder Cup team, and they can also be a royal pain in the neck.

I personally think they can put this team on their shoulders and they will do it and put their differences aside. Brooks, when I just read that article, I'm not sure he loves the Ryder Cup that much. If he doesn't love it, he should relinquish his spot and get people there who do love the Ryder Cup. Not everybody embraces it, but if you don't love it and you're not sold out, then I think Brooks should -- especially being hurt, should consider whether or not he really wants to be there.

Then if you add the Bryson dynamic to that, that would be an easier decision for him. Brooks is one of the most candid, most honest guys there is, and if he's blatantly honest with himself and doesn't want to be there, he should come out and say it. I don't know, I'm a fan of both players. I just feel like it's going to be one or the other. They're going to put the weight of the team on their shoulders, or they're going to be a pain in the neck.

Q. Paul, this U.S. team having the most rookies since your team in 2008, I'd be curious your opinion on the value of experience, and is experience that valuable when a team keeps getting beat all the time?

PAUL AZINGER: No, it's not really that valuable if it's always a bad experience. That's the way I look at it. I love the idea of fresh blood. I think all of our guys on our team were real -- I don't know, they were energized and I think got them engaged.

For the most part, giving them ownership a little bit -- Justin can attest to this. These guys had ownership in who they picked, and I thought that was real important. So I don't know.

Q. Shortest answer ever. Appreciate it. Justin, as we look -- and I forgot who brought it up. I think Paul did -- in terms of the amount of talent through the world rankings or victories or whatever you want to say, but

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Europe keeps winning. As a player, this whole argument of this team is better on paper, you want to ignore it. Is that really hard to do when you're playing and you look at who you're lined up with?

JUSTIN LEONARD: Well, I don't think once they're matched up that players are thinking, well, I'm higher in the world rankings and I won 12 times and he's won 3. It's about going out to get your point. But I do think that it plays a part in the attitude of the two teams going into it.

The European side seems to take this underdog role and mentality and use it to their advantage, whether they're playing at home or in the U.S. With that comes a sense of freedom, of well we're not really expected to win, so let's go out and play freely. And I think you see that time and again at every Ryder Cup.

With the U.S. side, if I'm Steve Stricker, I'm trying to talk my players into, you know what, we haven't won this in a long time and they should be the favorite and trying to embrace more of that underdog mentality where the U.S. team can play more freely.

Because it's hard to play as a favorite. You see it a lot in regular TOUR events. The player that's leading through 36 or 54 holes doesn't go on to win because it's hard to play out front when you're the favorite, when it's kind of yours to lose. I feel like that's unfortunately been kind of the circumstances that the U.S. team has been under, and they just haven't been able to perform as well.

So I think for Steve Stricker and his side, the key is to try and convince your players that, look, we're not the favorite in this. Yes, maybe so on paper. We've got plenty of talent, but all that stuff on paper, you can take a match to it because it means nothing in the Ryder Cup. The European side's won it consistently throughout the last 15 to 20 years, and try and get the U.S. to play with a bit more freedom.

Q. Paul, what would you say is the single hardest part about making the player pairing, making those decisions?

PAUL AZINGER: It really shouldn't be hard. The way I looked at it, I just felt like just about everybody could play with anybody. It just isn't that hard.

But I think now you have to deal with these guys wanting to play with each other, which actually is liberating as well. That's pretty nice. Making the pairings for day one, the first day or whatever, I wanted all 12 of my guys to play on day one. It was real easy to do. If you're getting waxed, then I think the second day it becomes something different.

But all in all, I just felt like the pairings were so easy and obvious. Then I felt like the ones that you didn't want were pretty easy and obvious, especially the way we did it with the three four-man teams. But even if you just had 12 individual guys, it always looks so clear-cut to me who should and shouldn't be paired.

Q. But at the same time, you did invest a lot of time into weighing personality types and all those things that are in Cracking the Code.

PAUL AZINGER: Well, here's what I did. Because I had six guys coming back to the Ryder Cup who really hadn't had a lot of great experiences. Justin Leonard had in '99. But I felt like in my mind I wanted to get these guys engaged in something different, and that's what happened.

They got really interested in what we were doing rather than dreading the event. It's quite possible, when you get beaten every time, that you go into that event dreading it. What if Brooks Koepka deep down, if he's thinking my reward is I have to go play the Ryder Cup because I played so well? It's possible. I know there's players in the past who have felt that way.

I'm not saying Brooks feels that way, but the Ryder Cup, it's a different animal. Getting those right players together, like I said, like I did personality types, and I felt that trumped like games. So that was my philosophy. The players fell in love with it. I gave them ownership of it. They made the decision. So it worked out great.

But it was up to them once the bell rings. The worst part about being a captain is having no control whether or not you're going to win or lose beyond creating the environment. But if that environment, if on 15 of the Ryder Cup one guy misses and the other guy makes, whatever you did in the team room, I don't know how much that really mattered.

Q. This is for Justin. Before you made the big putt in 1999, before, Johnny Miller criticized the American team and you in particular. I'm just wondering 22 years later how you look at that and how you look now at your role of what you should or shouldn't say in the Ryder Cup.

JUSTIN LEONARD: Look, it was motivating for myself. I know it was for Jim Furyk as well. At that point in a Ryder Cup, you don't necessarily need outside things for motivation. Johnny had the biggest voice in the game of golf. I wouldn't say that it stung. I would say we just wanted to try and prove him wrong, and he wasn't wrong at the time that he said it.

It was one of those things where it served as motivation, and Johnny was so gracious. I'll tell you a story. About a month later there was a charter flight going over to Spain to play in a WGC event in Valderrama. Johnny was on the flight. NBC was broadcasting. He leaped over three rows of chairs and knocked over two small children to get over to me as quickly as he could to apologize for it, which was not necessary.

He apologized. I said, Johnny, there's no need to. I said, you were doing your job, and you do it so beautifully. I may not have personally liked what you said, but you said the right thing, and I said just thank you for the motivation.

So hopefully, we won't give either team motivation, but there will be times, I'm sure, where whoever is sitting at 18 needs to be critical in the moment, and Johnny set the bar for that. He spoke his mind. I think it's all something that we all strive to do each and every day with broadcasting.

Again, no bad blood whatsoever. We had a funny moment when he was doing his last telecast a couple years ago at the Waste Management Phoenix Open, and we kind of relived that moment a little bit. So we've had a lot of fun with it over the years.

Q. It was hard not to notice in Steve Stricker's captain's press conference that he name dropped both you and the pod system. I'm curious. You've seen a lot of captains since '08. From whatever glimpses you've had behind the curtain, is he the most Azinger-like captain since you?

PAUL AZINGER: I have no idea. I have purposely not gotten too deep into what he's doing. I actually called him the other day and left him a voicemail. I'm calling as an American. I should apologize up front if I ever say we or us or them or they. Tommy already two weeks in advance has let all of us know that we're not to do that.

But I did call him as an American and just felt like I wanted to know -- I wanted him to know what I was thinking, just basic things, making sure he didn't miss anything. But that's about it. I really don't know what he's doing. He's not told me if he's going to do the full blown pod system or not. Nobody has delved into it the way we did with the personality types and using my Myers Briggs green light, caution light, red light stuff.

It's so different now with social media anyway with the way these guys are. The way I did it wouldn't even work today to be honest, even though the concept was good. Look, I'll believe this forever. The Europeans are bonded by blood. They're bonded naturally. This means everything to them.

The Spaniards play together. The Englishmen, the Irishmen, the Swedes -- that's how they do it, and they're bonded by something that really gives them a full blown 1 percent advantage no matter where they are.

Vegas can build hotels on a 1 percent advantage. So you have to as a captain figure out how to get yourself back in there where it's even up. But something happened, we've only won five times in 38 Ryder Cups -- 38 years, excuse me. Not that many Ryder Cups, obviously. It's sad really that this American side has gotten beaten like that, but they bring an intangible with them. It's a fact.

Q. I had one for John as well. John, there's so much glory in the Ryder Cup, but you had a front row seat to the opposite of that, how much pain it can bring in 2010. I was just curious, I don't know if I've ever heard you talk about that. I kind of want to hear what you remember from that and sort of how devastating an event this big can be if it goes the wrong way.

JOHN WOOD: Sure. Hunter was put out last, and it's a huge position to be in. I was pretty happy for him, to be honest with you, that the captain trusted him, that Corey trusted him that much.

It's weird being the last group out, though. Unless you're Tiger or Phil or Rory, you play most of the day with not that big of a crowd, to be honest with you. Everybody is watching those opening matches. So we were playing Graeme, and for the first 9, 10, 12 holes, it really wasn't that big of a crowd. Hunter was playing beautifully, just couldn't make a putt, and Graeme was making those Graeme putts.

I think we birdied to get within one and then we came to that par-3 and obviously hit a little fat off the tee. Hunter had struggled with his short game whether it was Tuesday in a practice round or the biggest moment in the Ryder Cup. That's no secret, and he would admit to that.

So when we got up there, I was a little surprised that he reached for the sand wedge right away, but at that point, I was expecting him to putt it, but when he didn't, I wasn't going to get in his grill because he was very decisive about it.

When it happened, obviously, my heart sunk for Hunter. Obviously, it meant that we were going to lose as a team, but Hunter was my guy, and it hurt a lot for him.

The one thing I would say, and I think Hunter would say this as well, if I could change the outcome I would, but I wouldn't have traded that experience to be last out in a Ryder Cup with everything on the line, with every single

player on both teams and every single fan with your group. Not many people get to experience that. So, yeah, I would change the outcome, but in terms of the experience itself, I wouldn't change a thing and wouldn't want to trade it for anything.

It was one of the most meaningful moments of my career, and I think Hunter got over it fairly quickly. He had a great year the next year. It's just one of those things. I keep harping back to it wasn't so much that I don't think he blew it, it just was a shot he's not good at, bottom line. Like I said, it could have happened Tuesday in a practice round just as easily, but, yeah, I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

Q. My question is for Paul or Justin. How big a deal is the course preparation? The captains are so secretive about it. But home crowd aside, are there certain things that can be done to Whistling Straits to give the Americans an advantage?

PAUL AZINGER: There should be something they can do, but you have to think to do it. Apparently, according to Kerry Haigh, I was the first captain on home soil to ever ask to control the course and how it was mowed and that sort of thing. Europe had been doing that ever since I was playing Ryder Cup. I was surprised by that.

I think Stricker does have things he can do. He's just got to set up the course, I feel like in some ways never to disadvantage your guy, if you can. If you can find an advantage, go for it. Yeah, I think Stricker can probably figure out with the makeup of his team how to mow that place.

JUSTIN LEONARD: I don't know that there's a particular advantage at the golf course. There's no regular event that's played there. So many of their players on the European side play in the U.S. They've played PGA Championship there.

I think the fact that the U.S. team was there this past week spending a couple days to really get to know the golf course is very helpful. I don't know how many European players have been able to do that here recently.

Over the course of two or three days, it's pretty easy to figure out a golf course, but to be able to go ahead of time and see it in tournament conditions but without all the galleries, without the distractions, where you can really take your time and do the things you need to do, I think that is an advantage.

But the golf course itself, I don't see it being much of an advantage. I think the biggest advantage will be all the

people there to support the U.S. I feel like that's worth maybe a point in the overall outcome. It's just the support for the home team, and I would expect, as I've seen there in Wisconsin, some pretty rabid fans.

PAUL AZINGER: Can I just add to that? The captain, I think, can control the length of the holes. There's not a lot of trees out there, maybe zero. There are zero trees. You have bunker carries and distances and that sort of thing.

At Valhalla I was real specific about what my longest hitter's carry distance was, and I just made sure they were -- I just wanted all the holes to play at length and allowed them to carry the trouble. Then my shorter hitters were so accurate. That's just kind of how we did it. That's really about the only thing, and maybe you just don't have any rough over some of those bunkers. That's about it.

Q. Obviously, golf is an individual sport for almost every single week of the year except this one, when players are asked to work as a team. What role do you think team chemistry plays in a team's success or failure?

JUSTIN LEONARD: I think it plays to it in some part. I haven't been in those team rooms since 2008, but I can tell you in the three Ryder Cups that I did play, we had very good chemistry. You come together really quickly.

As we talked about a lot on this call, in 2008 we were broken up into players of four. I was in a pod with Phil Mickelson, Anthony Kim, and then we picked Hunter Mahan basically to be my partner because Phil and Anthony wanted to play together.

We ate breakfast together. We ate dinner together. Now, we're all in the same room with the whole team, but we sat at a table together. We played our practice rounds together. So we went in knowing, okay, this is who we're going to play with, and if something changes up, it's only going to change -- I'm either going to be playing with Phil or Anthony.

That adds a level of comfort to it, but it's also we talk about, as we have already, Bryson and Brooks. Ben Curtis was on that 2018, Kenny Perry was on that team, Jim Furyk was on that team. I hardly saw those guys other than at the big dinners where we're getting dressed up and all those things. I don't think they even do that anymore.

So you can break up into groups, and I think it's real easy to avoid players that may not quite get along. You can keep them kind of separate for the week. Like Paul said, I don't know exactly what's going on there in the team locker room, but I know that Phil Mickelson was a big proponent

of the pods. He loved that system. Him being a vice captain, I feel fairly confident that we'll see something similar to that next week.

JOHN WOOD: This is John Wood. I just want to jump in on Zinger's strategy, one other thing that it did. We got there on Monday, and we immediately knew everything that was going to happen during the week. Who we can play with, what balls we might need to prepare with, what personalities we needed to know.

To have that taken away right early in the week -- that week takes so much energy to play, to caddie, to captain, to do anything. What that did was take away that energy that's wasted sometimes thinking, I might play with this guy. I don't know. I'd better hit his ball a few times just to see or talk to him a little bit and see what he's like. To know that immediately, right when you get there, your preparation is yours and yours alone and you don't have to do A, B, C, D, and E, you prepare because you know what's going to happen, that takes an incredible amount of energy waste off the plate that week.

PAUL AZINGER: That's awesome to hear.

Q. John, from being around the team for the 2017 Presidents Cup, what do you think some of Steve Stricker's strengths as a captain are?

JOHN WOOD: I think Stricker will stick to his plan, and I don't think he's going to be one who, oh, boy, we're behind on the first day, we need to change everything up.

That was huge in Melbourne with Tiger as captain because there was a point where it looked like we might be down 9-1 or 8-2. At that point, you kind of mail it in. You're not coming back from that. But Tiger never seemed to waver in these are my partnerships. This is my team. We're not changing anything. By the end of all these matches, we're going to be ahead.

I think Stricker is going to be very much like that. This is my plan. I've been working on it for three years now. Just because maybe we had one bad session or two bad sessions, to throw all that out the window, which is the worst thing a captain can do. All of a sudden he's panicking, and the team starts to panic. Oh, boy, we're changing everything. We're in trouble.

Whereas I think Stricker will be very -- he's an emotional guy, but I think he's going to be very matter of fact in his decision-making, and I think that's huge knowing that this is what we're going to do, period. Behind, ahead, it doesn't matter. It just gives you some confidence going in knowing that the captain believes in his theory.

Q. Justin, a lot of talk about length at Whistling Straits, but we've seen a variety of players and styles have success there. Is it a place where a variety of players can fare well? Maybe there's too much reliance on the length talk.

JUSTIN LEONARD: When playing major championships there, the two PGAs, I didn't feel like length was a huge advantage because the golf course played firm. At least I remember that it did back in 2004. So precision was rewarded there as well.

It's a different game that these guys are playing now. I would think that the golf course, it won't be as firm or as fast as maybe it would be in a major championship because you're not trying to -- not that the PGA of America does for a certain score, but they're trying to test the golfers as much and as thoroughly as they can.

The Ryder Cup is more match play. It's a different animal. So I don't feel that the golf course will play quite as fast, at least in the fairways. And I think a lot of that does come down to Steve Stricker, and if he feels like his team has an advantage in length, maybe it's better to have the golf course playing a little bit slower so that his players will be coming into the green with a little less club, but kind of a softer golf course I feel like length is a bigger advantage. When it's firm and fast, I always felt like I could get it out there and compete just fine.

But this is a different game. These players, they're so good from tee to green. I think it will be interesting to see how it's set up, and Kerry Haigh, who's one of the best in the business -- my guess is that Steve Stricker would have some control over that, and then I think once the week begins, it's completely up to Kerry Haigh and the PGA of America how they want to set it up.

But, yeah, if you look back at the playoff in 2004, Vijay, one of the longest players in the game, and Chris DiMarco and myself in the playoff, Chris Riley played well there. In the past when it was firm and fast, didn't think length was much of an advantage, but with a little bit softer, I think it certainly could be.

Q. Not to belabor the pod discussion and this year's team, but I'm curious, if you looked at the group, just from what you know of them and thought of possible pods that you would put them in or if you'd ever consider a pod of one looking at some of the issues going into this year?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, I'm not going to speculate on what his pods are. Looking at teams in four-man squads, it's so

easy to do, knowing some of them and using the generalization of their personality types. Are they influencing relaters? Are they steady supportive? Are they dominant controlling? When you look at them and you know what guys you should avoid putting together, it's pretty easy to see the pods if they want to do it.

The only thing -- look, it's going to be an incredible event, whether they do pods or they don't. I just think the pods help only -- they don't work all the time. We keep getting beat. If everybody's still using the pods, pods isn't the answer. It's something bigger than that.

We have the best players this year, and obviously they roll in with the most confidence and maybe the best team. It's going to be an intriguing matchup.

But the pods, obviously, it's not the answer. There was something different there. The way we messaged that team was just to really take the heat off, to play great, play aggressive, show off for the crowd. We tried to embrace the crowd, and that's about as big of an advantage as you can get on the Europeans really. That's about it.

Q. And just a quick question for Tommy. Just watching the Solheim Cup, it's kind of a reminder that it looks like from the production side that Sunday Singles is the hardest day to do because it seems like not a lot happens and then suddenly everything's happening, and then there's only a few matches left. I'm curious if that's something you've ever tried to address and deal with, either asking for tee time spread more or situating commercial breaks so that you have kind of more of a window there in the middle, and it seems like basically everybody's on the course and it's just going crazy.

TOMMY ROY: Yeah, well it's complicated, the match play, because you never really know when a match is going to end. You have matches that are very close or they're so one-sided. So it's hard to pick a time when you can ask for that.

We do happen this particular Ryder Cup, when the last Sunday Singles match tees off, we have a one-hour window there that's commercial free courtesy of Rolex, which is nice. I haven't seen the commercial load for the rest of the time just yet, but that being said, it is complicated. The thing you try to do is be live with the matches that are furthest along in the course that have a chance to end, the ones that are close.

We used to get criticized because a lot of times Tiger's matches would be one-sided and we wouldn't follow his match much at all. That's in a day when everybody wanted

to see every single shot that he hit, but we were concentrating on the matches that were closest and furthest along, about to be decided.

It's complicated, but it's a blast, I can tell you, just the whole Ryder Cup thing. If you're in contention at a major championship, it's because you're playing really well. And what you end up having happen at Ryder Cups is guys are out there playing with all this pressure and everything on the line, but they may not have their best game. They may have qualified for this team months ago when they were playing great and now they aren't necessarily playing great.

With all that added pressure, you tend to get the good shots are even better, but the worst shots are even worse. Bad shots are even worse. So it just makes for a lot of fun. Capturing all that emotion, it's not about dissecting swings and the design of the course. This is about capturing the emotion of this whole thing, which is refreshing to do.

Q. This is for John Wood. John, in general, how is this week, Ryder Cup week different from a normal week for a caddie in relationship with his player? Do you have any stories of something that you felt you did really well and maybe a story to something you felt you did poorly as a Ryder Cup caddie?

JOHN WOOD: We don't have enough time for everything I've done poorly in Ryder Cups. It's a different week, and you really need to -- especially with the pod system and you know your potential playing partners, you've really got to learn his game. You've got to learn what shots he likes to play, what shots he likes to avoid. A lot of that is talking with the other caddie. Does he like a certain number on layup shots. Would he rather chip, or would he rather play from a bunker?

More than that, though, it's learning their personalities. Sometimes in these team events, you're out with somebody and you can kind of tell that, for one reason or another, they may have tuned out their caddie for a little bit, and it happens to everybody, where you hear the same thing over and over and over again. Sometimes it just comes on blank ears.

Sometimes -- I've had an instance where in Melbourne at the Presidents Cup -- not this last one, but the previous one -- Hunter was paired with Bill Haas. Bill was playing fine. He just didn't have a lot of confidence at the time. He had his brother working for him, and his brother said, Boy, you've got to go say something to Bill. He's not listening to me at all. So that was a case where it's easy for me to do that because I'm not worried about keeping my job with Bill. I can tell him anything I want.

So we were walking from 9 to 10, and I said, hey, Bill, Hunter is playing good enough to win this thing on his own right now honestly. You make us one or two birdies on this back nine, and there's no way we won't win this match. That kind of picked him up, and he made a couple birdies, and sure enough, we won the match on the 17th hole.

Yeah, there's a lot more prep and learning other people's games. And the other thing I would say is I didn't learn this until my third or fourth Ryder Cup, but sometimes it can be a little unnerving early in the week when your player seems to be listening to everybody but you. Week in, week out, you're the only guy he takes advice from on the course, reading putts, clubs. You get in the Ryder Cup, and all of a sudden Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, they're listening to the other players and the other caddies a lot more than normal.

That can be a little unnerving, but you've got to know that, once the tee goes in the ground on Friday, you'll be back in the game. That's something I used to tell rookie caddies in that thing because it can be a little unnerving.

Yeah, it's a different week. You've just got a lot more to prepare for. At the same time, it's such a meaningful week. Those are the weeks I'll remember when I'm all done doing whatever I'm doing.

Q. With six rookies on the team this year, how does that dynamic work then with trying to maybe -- how does the caddie ease the tension, ease the anxiety that those guys may feel?

JOHN WOOD: I have a theory that rookies on home Ryder Cups aren't rookies. It's certainly nerve-racking and pressure filled, but not nearly as it is on an away team. I think that's why you saw Strick pick some rookies and Padraig stick with some very veteran players who have been through this before.

Yeah, there are times when, if I'm paired with Austin Johnson and D.J. We've been out with them when I was with Kuch a little bit, and if Kuch is struggling, sometimes the best thing for Kuch is just forget about golf. I'll pull A.J. aside and say, Hey, talk to my guy about basketball coming up this fairway, talk to him about something else, because sometimes that's what's best for Kuch. If I do it, he almost knows I'm trying to get him out of that, but if A.J. does it, it's something new. Okay, let's talk some basketball.

Yeah, it's a good question. Those are some of the things you think about as a caddie in this event.

Q. We talked about Strick a lot, but obviously in '17

that team dominated. It wasn't put under the blow torch as such. We also know him as a nice and accommodating individual. Is there such a thing as being too nice for this role if things do get a little bit fiery?

PAUL AZINGER: I don't know if that matters whether you're nice or not. I think the captain is going to try to control the controllables. Stricker is pretty organized. Padraig is really one of those cross the Ts, dot the Is guys. So you're going to have two pretty thorough captains. They had an extra year to get ready.

His emotions and all that might inspire the players. The main thing is all the players love Strick and they respect him. They'd probably run through a wall for the guy if they can. I feel like that's going to be the environment that's created for the American team.

JUSTIN LEONARD: Yeah, along those lines, I think any coach who knows his team knows there's certain guys who will respond to a pat on the back and other guys who will respond to a kick in the ass. I think Stricker knows who those players are and knows how to go and approach them if he needs to.

I'll tell you one great story about Strick that's kind of unrelated. At the Presidents Cup at Muirfield Village, it was Jordan's first team event and he was amped up. He's always amped up and very animated anyway. Fred put Stricker out with him to kind of settle him down and talk to him out there and lead him through some matches.

I remember he came through the first match, and Strick came up to me and said, Woody, somebody's got to calm that guy down out there. He's so animated and so amped up, I can't take it. I looked at Strick and said, yeah, I think that's your job. I'm pretty sure that's why you're playing with him. He kind of flushed a little bit and said, oh, yeah, you're right.

I think Strick is prepared for everybody on that team and knows what to do and how to handle it and knows that you don't necessarily handle everybody the same way.

JAMIE PALATINI: Great. Appreciate everybody joining the call. A full transcript of this call is going to be available later this afternoon on NBCsportsgroupspressex.com. Additionally, for members of the press interested in watching a screener of the new documentary *Cracking the Code*, as I mentioned, that's going to premiere Monday evening at 9:00 p.m. eastern, but I do have screeners available that I can e-mail to you. If you're interested, reach out.

Other than that, again, appreciate everybody's time. Can't wait for next week at Whistling Straits. Thanks again. Have a good day.

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