

John Deere Classic

Tuesday, June 28, 2022

TPC Deere Run

Silvis, Illinois, USA

Clair Peterson

Press Conference

DOUG MILNE: Okay. We'll get started. I was thinking back for a few minutes on everything I've had the opportunity to do in this portion of my career. I've gotten to sit up at tables with Tiger and on down the line, but right now I can honestly say that never been more of a treat to sit up here with someone than you. When I started at the PGA TOUR as a media official in 2007 I was anxious, I was nervous, I didn't think I would fit in, I didn't think I would do a good job. My first tournament, thank the Lord, where I was the advance media official was here at the John Deere Classic and you were one of the first people I met. And it was then and there that I knew that I'm going to be okay and that's because of people like you. And every year, I think I told you yesterday, this is just one of four tournaments that I have not missed. I do have a say-so in where I get to go and this is one of the ones that I haven't missed and I don't plan to miss. So it's obviously with mixed emotions that I'm up here to introduce you and just a remarkable career and everything. So with all that, thank you for everything you've meant to me over the years. I see you at so many other tournaments as your way of just trying to make the John Deere Classic a better event. And you've done an incredible job with it. So with that just a few comments from you on how you're feeling and what you're excited about and looking forward to as you move on to bigger and better and then we'll take some questions from these guys.

CLAIR PETERSON: Wow, that was very nice, Doug. Yeah, it's gone by quickly, obviously. My history with the event really was back as John Deere liaison back in 1997 when they inked the deal. And then built the golf course. Kim Huffman of course was the tournament director here and just kind of being able to have a John Deere branding mindset into the presentation of the event was something that I was charged with. Never ever thinking that tournament director would be in my future.

Without getting into a long explanation, it did and I consider it one of the great blessings of my life. Because I led a pretty narrow John Deere, nothing wrong with that, existence before becoming tournament director. But with that assignment all these other people in town, all of the



volunteers and all of the sponsors, the PGA TOUR people like yourself that I was able to meet, the PGA TOUR universe and all of the people in these other cities that I was able to meet. It's been so gratifying.

That's what really I remember and I'm thankful for more than anything, just as you said, these relationships mean a lot and there are so many of them. I'm very thankful for that.

DOUG MILNE: Very well said. Well, with that we'll take a few questions from anybody.

Q. I was at the hotel today watching some of the PGA TOUR players doing their workouts and I was thinking about how much work they put into their game and for years they talked about magic happens at the John Deere Classic. It doesn't really just happen. You have assembled a great team with a succession plan and led something really terrific here. Can you reflect on that a little bit for us?

CLAIR PETERSON: It's one of the things that makes it easy to pass the baton. The staff we have right now Andrew Lehman is in the front row there, I know it's almost time for me to leave because Andrew's starting to wear a white shirt. So that's never happened before. (Laughing).

A little observation there.

Ashley Hanson as our assistant tournament director, Jen Cress director of sales, Micaela Booth, director of Birdies, Marshal Lamb and Sarah Hill, they all are just world-class rock stars. The envy, quite honestly of other events. We go to PGA TOUR meetings and they talk about our group.

So in a small office, seven people, it's nice to be able to retire, if that's the right word for it, I'm still going to be doing a few things, with this group in place. We got our reorganization done last fall. So this event, quite honestly, has been put one more by that group. I moved into executive director role on the org chart, which is a great gig, because everyone else does the work and I get a paycheck. That peels off after this year, unfortunately.

But anyway, yeah, it's magic what's gone on here. And it's layered with staff being the first and most important layer but everything underneath there. All of our board and our



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volunteer chairs and sponsors and everything else. Big pyramid.

Q. You've been very kind and effusive with praise for your staff, but I wonder if you've had any time to reflect on your personal journey and beyond what you responded to Doug, just the idea that people that work in sports say they're going to work in sports forever and you're pulling the plug on your own, on your own terms. It's got to be bittersweet.

CLAIR PETERSON: Not as much as you might think as far as the bitter part of it. It's been sweet. To me this is a present moment business and you better be in the present moment if you want to survive. There's so many things that you have to accept and adapt to that I really have never felt like a big retrospective look either in the past or a big look forward was part of the way I approached life or the way I approached this job.

My feeling, my prediction is as I walk out of the stone house in December and these seven people it might hit me differently, because they're so great to hang with. But there's not any bitterness at all at this point. I'm really excited about this week, we'll put another one in the book. We were reflecting on some of the early events with J.L. Lewis and Mike Brisky and the hot 1999. And Mark Hensby, who is in our field, in 2004. And Vijay winning here my first year full-time in 2003. So all those things are great memories and things I cherish. But there's not a lot of sadness yet. Maybe I'll get sad some time.

Q. Can you talk, was it an 8-iron that you hit on the 17th hole to close out Dick von Maur in the Davenport Country Club championship?

CLAIR PETERSON: I'll tell you the finish if you want, but none of these people are going to want.

Q. I just thought that you're here you might as well talk about golf shots.

CLAIR PETERSON: It was the 3-iron on 7-iron that did the deal.

Q. Oh, wow. Okay. When you talk to other tournaments, the relationship and the symbiosis that you brought as a John Deere marketer by trade to the position of tournament director, is that a relationship that is the envy of the TOUR and is it something that is -- how is that? Can you reflect on how that's helped the John Deere Classic grow and remain going on 26 years now of tournament sponsorship?

CLAIR PETERSON: Yeah, I don't think it's unfair to say

that if it weren't for John Deere this event would have been gone. Having a world-class respected brand like John Deere and Company like John Deere as title sponsor changed everything. Donated the land, provided the equipment across the entire network.

So we are the envy of many events because of the depth of the relationship we have with John Deere. They're a mile and a half up the road. If we need to talk to anybody, decision making wise, they're right there. And they're fully invested in what's going on here.

Their involvement in being a good corporate citizen is critically important to them. I remember when I first went through my orientation when I came out of college first as a John Deere employee, they go, We want to improve the quality of life in the places where we do business. That had nothing to do with a golf tournament, that's in their DNA anyway.

The charitable affect of the tournament means a lot to 'em. So if you go to other events, those title sponsors aren't necessarily in that hometown, in that town. The depth of this also includes they're in the equipment business, there's something really tangible to look and feel. People sit on the equipment and see the machines on display and go to the Big Dig on Tuesday or Wednesday night. So, yes, I would say that there are other events that are envious, but we never have taken that for granted and we always want to make sure that they get their money's worth. Because if they ever decide not to renew, it's going to be hard pressed to find another title sponsor with that kind of strength.

Q. We've talked in the past about the, your understanding of brand, your understanding of John Deere's culture and the things that help John Deere leverage this tournament. Has anybody tried to copy that model on TOUR that you're aware of, to dip into a sponsor's marketing department?

CLAIR PETERSON: Everyone copied our tee markers, I know that. That was a branding element that we were.

Q. Is that a template that can be replicated in any way across the TOUR?

CLAIR PETERSON: Every company's got a different culture. The other thing about John Deere's culture is they trust us and they allow us to do our thing. I know that there's some title sponsors that have a lot more influence and involvement in putting on the tournament and decisions being made than what John Deere does. So to say that there are other events with title sponsors that are copying this is really probably not fair. They have their own



way of presenting themselves and branding themselves. I mean look at all the different things, how different is it to sell equipment than it is to sell mortgages or insurance or cars or something else. It's hard to compare one company to the next when they have products and different philosophies.

Q. There's always discussion about strength of field and you spend a lot of time recruiting. Talk about your relationship with players and the way that you've tried to manage the challenges of this date and also how you go about understanding that not -- you still see players that you know won't come, but they're still happy to see you, how do you manage that?

CLAIR PETERSON: Well we've always had our challenges with the date. I like to say we hit for the cycle. We've been opposite the British Open, we've been opposite the Olympics, we've been opposite the Ryder Cup and we've been opposite the Presidents Cup. So our history is not always to have the top-10 players in the world here.

That said, we've always succeeded. It's a big deal in the community. Our title sponsor succeeds by leveraging these relationship opportunities. They're going to have 600 people in this week. And they quantified a couple years ago that they sold 130 million dollars worth of ag equipment just in guys that have played in the pro-am the last 10 years. So that's a success.

The charity, 145 million dollars basically since John Deere became title sponsor. That's a success.

So to me you can't judge the success of the tournament just by the strength of the field. It's always great to have highly ranked players, high Q rating players here. And we've had our share of those. When it happens, it's great.

One of the local newscasters this morning when they were talking about strength of field pointed out, Yeah, but those people never seem to win. So you always have question marks going into Sunday, who is going to be victorious, who is going to wind up winning. But it's been a successful week anyway.

As far as relationships, I think it's important in life to have positive relationships. So whether or not that means that they're going to come here some year or not, that's the hope.

But look at Jason Day. I mean we gave him a spot as a 17 year old. He made his first check here. I think that was 2005 or 2006. And he came back I think five times. And then he becomes No. 1 in the world. And it's tough, once

you're getting into all the majors and the World Golf Championships, you can play all over the world, it's tough to build a schedule and include our event, which is a week before the British, up until this year.

But here he is this year to come back and recognize that we gave him a spot, it's exciting to have him here and that's the value of the relationships, I think. There's not expiration date on 'em.

Webb Simpson. Same deal. We gave him a spot. Won the U.S. Open. Had a tough time coming back. But he's coming back this year. I saw him at Valspar and he goes, I'm coming back to thank you for the sponsor exemption. So that's a really long answer. Sorry about that.

Q. You talked about John Deere and the relationship with John Deere. I found from 2003 you and Kim being interviewed by Jim Mertens as they were passing the torch if you will and they asked you about the future and you, you talked about, not a direct quote, but about the community and there's ways to tap into the community that we haven't done yet. You look now 20 years later and how involved the community is. We talked about John Deere itself, but the other organization, the other charities, the other companies in the Quad Cities. How proud are you of that and is that something that you kind of set out 20 years ago with that thought process in mind, did you achieve what you may have thought of in 2003?

CLAIR PETERSON: No. 1, I don't remember saying that.

Q. It was really good.

CLAIR PETERSON: But I think we have become stronger. The experience of being a hospitality sponsor of something is first class. Not that it wasn't 20 years ago, but we continued to improve, with the build and the experience that anybody has out here. We have all of our hospitality is sold out this year, which is exciting.

So I think we have tapped into, if that's the way I termed, more corporate sponsorships. Certainly on the charity side, I don't know what our number was back in 2003, but last year we partnered with 470 different organizations and delivered 12.5 million dollars to them. Including an eight percent bonus check, which didn't exist 20 years ago. We never had the bonus program back then. So, yeah, I'm really happy with where we are today and I know that it's going to get better over time too.

Q. We've tried to ask you your favorite moment and you've very, very creatively said a favorite spot. So you don't have to pinpoint the one. So I'm going to try



it from a different angle. If you could golf a round of golf, of a foursome, yourself and three other guys, that's played in the John Deere Classic under your tenure, who would you choose to go golf with?

CLAIR PETERSON: Who played in the John Deere Classic? Well that's pretty easy, really. I mean the ones that you would think about. And they're all really great guys. And you're restricting me to three so everyone that doesn't fall in that list it would be Zach, my first exemption ever. It would be Strick, three-time champion, unbelievable. And Jordan Spieth. I just think the world of him, even though we're still waiting for him to come back and I'm sure he will some day soon. They're guys that you would love hanging with anyway.

Q. I won't ask you which media guys you want to golf with.

CLAIR PETERSON: I couldn't come up with three. This is a lot longer than I thought it was going to be, by the way.

DOUG MILNE: You're doing great.

CLAIR PETERSON: Wait until the transcripts come out.

Q. Part of your legacy, I guess, we can say is tied to your sponsor exemptions. You've done a tremendous job in the last 20 years of pinpointing the youngsters, the guys that you want to build those relationships with. Talk about that and what that means to you having seen some of these guys hand picked for these guys for the sponsor exemptions and what they have done for this tournament as a result of those sponsor exemptions.

CLAIR PETERSON: I didn't start it. I was on the executive committee with Kim as the tournament director when we invited Lucas Glover and Zach Johnson and others. I certainly believed that was a way to start relationships that could over time pay off with players coming back who had accomplished great things and it did.

I've kind of compared it, I guess, to an IPO, where there's an initial public offering of this new product and there's no promise that there's going to be success, but you try to do your homework and identify guys in this case that were going to be successful as athletes, but quite honestly we also were really focused on young men that we liked and respected and had a lot of regard for.

And there's some that were more highly ranked out of college that we didn't give spots to, just because we didn't think they checked all the boxes. Now when they succeed, that's great. I'm going to give you a true confession right

now, because people have said, Oh, wow, you know, you do a great job picking exemptions. I said no to Scottie Scheffler, okay? So don't give me too much credit. That's one that really kind of was a whiff. But I think he's going to do okay.

Anyway, that's the philosophy. It's changed now again though, you know, Pierceson Coody out of college gets a chance on the Korn Ferry TOUR through PGA TOUR University, top-5 guys go and get their professional starts and he's already a winner. So we'll see how that goes over time.

Chris Gotterup this week is really an easy guy to root for for all those reasons I talked about. As is Patrick Flavin, as is Quinn Riley, as is Luke Gannon. All great gentlemen and terrific athletes and people we expect great things from and we expect them to come back.

Q. Thanks for everything that you've done, Clair, for me over the years. I wanted to ask you how you feel about this LIV Golf thing, if you perceive it as a threat to your tournament and to the PGA TOUR in general.

CLAIR PETERSON: Well I don't think there's any doubt that it's a threat to the PGA TOUR. It's disruptive for sure. As far as the John Deere Classic, and that's all we have control over, that's all we can make decisions about.

In my opinion it's a totally different product and it's a totally different experience for a fan. We talked about all those ways that this succeeds locally. It succeeds for a title sponsor who develops relationships and has a brand presence in 200 plus countries. It means a lot to the community, 50 million dollars economic benefit. We'll leave 12 to 13 million dollars left to charity when it's all over. There's 156 world-class players in a traditional format where only half of them make it to the weekend.

So it's a totally different product than what the LIV Golf product is. They will leave Portland and not be doing all the kinds of things that we're doing here nearly as positive.

So it's changing by the day, obviously, it's changing by the week. But we're focused on things we have control over here and we're looking forward to having a big impact this week.

Q. A lot of players have not been shy to say you are the best tournament director on TOUR. What does that mean to you when you hear words like that?

CLAIR PETERSON: Well it's a terrific compliment. I don't know that you can quantify something like that and say one's 1, 2, 3, whatever. It means a lot. And I'm

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appreciative. You could argue that there's better ones out there. But I think what I've -- I'm really proud that I've tried to represent John Deere and I've tried to represent the Quad Cities. So maybe that's what they're responding to.

(Applause.)

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Q. We came here hoping you would take some credit today but that would be diametrically opposed to the way you carry yourself. I must ask you, when I went to the PGA of America on Demo Day, they had a John Deere excavator hooked up to a putter. Every time you come to this tournament each year people are wondering what the staff is going to come up with to make things differently, esthetically pleasing, exponentially. I read in a recent business journal report where your successor Andrew said, We have no shortage of ideas. We can't implement every one of them, but we sure make an effort to make it better each year. What does that legacy mean to you?

CLAIR PETERSON: It's the only way you're successful is to improve your product. It's basic business best practice. And it's, quite honestly, as much or more involved with the people at John Deere, understanding the value of this tournament, getting their money's worth, getting their best value and coming up with these ideas. We try to accommodate and we try to implement, but they are at the forefront of this right now, which is really exciting that 20 years ago they weren't necessarily as aware I don't think of the power of a PGA TOUR event and the reach of a PGA TOUR event. When you see that excavator with the driver head and know that it's being seen in 226 countries, that's pretty powerful.

DOUG MILNE: Last question and we'll let you go. What's next? What's on the horizon?

CLAIR PETERSON: Well, Andrew's left now, but he's promised me that I'm going to be able to be a player liaison. So some of those relationships that I've developed I can keep going, as well as learning the new wave of PGA TOUR players. And more specifically the Monday pro-am where we're always looking to get 28 guys to play, I'm going to be kind of in charge of that.

DOUG MILNE: Good. So you'll still be around.

CLAIR PETERSON: I will. Yeah. That's why I can't be too sad about it.

DOUG MILNE: Well thank you for everything you've done on behalf of everyone here and all those that can't be here. There's no one better.

CLAIR PETERSON: Thanks, Doug.

