

The American Express

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La Quinta, California, USA

PGA WEST Pete Dye Stadium Course

Will Zalatoris

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Will Zalatoris to the interview room here at The American Express. Will's making his first start since the 2025 PGA Championship. Can you just open up with what the past couple months have been like and how your recovery is going.

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, so I think any time that you hear a disk replacement, I think or any sort of replacement, people kind of start getting a little edgy and go, Oh my goodness, I can't believe you went through that. This is, when I say it was the easiest recovery compared to what I had to go through in 2023, it was the differences with this one it was actually solving all of my issues as opposed to kind of taking away some of the issues I had. So this is the first time I would say in four years that I haven't been able to not have any sciatica down my legs. The recovery itself this time around, like I said, it actually wasn't too bad, it was eight weeks much no movement. I was able to putt for a couple weeks and then I was able to start doing some chipping and some core work. But I think when I re-herniated the disks at the PGA, I really was kind of at a little bit of a cross roads where, three years ago when I first herniated it, I knew I was going to be a candidate for fake disks, but there wasn't much information out there about doing it on somebody in their mid 20s. So of course we did the frugal route, took our time, tried to do every modality you can possibly think of under the sun. Then finally I said, Look, let's go for it. We've got the technology. We've been putting it in long drive guys. We've been putting it in hockey players. It's been saving guys' careers. So we feel way more comfortable now doing it than we did three years ago.

So made a couple changes to my golf swing. A lot of it is actually trying to understand my body a little bit better in terms of just how I rotate around my body. A lot of people always were pretty critical of my posture, how much I was kind of diving at the ball. The difference was is that I would say over the last year I did a very good job of managing it, but this time around there's no management. After the 15th week my surgeon said, Hey, have at it. Go play as much as you can, go walk as much as you want, just be

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smart. I had some days where we went and played 36 holes, did it back-to-back days, just to try to push myself and just see what the limit was. This is stuff I haven't been able to do for three years.

So it's a long story short, it's been a long journey, but I do feel that this kind of chapter of my life is definitely over and I feel like I'm 30 to 35 will be feeling a lot better than I was 25 to 30.

THE MODERATOR: Mentally, what would you say was the biggest challenge that you had to overcome with this injury.

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I think any time you have to go through three surgeries in basically a three and a half year span you kind of question, am I able to continue to do this, is this something, even though the surgeon says, Hey, I'm not going to see you for 20 years, you know, is this true. The little things that of course always creep into your mind. But I think the beauty of this one is that I feel like for the last two years I wasn't able to practice the way I wanted to, I wasn't able to play the schedule I wanted to. I had to WD from a couple tournaments. This time around I'm pushing myself in the gym harder than I ever have. I'm able to do the things that I haven't been able to do for years. So I know that's kind of a weird thing to say at 29 years old, but obviously you know what I've been through for the last three, four, five years.

The mental side of it was very tough. Leaving the PGA not knowing if that was going to be my last professional golf tournament, given all the issues that I had had. But I would say that it only just gives you more appreciation when you come back out here.

THE MODERATOR: You're making your fifth consecutive start here this week. Can we get some comments on what it's like to be back here at La Quinta.

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I mean every year I played here it's been 70 degrees, sunny and perfection. So it's exactly how you want to start off your year. I've had a couple of nice finishes here. I love the three golf courses. The Nicklaus Course, I don't know if I still have the course record, but I had it at one point. So I've always loved coming here. This is great week to get your feet back

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underneath you for the season and given the conditions it's kind of nice to go out and make a few birdies, kind of start off the year that way. Then obviously next week you head over to Torrey Pines which is a little different.

THE MODERATOR: What are some goals or expectations that you have for yourself this week and for the 2026 season.

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I think the biggest goals this year I'm technically on a medical, I want to try to play my win into some Signature Events. I feel like I'm very capable of it. I did a start down in South Africa in December and was a little rusty Thursday, Friday. I think I might have won the weekend, actually. But that confidence where every single day I was getting better and better and doing kind of more of the special things that when you're playing well where all of a sudden maybe you chip in or you make a 40-footer. That's just stuff I've been missing. I've missed the momentum. So like I said, this is about as good as it possibly can be to be back.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions.

Q. So there's another fairly famous back in golf these days, and it seems like we're always waiting for the next bad news. You kind of sound like you don't feel like that's going to be part of your future; is that accurate?

WILL ZALATORIS: So when I had my first surgery in 2023 I was given a two-to-eight year window that they thought I would maybe need another one. But I wasn't willing to take the risk of having fake disks put in at 27 years old. The technology, they have run three million cycles on these disks, and they haven't broke 'em. They're fixed in your back, basically it's two fins that kind of hold what kind of looks like an Oreo in place. I was down to three millimeters and four millimeters of height in my disk, which essentially is nothing. And now I've got 11 in each. So all of the compression that I had from all the nerves being compressed from the lack of height. It took some time for it to fully feel it, but I would say that right when I got back to being able to chip and putt I knew immediately.

Q. That other back's a lot older than you though, too.

WILL ZALATORIS: He's got some more mileage on it, for sure. That's for sure.

Q. Obviously you did play down at Nedbank. Afterwards was there anything different or was it just you just finished the tournament and let's go to the next one?

WILL ZALATORIS: I wanted to play the next week, yeah. Any time you leave a golf tournament and you're feeling like you're just trending more and more and more by the day I wanted to try to get out as fast as I could. I usually I think I've only played Sony once and missed the cut. I tried to go there and didn't get in, which is fine, I'm on a medical. So I'll have to pick some spots this year that maybe I don't usually play, but that's okay. I know that I'm able to play every single week now compared to what I've had to do in the past, where I would set a schedule for four weeks and then maybe the third week I would have to pull out and then play the fourth week just to recover. That's something that I pushed myself at home as much as I possibly could to make sure that that doesn't happen again.

Q. You said there was a little rust at Nedbank, which would be normal, I suppose. Are you feeling mentally now like you can be where you were before any of this stuff started?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I mean, you think back to when I blew out my back in Delaware, at the time I was leading the FedExCup and I was leading the DP World Tour Race to Dubai at the time and then my season was cut short. I got up to 7th in the world. And then everything kind of from there turned into, can you play, can you get by. I still am that same kid from 2022. I just have a lot more appreciation for where I'm at. And I would even say even at the U.S. Open at Brookline, I remember getting out of the car, being in the final two groups, the second your car pulls in you have a camera right there once you get out. And I remember trying to hide kind of my limp heading into the last round. Just because of how stiff I was and how locked up my back was. And I was still able to go out and possibly win a major. So now I'm healthy.

Q. You were down for a few weeks or a few months. Were you watching golf, following along on the broadcast, or was it something just kind of tuned off?

WILL ZALATORIS: I watched when my really close friends were in contention. In all honesty, I kind of didn't watch as much as I normally would have. I watched all the Ryder Cup. I watched the majors. But the regular weeks, unless somebody was contending, I would, that I was close with, that then I would watch. It was kind of good for me to get away from it, just because golf had gotten so hard for so long for about two years where it's, All right, I'm leaving for three weeks. No, only played one week, now I got to pull out for the next couple.

So like I said, it's fun to look forward to playing three, four, five weeks in a row. I've always been a guy that loves playing in rhythm, and I literally have not been able to do that for two years. So coming back on a medical, it will be

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a little bit hard to build that rhythm. I'll have to get into some fields and kind of play my way up to back to having full status again. But like I said, I'm so comfortable now with my game, I feel like everything's in a much simpler place. I'm not at home hitting a million golf balls, trying to figure out my golf swing, when in reality I had a compromised back. I'm now going out and playing golf for a dollar or two with friends. That's stuff that I haven't been able to do. Last fall I made a conscious effort of, once I was able to play 18, go play a bunch of new golf courses, go have some fun. You love the game, love course architecture. Dallas is booming with golf right now, and all these new developments, go check 'em 'em out. That part was actually fun. That was kind of my reprieve from the professional life, even though I was still around the game. I just didn't watch as much as I normally do.

Q. You mentioned betting with friends on golf. What were some of the things you missed, whether when it was returning to South Africa or this week on TOUR that you realized these small things you've just missed?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, you miss hanging with the guys. It's the same thing with kids that are trying to be professionals, and they're trying to get out much college and be out here. I tell 'em, Enjoy those four years at college, because those times in the van with the team, like you're not going to get that back. It's the same thing out here. Traveling with friends that, take for example, Davis Riley, I've known him since I was nine years old. These are life-long friends that I've had. So just being out with the guys when they're out traveling and I was at home. So if anything it's just kind of nice to hang out with all the friends and get back into the life that I've dreamed of.

Q. Fifth start here in La Quinta. What's your favorite part about this tournament?

WILL ZALATORIS: I've met some pretty cool people along the way. Last year playing with Tony, a senior playing with Danny Ainge and Ryan Smith, that was pretty fun. Stuff like that. Playing one year with Jim Gray. The weather's always perfection. We always talk about how La Quinta's greens are some of the best greens we putt on all year long. So it's just such a great week to get back going because, even though it is a pro-am and there is just a slight bit of a relaxed atmosphere to it, we're obviously starting off our season and wanting to compete and win. Being able to come out and make some birdies early on in the year and kind of get the mojo going, it really kind of is, I've always, this has always kind of been a great setup tournament for me for the West Coast. So it's always fun to be here. Every year this tournament's gotten better. I always love coming here.

Q. A very important question: You were ignored at the Golden Globes. Are you expecting an Oscar nomination? No. Are you recognized a lot for that now, or is that just, well, you did it, and you knew it was a minute and a half of your life?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, no, it was funny, because I would say in when I was making a pretty big run in 2022 I was getting a little bit of recognition around town. And then it just shows you how small potatoes our world is compared to a massive budget movie. I would go get coffee and a barista would put "Blondie" on there. Little things like that. So it was an absolute treat. I mean, hanging out with Adam and the guys. Justin Thomas and I did a lot of the filming together, so we were just hanging out the whole time. It was so much fun. So Kyle, the director, helped me a bunch with kind of figuring out how to act, considering I had never been in a drama class in my life. It's pretty easy when all you got to do is being yourself.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for the time, Will.

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