

PGA Championship

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Oak Hill Country Club

Zach Johnson

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: United States Ryder Cup captain Zach Johnson joins us at the 105th PGA Championship. Zach, welcome to Oak Hill, where you'll be competing in your 20th PGA Championship this week. Last time we were here in 2013, you registered a top-10 finish. What are you expecting from a newly restored East Course this week.

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, I remember -- what year was it, 2013? I guess 10 years ago. I remember it being an absolutely phenomenal test. I remember leaving here, like man, that's one of the more proper golf courses I've ever played, meaning you've got to have everything, tee to green, short game, et cetera.

I think based on what I've witnessed so far, that still holds true, even though there are some pretty subtle and significant changes.

This is one of those venues that with a slight facelift still has all the characteristics you want in a major championship and in a venue that tests, again, every aspect of one's game.

I do like it. This is kind of the golf that I grew up in. I'm not fond of the temperatures right now, but I guess for me it's probably better than the opposite of 90-plus. I don't like that, either. I'm a pretty picky guy. I like 60 to 75.

But the weather looks okay, and excited for the week.

Q. How are things coming together for the Ryder Cup? Looks like you had some of the players and caddies together for dinner a couple weeks ago in Charlotte.

ZACH JOHNSON: Yeah, things are coming together. We're still just on the start line more or less the way I see it. Nothing of any significance has been decided or even had the opportunity to, with the exception of a couple vice captains.

I'm just trying to keep it on their radar. I think it is. Not everybody has voiced it to me, players, but a lot have, that

it's a massive priority, which is great. It was for me every two years.

That excitement is starting to burn. I have it. I'm jacked. It's one of the things in my profession that I legitimately live for. Knowing that I am a distinct part of it and going to make some key decisions is all that much more gratifying.

I can't wait for September, but at the same time I am really enjoying the journey and the process as to how things transpire in this captaincy, and sharing it with family and friends.

Q. This is the 20th PGA for you. You've played all the majors a bunch. How do you characterize the PGA?

ZACH JOHNSON: The actual event?

Q. Yeah.

ZACH JOHNSON: I would say most -- geez Louise, if I go through my experiences, this championship is just extremely proper. I feel like we play really good, classic golf courses, classic golf courses that have also been nuanced to make it more modern if that makes sense, which is a hard element, but they've done a great job of that, whether you're talking Hazeltine to Baltusrol to -- well, the Ocean Course.

What I appreciate about it is they're not afraid to go to every corner of this great nation and showcase certainly the PGA of America and what they're about, but more or less this tournament and the history behind it.

It's different every year. Obviously you know what you're going to get at Augusta, and everybody loves it. You know what you're going to get at the Open across the pond. It's Lynx-style golf, and everybody loves it. The U.S. Open has their schtick.

This one just really takes on a new being every year, and I love that. The consistency is that there's inconsistency in where we go, and I love that.

Q. For players who are trying to make the Ryder Cup



team who are non-Tour members right now, when it gets right down to it, what will be more important to you... a result that may get them close to, let's say, the top 10; seems implausible, top 6; or chemistry with the guys on the team? What will factor more for you?

ZACH JOHNSON: I don't know if I can single one things out when it comes to what's important with my picks. I can say this: I don't know the specifics behind it. I know that there's been some that have done some math. But it's difficult to fit in the top 6, regardless where you are. And when it comes to those elements, they're all important.

I want camaraderie and chemistry in the team room. I want ownership by the team. I think it probably holds more true over there than over here. I want horses for courses. I want guys that can navigate Marco Simone in September, and caddies because it's a hilly gem. There's numerous factors.

Shoot, we can get into stats, too, probably, but I don't have all that data yet. But I'm going to rely on all those factors when it comes to -- and those gentlemen, those guys, whether it's my vice captains or those guys that make it on merit to help me formulate my team.

Q. To kind of go off of what Gary just said, Luke was in here yesterday and said that he has some clarity now when it comes to LIV players. Most of them have turned down their Tour membership so they can't be involved with the Ryder Cup. How much time, if at all, have you spent thinking about if a possible LIV player could be a qualifier or be a pick for your team?

ZACH JOHNSON: I haven't given -- it's funny you say that because I was talking about that just the other day with some of my vice captains. We're at a point right now where when it comes to -- it's not even a discussion item.

There's maybe a couple guys that have come close to securing their spot in the top 6, but when it comes to picks, it's not even on my radar. I haven't even -- especially given how many points are still out there, whether you're talking about major championships or elevated events or all of the above.

I think it would be premature and almost irresponsible to even go into that. It's not on my radar right now.

Q. Based on what you saw in Le Golf National in Paris, what do you expect the configuration or kind of the setup is going to be or the adaptations from the European team to get some advantage?

ZACH JOHNSON: That's a great question. That subject

has been approached within the confines of my team and the stat group that we use, the data-crunching nerds as I like to call them.

I'm not one to go on assumptions. It's probably not a great thing.

At the same time, any safe assumption or anything that's been kind of consistent every four years when we go across the pond, it's the setup. When I say that, I mean usually it's -- it's actually, again, I keep using this word. Well, it's difficult. I'd say it's pretty proper in the sense that it becomes very cliché. You have to hit fairways. It feels like the fairways kind of come in, the rough comes up. So it puts a really strong emphasis on the first shot.

Then from there obviously the greens, given probably the consistency week in, week out of the European Tour versus the PGA TOUR, they seem to be a little bit slower, maybe. Marco Simone has an ability to probably go both directions. I think that's a pretty cool, unique future is they can speed those jokers up pretty quick and also slow them down if they want. Luke has that ability, which again is a really cool trait of the Ryder Cup.

I don't want to say I have safe expectations yet. I'll know more as time goes on. I did witness the Italian Open two weeks ago, three weeks ago, and you could kind of tell that the rough was getting up there. And from what I could tell, some of the fairway widths and sight lines were slightly different than what I remember in September when I played it myself.

But all of that I think is fantastic. That's what this tournament is all about. Certainly you can cater to your team, but you can also figure out what's just best at the end of the week for your team, whether it's here or there, and that's what that captain has as the home host.

Q. Based on that, in looking at the calendar and the tournaments you have coming up, what would be the opportunities to get your team prepared for those conditions?

ZACH JOHNSON: Also, a great question. This one I can answer easy, too. I have something already in store and a plan. I made it a priority, and I'm very grateful that the powers that be at the PGA of America have granted me that liberty, in the sense that I'm taking the 12 guys that make my team to Rome two weeks prior to the event -- two and a half weeks prior to the event, so that way we get our feet on the grounds, they get their feet on the grounds, experience Marco Simone firsthand. Then when we leave and come back home for two weeks, they'll have at least, I think, a pretty realistic expectation as to what is required.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

I think it helps. I think that trip right there is going to be crucial. That's a strong word, but I think just key for a number of reasons. Certainly chemistry and camaraderie and all that good stuff inside the locker room. But more than that, we all know that -- those that have played, we all know Monday through Thursday is pretty trying. There's a lot that goes on. And if we have any weather issues or just things get really congested and difficult and tight, they've already experienced it, so they don't have to push themselves immensely. Does that make sense?

I just think it's -- I wouldn't change Monday through Thursday. It's beautiful. It happens every two years, and it's fantastic, whether you're talking about the evenings or the days.

But it's a priority for those guys to get on Marco Simone.

Q. Historically that's been a tough buy-in to get players to go over early, no matter if it was two weeks early or two months early or whatever it was. What have you done to talk to 12 players that you don't even know who they are yet to convince them that they're actually going to come over, and will that be part of your process in regards to if you pick somebody or not if they're willing to make that trip?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, yeah, so the only thing I can do right now is communicate that. Communicate, one, that it's a priority to me; two, that it's a priority to Team USA and the PGA of America; and, three, put it on your radar, put it on your calendar. So I've done that.

I don't know how far down the list I've gone, but I've done that to the guys. I have not heard anything that says that no one is in support of that.

The first part of your question, it stems from what I've witnessed and experienced as a vice captain and as a player with these trips. Granted, Wisconsin is a lot easier to get to, but everybody made it a priority.

There's certain things that come about, whether it's an injury or whatever it may be, it's a hurdle you can't get over, but that's okay. You can figure that out. But if you can get the high, high percentage of them there, that's massive.

In talking to Steve Stricker, in talking to Davis and certainly Jimmy and Fred, this has become a priority, and everybody is in full support.

Q. You have three vice captains. Two of them have been former Ryder Cup captains. One of them has been a captain on the Presidents Cup for decades it

seems like. Where are the young guys, and is that something that you're waiting to see what happens before you bring somebody on who's inexperienced who hasn't done this in the past?

ZACH JOHNSON: Sure. Well, I don't know if you're -- I have three former captains and one non-former captain that has captained in another Cup. Is that what you're saying? So I have four guys.

Yeah, the way I see it is this: There's kind of a bunch of factors in there. Number one, I think it's proper for me and responsible for me to put the guys that have a really good chance of making this team around the guys they want to be around. That's number one. They want to be around these guys.

Number two, I respect all four of those guys for what they've done on the golf course and off and in these Cups. I would say, number three, yeah, for me having that wisdom and experience, good and bad, is something I know I can rely on.

The most mundane of circumstances to the most heavy of circumstances, I can go to these guys and say, hey, what did you do here or what do you think about this, and they're going to have at least some sort of morsel of wisdom I think that I can chew on. That's all that.

Now, going back to it, yes, I mean, I don't think it's a responsibility of mine to provide for the youth. It's a responsibility of mine to provide for future captains, regardless of age. I don't think that necessarily needs to be somebody young. I just think it's something -- I've still got one, and I'm going to keep him in my pocket. I don't know who that is. I'm just saying, I'm going to keep that for the time being.

I think when things progress, it'll happen naturally, and we're going to formulate five vice captains that get along great, and those five vice captains are going to be wanted by the guys that have a really good chance of making the team.

Q. For the players not playing on the PGA TOUR, are their performances in the majors this summer the best and the only way to judge their perform?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, firsthand? Yeah. I don't travel anywhere but the PGA TOUR and the majors. Technically I'm not in the U.S. Open, so that's going to be difficult, but I'm going to try to get in.

I don't know. I haven't really gotten down to the stats and crunching of data and that sort of thing, so it's not really fair

for me to say that's the only measurement. But I am in the golf circles. I know what's going on. I'm not oblivious to things.

The way I see it is every guy that wants to make the U.S. Ryder Cup team should try to make the top 6. However that looks, you've got to play good and earn your way onto that team. I've been on both sides of that. It's not fun not getting picked, and it's not fun waiting for that phone call to be picked unless you get it. It's a tough thing as a pro, but it's something you've got to go through.

I want all those guys to try their best and try to make the team and make it a priority.

Q. Just on current form do you think Dustin Johnson is among the top 12 American best players at the moment?

ZACH JOHNSON: Really difficult for me to judge that. Again, I don't know the golf courses they're playing. Never seen them. I'm not there on foot in person.

You're talking about an individual whose resume is extremely deep and wide. He's certainly in my generation one of the best players I've ever competed against, but it's not fair for me to guess his true form or anybody's true form that I can't witness.

Q. One of the themes heading over to Italy will be the U.S. having a 30-year drought winning in Europe. Obviously you've looked at that a lot, and obviously this team goes in there at 0-0. What will be some of your messaging there, and what seems to be some of the themes you've come up with as you look at the past?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, I'm a mind that's pretty simple. I love teams that go into places they haven't and probably shouldn't but do, number one.

Number two, what a great opportunity to just go over there and show off. Number three, fully embrace what's difficult. That's what I've done my entire career, embrace the opportunity that's presented, and that is they're not going to be in your favor and relish that, love that.

I wouldn't have it any other way. This is why I'm here.

Q. Given the quality of teams that have gone over there through the years, is it kind of an amazing stat as you look across --

ZACH JOHNSON: If you're just going to go based on pure numbers, sure. I'm not going to sit here and say I'm overly

surprised, but yeah, given the quality of American golf over the last so many years, yeah, it's pretty impressive what the European team has done.

I'm confident knowing that the team they're going to assemble is going to be willing to keep that going and wanting to keep that going, so it's going to be a very hard task. But again, one that I'm jacked for.

I'm still going to try to make my team. That sounds really, really outlandish, but I'd love to have the opportunity to not pick me.

Q. On the trip over there with these guys, every player nowadays is kind of their own traveling band of trainers and coaches and --

ZACH JOHNSON: Sure.

Q. When you go over for this pre-trip, is it just the 12, or how do you envision this actually looking?

ZACH JOHNSON: Some of the specifics are still fluid. We're not really concrete on what and who and how many, but all of what you just said I can tell you has been talked about and taken into full consideration, especially you've got to look at the practical side.

They're a week and a half coming off the TOUR Championship. Well, I would suspect they are. Most of those guys are going to be around that field, right? And they're tired, and so you've got to take all that.

The beauty of it is there's four weeks between the TOUR Championship and the Ryder Cup, so I'm confident knowing that these guys -- again, I know they're making it a priority, so I know they'll take care of their bodies, but if there's anything I can do along the way, I'm certainly going to give it its full attention.

Q. You mentioned that you're only physically present obviously at PGA TOUR sites. Not only not seeing those guys in terms of their form but also just talking to people, and I wonder if you're kind of making sure to be in communication with guys who you're not actually speaking to and seeing on a regular basis of just kind of having a relationship, maintaining a relationship.

ZACH JOHNSON: Sure. Well, I get to see them, I guess, technically three or four weeks a year, this year. So that part is difficult, but you're talking about a number of guys that are my friends. I would fully embrace the opportunity to speak with them if they want to chat with me. That would be amazing.

I'm an open book. They can call me. They have my number, et cetera, et cetera. I'm not going to sit here and say that I'm shutting that down. I am fully in as the Ryder Cup captain for the Team USA and whatever that looks like.

Q. Since you talked about Dustin, you saw Brooks at Augusta. Can you give an assessment of where you think his form is and where he's at in the equation?

ZACH JOHNSON: Well, I haven't really seen where he's at since Augusta. He played really good that one week, but it's one week. I don't want to sit here and say that it's concrete, it's the only thing we're going to be looking at. It's one week, at a major venue, at the Masters tournament. He played great.

But there's a lot of golf. There's still a lot of golf between now and then. One of the factors that we've looked at over the years is what kind of form are the guys in when it gets close to the TOUR Championship. I think that would be wise for me to look at.

I remember playing really well one spring thinking, man, I've got this, I'm a shoe-in, and I didn't make the team. There's a lot of factors involved.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for your time, Zach.

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