

Western Golf Association

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Paul Azinger

Mark Rolfing

WGA Fireside Chat



(in progress.)

PAUL AZINGER: ...decided to biopsy my shoulder, and then three days later, the week after the skins game that I played in. I played with Payne and Arnold and Freddy. What a skins game. That was awesome.

Yeah, three days after that I had cancer, non-Hodgkins lymphoma in my right shoulder. I was the hottest player in the world at the time, but it was -- it ended overnight. It was over like that. Now, I never got back. I was never quite the same as a player. I lost a little bit of my intensity.

But it's just part of it. I feel like -- you know, as a matter of fact, Johnny Miller called me, and I can tell all of you this, Johnny Miller was one of the first people to call me, and he said something I'll never forget. And I say it on the air quite often. He said to me, you know, sometimes it's not what you accomplish in life; sometimes it's what you overcome. Hit me like a ton of bricks. (Applause.)

MARK ROLFING: I don't know what to say after that. If you look back at your career, Paul, you talk about all the tournaments you won in '93. Where does the one tournament you won after the cancer fit into this whole thing? Because he went seven years and then won out in Hawaii by seven shots. Just an amazing performance. Where does that one fit in the overall scheme?

PAUL AZINGER: That was the biggest win, I mean, at the time, because I kept getting asked, you know, Are you all the way back? What percent back are you? And I wasn't all the way back until I won which kind of put an end to that question.

That came right after Payne Stewart had died in that tragic plane crash in 1999. We were best buds. I remember going out in January and standing on that putting green. It was the first tournament after Payne had passed away. I looked around at everybody and I thought, Wow, everybody just forgot; life goes on. It just rocked me to the core.

I went to the pro shop and talked to Greg Nichols, the pro

there. I cried in his office about Payne Stewart, and I walked out to that first tee that afternoon, shot 63, and led wire to wire and won by seven.

It was pretty fun. (Applause.)

MARK ROLFING: How about that? You didn't know that, did you? You didn't know that, did you?

PAUL AZINGER: But that was also the first week that I used the belly putter. I invented that belly putter. I think Phil Rodgers maybe the -- but never used it. But in 1999, in the off-season I was messing around in the pro shop, and this guy that was shorter than me had one of those chest putters and it fit my belly button. I went all around the pro shop and hit everything in the pro shop.

Few days of tinkering around with my putter and extending the shaft, I shoved it into my belly and won Hawaii by seven shots, and the next week there was belly putters everywhere. All over the green. Yeah, that was a big win for me, Mark. It really was a big win.

MARK ROLFING: That's another thing that Paul and Johnny have in common. Johnny also claims to have invented the belly putter.

PAUL AZINGER: Yeah, that's true. But see, that generation ahead of me, Phil Rodgers, Johnny Miller, those guys that dominated in the '70s, they might have monkeyed around with it, but no one used it in a tournament. I don't think. If Johnny used it in a tournament I want to see the footage of that.

MARK ROLFING: We're going to talk a little bit about caddieing in the WGA, but I want to tell a little story. Who all was in the room the night Johnny Miller was up here with me? Do you all remember that night?

When I asked Johnny what he remembers most about being a caddie, he said that he never lost a ball. In nine years, he never had a player that lost a ball. The reaction was kind of like that. Everybody went, That's not possible. I think I said something like, Johnny, wait a minute. That's not possible. Not possible. And he stuck to it the whole

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night that he I never lost a ball.

PAUL AZINGER: You know, I remember one time I was at press conference -- actually, it was after Payne passed away; he was defending champion at Pebble Beach and I had just won Hawaii. I flew in and Johnny Miller flew in to host me at Pebble Beach. One of the media guys asked Johnny Miller about his prime, and they asked him what it was like in that stretch where he would win by nine and then the next week by eleven and won all those tournaments in that stretch.

He said, It was kind of frustrating, really frustrating. He says, You know I probably should have made more iron shots from the fairway. I never holed any of them. Inch away, three inches away, I swear he makes it. He was that good.

And Lanny doesn't throw out a lot of compliments. I asked Lanny one time, we played a lot of golf, and I said, Lanny, was Johnny really that good? He said, Tell you what, Zing, he'd do like this right here, he would hit a shot and move his head back and forth like this just to see the flag because the ball was in the way. (Laughter.)

Must have been good for Lanny to throw that out there. (Applause; laughter.)

MARK ROLFING: I remember seeing you not too long ago after you had the invite to join us tonight. You were so revved up and so excited.

PAUL AZINGER: About tonight?

MARK ROLFING: About tonight.

PAUL AZINGER: Yeah, absolutely.

MARK ROLFING: Talk for a minute about of the WGA and just kind of what it means actually to be a part of this like we are tonight.

PAUL AZINGER: I've had Evans Scholars caddie for me at the Western Open when I played at Butler, and I familiarized myself with the program a little bit. I didn't realize it had grown to the size it is and you have that many kids under scholarship. That's fantastic.

I went to Florida State so I'm not that good at math, but I think you made over 100 grand the night -- 500 grand the night I think is what happened, so...

Yeah, caddies make a big difference. Golf is like life, isn't it? You don't cheat at golf or you cheat at life. It exposes me, and I think for these kids to be able to caddie and see

these folks, it's a fantastic thing. What a great way to get a kid into college. He has to have good grades and the whole nine yards. I love it.

When I was in college, and actually when I was in high school, I caddied for Mickey Wright. Anybody heard of Mickey Wright? Hogan said she had the greatest swing he had ever seen in this life. She said things to me I will never forget. I remember she hooked a shot -- I say this on the air some -- but she look hooked a shot on the 10th hole, she handed me the club. She was 48 years old when I caddied for her.

She handed me the club and she goes, You know, Paul, the shot that gets you into trouble usually gets you out. We walked down there, and sure enough, she hit a sweet hook, back-to-back hooks.

Yeah, I learned a lot from her. I caddied for Dot Germain who ended up winning the US Open, and Roberta Albers Speer, who was probably the meanest person I ever met. She was so mean to me when I was a caddie. Caddies don't always have it cushy. Sometimes they get the blame.

MARK ROLFING: The player/caddie relationship we see now on television has changed so dramatically it seems like, particularly recently. Has it got to be too much, do you think? What do you think about what is going out there, not at the Evans Scholar level, but at the highest level of the game?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, for us we got Bones and Woody on the telecast, and Bones is like the caddie that does it all. You know, like Bones makes the caddies hit the shot. Kind of sitting in the booth it kind of drives him crazy sometimes, because our motto back in the day was, keep up, shut up, bring me some food.

And then John usually said, I'm right, you're wrong -- he would say three things to me: You're right, I'm wrong, and boy did you get screwed. (Laughter.)

MARK ROLFING: Things really have changed.

PAUL AZINGER: Today the caddie relationship with the players is completely different. The caddies are a brand in a lot of cases. I think social media helps them brand, too. Teddy Scott, some those guys are branding as a caddie their image. The players do rely on them more. Caddies when I first got on tour were third class citizens at best. I loaned so much money to caddies in the early '80s, and never see it ever again. That money is gone.

But they don't need the money now. These caddies are really finally making money, they're allowed in the



clubhouse, they're treated correctly. They really weren't treated well when I played. I never blame my caddie. I played the TOUR a full 28 years. I had three guys that I rotated really my whole career. Occasionally I would mix a guy in there.

But every tournament I won, maybe three tournaments I won by more than a shot, and you just know down the stretch that caddie can make all the difference. And they make a fortune if you win. They're making 10% of \$1.2 million or whatever first place is.

It killed me to win a tournament and win 72 grand and write my caddie a check for 7200. It must hurt to write one for 120 grand for the guy that carried your bag around. But if you win by a shot, he was worth it. He was worth it.

MARK ROLFING: You are getting ready to start your fourth year now is it?

PAUL AZINGER: Fourth year at NBC. Tough to fill those shoes, I got to say. I didn't know who I wanted to be as a broadcaster.

MARK ROLFING: Really?

PAUL AZINGER: I didn't know who I was. I mean, I knew who I was, but I mean, little things, like how I would inflect my voice were things I thought about as an analyst. Everybody on the broadcast that had been with Johnny for years, and here I come walking in there.

We got this guy named Gil Capps that hands the notes. He sits between Hicks and I and he hands Hicks valuable notes, and he'll hand me like this guy missed a fairway three times in a row.

When I first took over, Johnny did Saturday and I did the Sunday of the Phoenix Open. Johnny signs off on Saturday; I come rolling in on Sunday. Rickie Fowler has the lead, and he has this disaster on 11 if you remember. He putted it off the green and went down in the water, and then he dropped it back up there and it stayed, and walked over and looked at the putt, it rolled back in the water; that was a penalty.

And suddenly when Rickie Fowler gets on 13 tee, he isn't leading the tournament just like that. And we're in the desert and it starts raining. It's drizzling rain and Rickie Fowler just coughed up this big lead, and it's my first day on the job and I don't even know what Gil does.

Gil hands me a card, first card he ever handed me. I look at that card. Rickie Fowler just lost the lead, and this card says, Rickie Fowler holds the lead about as often as it

rains in the desert. (Laughter.) That was the first card he -- or I think he said it like it rains out here -- here is what he said: It rains out here about as often as Rickie Fowler holds a final round lead.

I looked at that card and I looked at Gil and I laughed, and I thought, that's where Johnny Miller got it, right there. I tossed it and I didn't say it. Thank God I didn't say it.

(Applause.)

MARK ROLFING: Were you nervous that day?

PAUL AZINGER: I was so nervous that day, I got to tell you. Came off all right. I brought a big pair of extra large size 17 or 20 golf shoes. Tommy Roy found them. I brought the big golf shoes and put them on there just to break the ice in the first on-camera. Said, I got some big shoes to fill. Johnny, I think Johnny forgot his shoes, something like that.

But it's stressful. I didn't know how tough the producer was going to be at NBC. He's won 29 or 31 Emmys or something crazy. But he yells a lot. You know, when you watch golf you could go to sleep only the couch. Everybody knows that. But if you heard what was going on in that production truck, you wouldn't believe it.

I'll go in there and video. It is chaos in there. Tommy Roy's left hand is always moving like this. There is director, and it's just unbelievable what goes on in that truck. There is a bank of about 30 or 40 monitors and they're picking -- and everything has nickname. Go to Elvis, go to Blue.

I had no idea. I just had no idea. And the first time I ever really got yelled at, when Tommy hired me, I remember saying, I heard you yell a lot. I said, I don't respond to that. I won't yell. I won't yell. I said, Okay.

So I get through the whole first year, the first tournament the next year is Mexico City. We have this little box that if you're going to show David Cook or David Feherty or Peter Jacobsen, we put them in little box. Tommy calls it Little Peter or Little David or Little Gary.

So we're showing Little David. We're going to show Little Davis here. There goes Little David in the box. He's not saying anything. Tom says, say something, David. He didn't say anything, so I started, Hello, David -- on the headphones, Shut the hell up. Don't talk over Little David.

I swear to God, it scared me so bad. That's the first time I got yelled at. I said to him the next day, I didn't know that was a rule that you couldn't talk over Little David.



But it's stressful. This year at the U.S. Open in my first on-camera on Thursday night we were talking about the start, the U.S. Open, and I had this threesome that had all won at Torrey Pines. That was the threesome I was going to focus on.

I mentioned the first two players and I forgot the one guy's name on the first on-camera. I was kind of squirrelling around a little bit. Nobody would know at home necessarily, but Tommy starts yelling at me in my first on-camera while I'm on the camera. Who the hell is it? Who the hell is it? It turned out to be Jon Rahm who I forgot, and I won the damn tournament. (Applause.)

But it's not as relaxing as you would like to think, I'll just tell you that. (Laughter.)

MARK ROLFING: Well, since you're showing that you've got some opinions, I think about half the room in the hour before we came up here asked me if I would ask you something about issues that are near and dear to their heart. These are some of the most avid golfers.

One the questions was, and I really don't understand this, how many people out here feel like they're hitting the ball too far and the game is just no fun anymore? You're going to quit because you're hitting it too far. How many people feel this way? One? Boy, I hope that didn't happen during the POWERADE Challenge.

Okay. What do you think about this whole scene with the golf ball, and now they're going to shorten the drivers? We're spending all this time worrying about one millionth of a percent of the players in the game.

PAUL AZINGER: Well, I think the USGA has kind of lost their way. They been outsmarted by their research and development and all the millions and millions of dollars of R&D that the manufacturer have pushed out there, and the ball has gotten away from them. They need to make it spin a little bit more. I think that would be great.

But I got tell you the truth. I played in a generation where we were taught to play close to the ground. That is different. Our go-to shot was a low cut generally. Almost every player on TOUR's go-to shot was a knockdown. Now the go-to shot is straight up in the air. These guys hit the ball so high.

Bryson has got a five-degree driver and his putter has six degrees of loft. His driver has five degrees of loft. Never heard of that before. And when you can tee it up four and three quarter inches, he hits eight degrees up on his driver at five degrees loft, he launches it 15 degrees, his ball

speed is hovering around 200 miles an hour and he is spinning it under 2000 RPMs. That's like throwing a javelin now.

There is a certain trajectory that that javelin goes, it's going to be optimum. Now they figured out how to do it. The USGA is in a panic because courses are being made obsolete. The reality is it's ten times more fun to watch. It just is for me. I go out there and watch these guys hit on the range and they can make a mockery of the hole, but it's not without risk, is it? It's not without risk to take it over that corner.

And like what Bryson did at the Ryder Cup when he blasted over the corner on 5. 400 and -- how far was that drive?

MARK ROLFING: 417.

PAUL AZINGER: 417. You know, if that's not the most-talked-about shot of the whole match, it just was. That power sells. I think the USGA has got to be careful here. I don't mind them shortening the length of the driver a little bit, make the ball spin a little more.

I talked to Hal Sutton the other day, and it's all about old school. All of us guys in our 60s, we want to hit the way we had it. The truth is it's better now. It's so exciting to watch. It just is. I'm not saying they're better than we were.

I would never say that. Mentally it's in your head. Golf is in your head anyway. You're only going to be as good as your brain allows you to be. Physically you can be a physical genius, and there are plenty of physical geniuses that never made a living.

There is a certain dynamic in your mind that will only allow you to go so far under. That's why at the BMW when Cantlay kept doing that stuff last year we were all freaking out about this year when he kept making those putts. It was like, Surely he's not going to make this one. Neither one of those two would give an inch, would they.

That was a true David and Goliath. Cantlay told me the next week, I saw him at the TOUR Championship, and he said, You know, I got to tell you, I hit some of those drives pretty solid there in that playoff and he outdrove me by 40 on every one. (Laughter.)

That's just -- Bryson to me is the most interesting cat in a million different ways. All his clubs are the same length, frightfully upright, and just decided to change his body. He announced to his world through his self-promotion, through his self-branding through Twitter and Instagram he said,



I'm going to put on 50 pounds and I'm going to outride everybody.

We're like, You go for it kid. We'll just see how it works out for you. He did it and he's my hero. I think he's the most interesting guy by a mile and I like Bryson. A lot of people don't like him. But to me, there is nothing not to like. He's squeaky clean, USGA guy from top to bottom, honest as the day is long. He's a visionary, and I think he's the most exciting player. (Applause.)

MARK ROLFING: Well, you led me right into the trap. Ryder Cup?

PAUL AZINGER: The Ryder Cup. Well we smoked them at that Ryder Cup. How about that? (Applause-cheers-whistles.) I was a Ryder Cup captain in 2008 when we lost four of the previous five and something like seven out of nine and 11 out of 14. We were just the same situation as this year, and I had watched a video about the Navy Seals and how they team build and take this large group and make them into small groups.

I created the small-group concept, the pod concept, because I felt like that we needed to create an environment for these guys and get them engaged. Stricker did the same thing for this Ryder Cup team. He got them in a place -- I don't know if he used the pod system and all that, but he created an environment that got the most out of those guys.

I talked to Stricker quite a bit. We talked about personality types. I said, It's critical for you to know their personality because you got to challenge one guy and encourage the next.

You can't try to challenge the guy that needs encouraging or you've made a mistake. That was all the Myers-Briggs stuff that I learned while I was the captain. I think Stricker did a good job. I got the players -- you know, our players were dreading the event, a lot of them, because we keep getting slaughtered and the media crushes the players if you get beat.

I think the pod system got our team engaged, and instead of dreading the event, they were excited about the difference in the nuance. This is out of the box. They would run through a wall for each other. It was a great thing. Stricker did the same thing.

In the end -- are we close to finishing? How close are we to finishing? I want to tell you all a story about our team leader that week. Anthony Kim was incredible, but Boo Weekley was the man. You want me to tell the Boo story real quick?

MARK ROLFING: So are you going to tell the Boo Weekley story?

PAUL AZINGER: I'll tell it in a minute.

MARK ROLFING: Okay. I want to end with that.

PAUL AZINGER: You want to end with Boo?

MARK ROLFING: Yeah, because you won't be able to say anything after that.

PAUL AZINGER: You're right.

MARK ROLFING: You'll have people out of their chairs. Let's just talk about the Ryder Cup in general for a second. First time I think I ever really met you, really interacted with you, was at Kiawah Island in '91, and that was a Ryder Cup. There was no pod system back then. In fact, there was not even a single grandstand on the first tee.

PAUL AZINGER: It wasn't live. There was no bleachers on the first tee, no gallery only the first tee. It wasn't live in 1991.

John Miller, the head of NBC, told me that -- who was the producer back then?

MARK ROLFING: Larry Sorello. (Phonetic.)

PAUL AZINGER: Larry Sorello was the producer and John Miller called him up. John Miller was telling me this a few weeks ago. This is about the Ryder Cup 1991. John Miller calls him up and says, Why is this on my TV? Why is this on my TV?

Well, we had a fog delay on Saturday and the tournament went into primetime that night. The things that went on that afternoon, that evening, Freddy Couples holding a bunker shot and doing that one move. You see him do it all the time. Him and Raymond and the battle between me and Seve and Jose and all that stuff.

Sunday, John Miller calls Larry Sorello and he said, How can we lock this up for the next hundred years? From literally, Why is this on my TV? To, How can we lock this up forever? That happened on Saturday night at Kiawah. That was the moment. (Applause.)

MARK ROLFING: Why has the Ryder Cup become the most compelling event in golf?

PAUL AZINGER: Because players care about it I think as much as anything. Don't you think? The patriotism and all

that, it brings out a lot. It brings out a lot. Players love it. (Applause.)

The Europeans love it. They bond in a small group in an individual sport, and you make friends for a lifetime at the Ryder Cup. Everybody wants to run through a wall for the other guy. The fans are so amped up that it's just a crazy scenario. I remember coming out of my first Ryder Cup in 1989. I beat Seve in singles that year. (Applause.)

Yeah, thank you. I'll tell you what, that year I remember Curtis said to me, I drew Seve in singles first match out on Sunday, and Curtis says that night, Don't you let him pull anything on you tomorrow. Curtis went out late that day and he was on the first tee with me and it was cold and blowing European flags and it's just like, Seve, Seve, Seve.

Here comes Curtis, Don't you let him pull anything on you today. We had some battles. On the second hole we both hit 3-iron off the tee. We both hit wedges to the green. I hit it about four feet. He hit it about 12 or 15 feet.

We get up there, and that year the square grooves were shredding the golf balls if you remember back then. Some you would. The USGA had sent us all a note reminding us that the ball had to be visibly cut, that just shredding it because of the grooves wasn't enough to take it out of play.

So we're on the second hole. I had a square grooved Ping wedge at the time, and my ball, I could pick it up by the hair on the paint on the ball. It was shredded, but I knew I had to play it.

So Seve, on the second hole, now there's 10,000 people behind this green, and Seve is bending down, and he takes the ball, looks at it, and he throws it to his caddie, Ian, and looks at me and says, This ball is no good. I take it out of play. (Laughter.)

He had a perfect 3-iron and perfect wedge, so I went over there and I grabbed the ball and I looked at it and it looked better than mine. He's lining up his putt. Imagine him lining up the putt like this and I come walking over, and he looks at me, and I said, Seve, I don't think you can take this ball out of play.

I said, Look at my ball. It looks worse than that. I don't think you can take it out of play. He says, This ball says, European rules say this ball is no good for play.

And I said, Well, I think we should ask the referee. He says, Is this the way you want to play today? Uh-oh.

So he starts lining up this putt -- well, first we go to the

referee, Andy McFee, and he says, I'm sorry, Seve you must play this ball, and flipped it back to him.

I said, I'm sorry, bud. No, no, it's okay. If this is the way you want to play today, we can play this way. I was like, Oh, shit.

So now the crowd is going crazy and they're jeering me. They're jeering me. Then the second hole, don't let him pull anything on you, he rolls that putt in and that -- first of all, when he made that putt, I never heard a roar like that in my life. As it decide down, some Euro yelled out, What would you have done with a good ball, Seve?

Then I missed my putt and they cheered louder when I missed. It was on. But I did beat him on the last hole. It was a hell of a match. (Applause.)

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