

PGA Championship

Wednesday, May 15, 2024

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Valhalla Golf Club

John Lindert, PGA

Seth Waugh

Kerry Haigh

Press Conference



JULIUS MASON: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining us this week for the 106th PGA Championship. Before the strongest field in golf tees off tomorrow morning at 7:15, we want to make sure you get some quality time with The PGA of America president John Lindert, The PGA of America CEO Seth Waugh and our chief championships officer Kerry Haigh.

John, you were here ten years ago for the 2014 championship and fell in love with Valhalla, the community. No surprise you are just as excited about this week right now.

JOHN LINDERT: Yeah, no, this is obviously a great week. We've had three great previous PGA Championships here. Two of them ended up in playoffs in 1996 in 2000, and historic playoffs, to say the least, and obviously 2014 with Rory's victory in darkness.

It's been a great venue, Ryder Cup, two KitchenAid Senior PGA Championships. Community's great, and as you said, strongest field in golf. We have 99 of the Top-100 players in the world here this week, run by a great team, a great staff. Keith Reese, who is a PGA member, is the general manager. Kyle Cramer is the head professional.

We have six first-time players here on the Corebridge Financial team. The Corebridge Financial team is actually 21 players this year because of a gentleman by the name of Michael Block. I think you might remember Michael Block from last year, and we have actually six players that have played on our men's PGA Cup team in previous years.

We are looking forward to another great week. We are looking forward to our Corebridge Financial team having some players make the cut and maybe another Top-15 finish.

JULIUS MASON: Seth, could you please talk about the special investment The PGA of America is making right here in the Louisville community here this week.

SETH WAUGH: Yeah, thanks, Julius, and hello, everybody. Thank you for being here today and more importantly what you do for us all year and the rest of this week.

Yeah, when I got here, we had three pillars to our foundation, which was, you know, junior golf through Junior League, we had WORKS, which was to diversify and include, welcome everybody to the game, and HOPE, which is saving lives of our veterans. HOPE is Helping Our Patriots Everywhere.

We realize that as we are creating all these new golfers that if there's not a place for them to play, we are going to have some issues over time. So we created a fourth pillar called A Place to Play. And what it's meant to do is kind of help restore so many of the municipals and community golf around the country has gone sort of under-invested in, maybe mismanaged and going into disarray, and they are built in the right places; they're for the people, near the people. If they go away, that land doesn't come back. So we created a pillar that would do a number of things to try and help there, advise but also do grants.

We also realize that in each of the major cities that we come into, we are sort of there for a couple years in terms of the setup. We're there for a week, and then we leave. We didn't really want to feel like carpet baggers. We wanted to leave a lasting legacy of PGA of America.

We decided to give grants to each of the majors that we go to, and that's \$250,000 which kind of launches things. The great news is we have given away about a million and a half dollars over the last three years and that million and a half dollars has turned into 30 million because of public and private donations that have gone along with it.

Our kind of Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval has kind of launched a lot of things. So we work with our section and the club and the facility that we are at and choose a worthy place. This year we have picked Seneca golf



course, and the really cool thing is that the new owners of Valhalla have also -- four folks have leaned in and agreed to match our gift. So there's \$500,000 going. Incredible generosity from Jimmy Kirchdorfer, David Novak, Junior Bridgeman and Ches Musselman. They have been amazing owners. Those of you that have been here in the past, we sold it to them about a year and a half ago, and they have put about 30 million or so of their own money into this in terms of really beautifying this thing, and they have been incredible partners.

What that will allow Seneca to do is create a new practice facility, create a new putting facility, an indoor. And look, we try to do it at places that are not only welcoming to all but invitational to all, and that's what we are trying to do around the country.

Which kind of leads me to a little bit of the state of the game and talking about that for a second, if you don't mind, Julius.

Look, the professional game is obviously a little messy right now or the tour game is a little messy for sure. But the game that we live in every day, where we sort of are in our 30,000 kind of every day is in the recreational game, and that's frankly never been better. It's 45 million players at this point. There's 125 that touch it through watching on television or "Full Swing" or whatever it might be. It's over a \$100 billion business.

It's growing in, you know, the right ways. The fastest growing cohorts are the females, and they represent about 30 percent of the game now. 60 percent of the on-course growth has come from females, whether it's girls or women and people of color, which has also been the other fastest-growing cohort, and it's almost 25 percent of it for the game.

And really importantly, the game has gotten a lot younger, and it's happened very quickly. But almost 50 percent of the game now is under 35 years of age, which is an extraordinary change, and any other sport would kind of kill for those demographics, I think. I think about baseball in that regard.

So a lot of great things are going on, and that's because of, again, our 30,000. We are basically at 31,000 now and we are also getting younger as a membership. Our associates are the highest since 2009. Our average pay is over \$100,000 now.

So we really feel like a few years ago, our biggest concern was not a lack of demand but a lack of supply in terms of people that would be on the front line of the game, and there's no question that they have put their thumb on the

scale in terms of this growth. We are really proud of where we are and frankly our membership sort of scores have never been higher. So we are in a good spot.

JULIUS MASON: Thanks very much, Seth.

Kerry, you have overseen seven spectator championships here at Valhalla dating back to 1996 including this, your fourth PGA Championship. The last time many of us were here was ten years ago. How different does the golf course look, and what do you have in store for the players this week?

KERRY HAIGH: Thanks, Julius.

It's always extremely exciting for me to come back to Valhalla. There's so many great memories that we've had here since 1996; all the championships you mentioned.

This year, particularly, new golf course almost. John Ballard, the superintendent and his team have done an incredible job in preparing the course. An investment was made two or three years ago to switch the fairways and tees from bentgrass poa to zoysia. And as you can see, the conditioning is just second-to-none.

The big part of that is because of the ownership group, the new ownership group who persuaded or asked the membership to basically not play the golf course since last November, and we are now into May. For any club to do that is an incredible sacrifice.

Jimmy is in the audience. I want to thank he and the entire membership for doing that because the proof of the pudding is what you see out there. The work that we have done over the years with the drainage and the quality conditions, it just makes it more exciting for me and hopefully for us to prepare this championship for the next four days and I can't wait for it to start.

JULIUS MASON: Happy to take some questions now.

Q. Seth, your comments on the game having grown, I know a lot of things that the PGA has done at this championship have been of the belief that the professional game is a big part of inspiring the program, but we have seen kind of something a little bit different than that with the strife in the pro game. Does that change your perspective on that between say, the distance topic, rangefinders, that connection?

SETH WAUGH: It's a great question, and we actually talked about this this morning at our board meeting. You know, the sort of model has always been, you watch it on television and then you go play it, right.



Frankly, it's reversed itself. As I said before, it's gotten a bit messy and it's showing up in ratings, I think, right. I don't want to read too much into six months, but it feels like ratings are definitely declining, and yet at the same time, the recreational game is booming. So I don't know if people are deciding to play rather than watch or they become players and then watch, or how that works, but it is a departure.

It's something that, you know, I wouldn't say we are excited about it but I think long term we want everything to be healthy. This championship, along with a couple other majors and a thing called the Ryder Cup, are what allows us to run our programs, and you all know that. We have two kind of waterfront properties in the men's game and one in the women's golf, and those are what gives us a platform to tell our story, to show our professionals, you know, triple-threats that are out there every day but also finance ourselves, frankly.

So are we worried about the health of the game? Absolutely, at the professional level. But it really does seem that that sort of traditional mindset of watch first, play second may -- that paradigm may be shifting.

Q. Kerry, on the invitation list with Talor Gooch, he's probably the first guy who would appear to get an invitation based strictly on his LIV performance. The question is: Did you see it that way, and secondly, given the kind of vagueness of the invitation list, do you feel it's at all necessary to be maybe a little more transparent on what exactly you're looking at to have players have a carrot to chase? That's an American thing, Kerry.

KERRY HAIGH: Well, our invitation process has been pretty much the same for many years. You know, we have 15 criteria that are pretty much set, and then there's an opportunity for us to invite those players who may not be in those 15 criteria. We're fortunate in that case to be able to look at various tours, all tours, including LIV, world golf rankings, federation rankings, DP World Tour, New Zealand, Korn Ferry Tour, and from those identify what we think are the best players or potentially the best future players and offer them invitations.

That process over the years has made us be able to have what we feel is a field we are really proud of. It brings the best players in the whole world together to compete on a great golf course for a major championship, and that's what we pride -- we are very proud of the field that we have, and we feel they are the best players in the game.

Q. As a quick follow on that, on the Asia Swing on The

European Tour, they have had a number of different segments in their season. Did you choose that one specific because of its placement on the calendar?

KERRY HAIGH: Yeah, the fact that the Asia Swing is pretty much the closest swing to the PGA Championship and the DP World Tour, offers the opportunity for players that are playing well in the past four to six weeks, to lead in and play. A couple of those players were already exempt through other criteria, but other players got in through that criteria.

So we are excited, and it's another way to identify potentially great up-and-coming players.

SETH WAUGH: The only thing I'd add to that is we've talked for a long time about being the best field in golf, and you could debate that, obviously not with us, but with others.

And we have the most flexibility of any of the majors, right. We are not bound to World Rankings. We are not bound to special invitations. Obviously we have exemptions from past majors and past champions and things like that.

But Kerry has the ability, we all have the ability, to kind of lean in and really pick the best field in golf, and that's never been, frankly, more important than it is right now.

Q. Tiger made it clear that he's had conversations with you about Ryder Cup Captaincy but he has not committed and I'm not sure where you are on that as well. But can you talk about the discussions and is there a drop-dead date in regards to when you have to go another way?

SETH WAUGH: I missed that. Did Tiger -- yeah, look, he obviously made it pretty public in Georgia a month or so ago, and I obviously was asked about it today.

We have had conversations for months. We have also had conversations at the Ryder Cup Committee, multiple conversations about potential captains and a list of potential captains.

You know, Tiger, he's been pretty clear. I think we all know that he can be pretty focused, and that's one of his many superpowers is that ability to sort of tunnel and decide. And he doesn't do anything that he's not fully committed to, and we totally respect that.

And he's got a lot on his plate right now. He's very active, obviously, on the TOUR side of things. We want to give him and the committee space to decide, you know, decide how it plays out.



You know, everybody sort of has a timeline for this, and I realize it's a news day and you guys want news, but we have picked captains later than this. We've picked captains earlier than this. Luke Donald was named a year out a year ago and they had a pretty good performance, for instance. We think there's plenty of time, and putting an artificial date on it is not something we need to do.

We have continued the conversations. Obviously want to respect his -- he's playing in a major and we want to respect that, and we'll re-engage next week or so.

You know, Bethpage is going to be epic. I really believe -- all apologies to Guy Kinnings who is here, I think it's going to be the Ryder Cup of Ryder Cups. New York and The Ryder Cup is a pretty incredible combination. We are going to have a great captain and a great team and we are going to be very competitive.

Q. The other question I wanted to ask you about is Jimmy Dunne. Obviously you know Jimmy pretty well and you are members of the same club. Can you talk about what your thoughts are about Jimmy resigning from the TOUR policy board?

SETH WAUGH: Yeah, look, he's a very thoughtful guy and he's a grownup and he obviously has his own reasons for what he did. I wish his timing had been, you know, different than the Monday of our major.

Look, they are going to have great candidates and I know they will get a great replacement for him. Wish him and them luck.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the rollback. You guys had your reaction to the rollback once it was announced. What are you now doing behind the scenes at The PGA of America in your diligence to support your members?

SETH WAUGH: Wouldn't be behind the scenes if I told you that, would it?

Look, you know, we were pretty public at the time and continue to be that we didn't want to do anything that would disrupt the momentum we have in the recreational game. We totally understand what the USGA and R&A are trying to do, which is protect the game for the next 50 years, and respect that.

We also don't always have to totally agree on everything. We are very thankful that they went from bifurcation, which we thought would be a disaster, particularly for our -- for the game. It would have created chaos, and our 30,000

would have been on the frontline of trying to police that, which is, you know, a very tough position. You don't want your head pro to be checking people's balls on the first tee. It's just not a very pleasant thing to have to do right.

We are thankful that they went to one rule for all, which we agree with. We are thankful that they reduced the speed at which they were testing and we are thankful that they pushed it out. We would have gone less, and we also probably would have extended the comment period in a perfect world so we could do some more stuff publicly.

Are there still conversations going on within the industry? Yeah. It's a hard issue. Nobody really knows if we are reaching human limits at this point or not or whether we are reaching technology limits or not. But our perspective was, anything that would make the game harder and less fun is probably not something we are for, while we are finally having the moment of growth that we have begged for forever.

I feel like we as an industry have created a lot of that. We can all say it's COVID, but there's no question, the industry, us kind of leading the charge, I think, put our thumb on the scale in terms of creating all the growth that Jeff is talking about.

It could be fragile. We want to protect that in every way we can.

Q. Just to follow up, do you agree fundamentally with the way the USGA went about the testing itself? You've seen the numbers. Do you believe the numbers?

SETH WAUGH: The hard part for us is there's not just one set of numbers, right, and we don't have our own because we don't have -- we don't have -- you know, we have one event a year for the men, right. So we are not pretending to be the scientific experts.

But the manufacturers have some numbers. The TOUR has some numbers, and the governing bodies have numbers. We are not thinking that, you know, we don't believe they somehow baked the numbers or whatever. We are just sort of looking at it, you know, anecdotally of, you know, what we would do in this moment in time.

And again, you know, the process, look, they took five years to make a decision. Like we can't argue that they didn't, you know -- they were very collaborative. We knew everything they were thinking.

I do think our involvement changed, you know, again, as I said, the bifurcation as well as probably the timing and as

well as probably the actual speed. So we are thankful for that. We just probably would have gone a little -- we wouldn't probably have gone as far on the speed.

You know, are we smart enough for two miles an hour or are they smart enough for two miles an hour? Time will tell, right. But look, we have a great relationship with those governing bodies and everybody in the ecosystem, and we collaborate all the time. But you know, we don't always agree, and I think that's healthy and that's sort of what the industry should be doing.

Q. Has your stance on the rollback softened at all as time has gone on and could you maybe elaborate on how do you feel a potential rollback could affect the game going forward?

SETH WAUGH: My views are what they were at the time. I don't think I've softened. I said roughly the same thing I just said the day it was announced, as has John and others that speak for us, Kerry, etc.

You know, it's far enough out where I'm not sure that we will know, and I do think -- you know, I do think that players will adapt. The very best will figure out this new ball and figure out how to hit it farther than I certainly do. And I just, again, I think our biggest fear is for that part of the game that is growing, are you going to sort of disrupt that for one-half of one-half of 1 percent that are out there, right, and where do you draw the line of what's elite and what's not. You know, is a club championship elite or not.

And so, you know, we are glad that it's one rule, and the game is going to be bigger than any of this. Like we can all argue about it, but the game is going to be fine, you know, both recreational and I think professionally, as well.

JOHN LINDERT: I'll chime in there a little bit.

You talk to the manufacturers and they tell you the golf ball is the engine by which they design all their clubs. Whenever that ball gets designed, you're going to see new equipment that's going to roll out to match that golf ball, new drivers, woods, different set of wedges to marry up to that ball.

From my perspective, I have said this kind of half-heartedly and half-jokingly, but from my perspective, as somebody that owns a golf shop, I'm probably going to sell a boatload of golf balls in 2028, and my members are going to store them until 2036, and they're going to continue to play them.

I know my membership; I know what they will do. Probably won't sell any golf clubs in 2029, but then sell some of the new clubs in 2030. That's what I see.

I see it's going to be a little bit of a challenge. We are trusting people to play by the rules like we normally do. Most of us don't have the resources to stand on the first tee and check whether the golf ball or our members are playing on a conforming ball list.

But that transition is going to be challenging.

Q. Two-part question for John and anyone else who wants to weigh in. There's a perception in the local media that the sale of this course and the move to Frisco hurts Valhalla's chances of getting this event again. Is that true? And secondly, can you maybe give us a sense for what are the factors that will come into play in awarding future PGAs other than profit.

SETH WAUGH: Did Jimmy plant that question? (Laughter).

JOHN LINDERT: I'll let Kerry answer the second. But from my perspective, having had this as the fourth PGA Championship here, every single one of them has been extremely successful. I've talked to other venues about it. Part of this is a community effort. The ownership group that's been mentioned before here is fabulous. The golf course is fabulous. The players love it.

So as far as -- the location, May date, it's beautiful out, more or less, if you'd like a little bit of weather here and there. I don't see why this facility wouldn't continue to be considered.

As I said, two of the three PGA Championships we've had here have resulted in a playoff. So it's a wonderful, wonderful venue. The community is extremely supportive. We've sold out of tickets. Hospitality has been off the charts. So from that perspective, and for me, I would say it would continue to be considered.

KERRY HAIGH: John said it all. We've had a great partnership for many years with the club, the membership, the community, who have always been so supportive of The PGA of America and our championships.

Just like every other venue that we go to, we want this week to be a success. We want it to be the greatest event we've ever had, and if it is, we'll certainly look to be talking and see if there's possibility to do something in the future.

SETH WAUGH: The only thing I'd add -- a couple things.

One is, Louisville shows up, right, and they show up in every way and that's why we are having a record, and it's an amazing town that gets behind things, which is

fantastic.

I'd also say that we have a discipline where we don't commit to future sites past seven to eight years. Some of our other majors have gone a little bit past that, and so we are trying to be disciplined about that. So the fact that we don't announce something, you know, this week or next week or even next year doesn't mean Valhalla isn't a great venue that we are thinking about.

Q. Quick follow. When do you expect to announce '32?

KERRY HAIGH: We don't have a timeline.

Q. This is your fifth tournament in May. I'm curious how you would assess that move from a business standpoint or even, Kerry, from a competition standpoint.

SETH WAUGH: I'll go first. I'm sure everybody has an opinion. I think it's been amazing. I think it's amazing for the pattern of golf, right. So you now have one a month for four months, and then obviously the TOUR gets to finish with their FedExCup and there's a lot more logic to it.

We don't now compete -- this summer we would have been competing with the Olympics, which would have been another added thing, and every four years we would be doing that.

We think that it adds more venues than it takes away. It obviously takes away some of the potentially northern but we played in Rochester, New York, last year and it was pretty cool.

We are rethinking that even a little bit because grasses are different, and sadly the climate is changing a little bit, and it adds -- a lot of the players this week said this is a whole lot better than August in terms of that playability.

It also speaks to what we do. It's kind of the beginning of the season in a lot of the country and so to talk about who we are and what our professionals do every year in terms of opening day for golf, if you will, is also another bonus for us.

So for us, our ratings have been very good but that isn't like why we did it. We did it for all those other reasons, and ratings is a little bit of a bonus to the whole thing.

So yeah, from our perspective, and I think from golf's perspective, which is the lens that we look at everything through quite frankly, we are better in May than we were in August.

JOHN LINDERT: I'll just say that to Seth's point, it does give us that opportunity to tell the story about what the PGA of America member does and promote our programming. We get to broadcast PGA Junior League. We started the week with the Secretary's Cup, which is for helping our patriots every, our PGA HOPE program, and we get to advertise that and broadcast that to the world.

May is a great time. We have a lot of our golf courses are just getting ready to open up. I'm from Lansing, Michigan, and we are just probably getting ready to get the snowblowers and put them away for the year hopefully.

It does allow us to tell our story, so I view it much the same way. It's been a perfect move.

Q. Several of the LIV players and their leadership in the absence of OWGR accreditation, have sort of intimated it's up to the majors to make sure that some of the best players on that tour get included. You went through exactly how you looked at it in terms of the PGA, but you are on the OWGR board. The access for them is obviously going to wane as some of their players are no longer exempt. Bryson is a good example after next year. How do you see it being resolved going forward? Are you sort of hopeful sitting on the side that there is some sort of a deal made?

SETH WAUGH: So there's an OWGR question in there and there's also a deal question in there, right, you snuck two in there, but I'll answer them both I promise.

One thing I failed to mention earlier, however, is I just wanted to thank Sally Morgan from the Kentucky Golf House and Chad Martin, who is the president of our Kentucky section, for welcoming us here and being such a part of Seneca, as well. I should have done that before.

So on the -- three things, I think.

One, in terms of our invites, which Kerry answered so well already, we said last year it's going to be a bit more of an art form than a math problem. We have the flexibility to do that and I think we have put together the best field in golf. That's Kerry's job and we all sort of sign off on it and we are very proud of what we are doing here.

As far as OWGR goes, you know, when LIV asked for points -- now, first of all, they publicly assumed they were going to have points and made some promises necessarily -- potentially, even, and really didn't apply for a while after that, and then finally did apply, and I think they expected an answer in, you know, a very short period of time.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

You know, that's just never happened in any -- you know, we always kind of look at new tours, and they take a bit of time. One is, are they going to be successful -- are they actually going to launch; are they going to survive more than one season, and what quality of play is going to be there before we kind of begin to think about it.

So I think they misunderstood how the process went. I'm not saying it's their fault. I'm just saying I think they misunderstood.

I would say having -- again, I'm one board member, but we were very responsive throughout. I went back and forth a number of different times. Peter Dawson, who is our chairman, independent chair, had a lot of conversations with them. I didn't have any directly. We told them there was some stuff that we could solve, which is 54 holes and no cut, like, yeah, we can solve for that. We certainly will in other places, both 54 holes and no cut, now on some of the TOUR events.

But there is two fundamental things that we weren't sure we could solve for with math, which was relegation and promotion, and what that looked like because that was murky and they didn't want to share exactly who was sort of there and so we never knew the percentages of what that would look like.

And secondly, just the inherent conflict of team versus individual play and whether that could create a situation, and it actually became public last year when one of the players talked about you know trying to 2-putt as opposed to trying to make a putt to win a tournament. He was trying to 2-putt for his team.

So we went back with that and told them if they could solve that or we could engage on it. Kind of went back and forth a few times, but they didn't change their position. We didn't really change ours. We've had very serious conversations about it, and then without telling us publicly, they have withdrawn their application.

So I don't think OWGR's job is to seek out tours to do that, and if they wanted to reapply, we'd certainly entertain it. We've behaved properly. Kerry sits on the technical committee that reviews all this stuff and we have behaved properly. It's very cordial. It's not a war. I don't want to pretend that. They were responsive, too, but they didn't get an answer that they wanted.

So that's kind of where it is, and you know, etc.

On the deal side of things, look, I said earlier, it's messy, and it has been, right, and it seems to get messier every

week. I'm a little bit -- I'm a very optimistic type and I'm sort of hoping it's darkest before dawn, if you will, but I think, you know, I think the best thing for the game is a deal. And we've been very consistent on that front.

What has been an unsustainable business model has put pressure on other places like the Tour that creates some financial dynamics as well as other dynamics that are very hard, and quite frankly it puts some financial pressure on us, as well. I don't think the game is big enough for two tours like that, and I think we are diluting the game in a way that is not healthy. We've said that, really, from the beginning.

I hope there's a deal. I think both sides are not only committed to trying to find a deal but really need a deal, and in my history of deal making, when both sides kind of need something to happen, it generally does. I don't know the timing. I don't have any insider information that you all don't have. But I'm hopeful that there will be a deal over time.

And what I would say, I hope there's urgency because I do think it's doing damage to the Tour, to the game. As I said earlier, I hope it's short-term damage, as opposed to permanent damage, and so I hope there's some urgency in the timing around it because I just don't think it's a healthy situation right now.

JULIUS MASON: John, Seth, Kerry, thank you very much. Have a wonderful week. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports