

THE PLAYERS Championship

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA

TPC Sawgrass

Justin Thomas

Press Conference

JACK RYAN: We'll get started with Justin Thomas at THE PLAYERS Championship. Justin has one top 10 in five starts at the event, attempting to become the fourth player to win THE PLAYERS Championship, a major, a WGC and the FedExCup, and is tied with Dustin Johnson for the most wins on the PGA TOUR over the last four seasons. If we can just get an opening comment from you as we begin THE PLAYERS Championship a year removed from the shutdown of the PGA TOUR.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I would like to say I tied for first last year, but I tied with a couple people. It's great to be back. This is a great golf course, a great tournament, I went out and played yesterday and it's the most pure I've ever seen the golf course. The greens are so fast, the fairways were so pristine, so I think it's going to be a great week, and I'm hoping that we get the weather that we're expected to have. I'm so excited to be playing in front of a good amount of fans again and get some juices flowing and hopefully produce some good golf.

Q. Given the last couple months you've had to deal with some off-the-course distractions, where you've had a tougher time with off-the-course stuff and then what's your mental state now, having a solid start at Concession under your belt and then a couple weeks off?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I'm doing okay. I have definitely been better. But at the same time it's a good opportunity for me to try to grow and learn and get stronger because of it. Yeah, I think it's kind of put a lot of things in perspective, into perspective, and unfortunately for my golf, it's taken a toll on that a little bit, and I haven't been and I'm not playing as well as I'd like. But I've been working and kind of tweaking things here and there, just trying to figure out kind of what's going on.

You know, at the end of the day I'm like an iPod Nano; I just keep shuffling.

Q. Do you have to learn this golf course, because you've had -- you contended I think in your second



appearance here and you've had a top 11 has been your other. Everything else has been a mixed bag. What are your thoughts on attacking this golf course and trying to be successful on it?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Well, I think as well as I was starting to learn it, it got switched to March, so I kind of had to re-learn it. I really, really love this place in May and how firm and fast it would play, and I felt like it was not very many drivers. I used a 2-iron at this event and I just would get it on the ground a lot and just really focus on hitting the ball in the fairway. I'm still clearly focused on hitting the ball in the fairway because this is a course that, if you drive it well, being in March, it's always going to be softer, the fairways and the greens, and you can make so many birdies out here. You have four par-5s, a lot of short scoring clubs into holes. But if you get it out of play, you're missing the fairways, you get it out of play on the par-5s, it's tough to shoot under par out here. I think that's what makes this golf course so good and also why a lot of people have had a wide array, including myself, have had a wide array of finishes. It truly is just how you're playing.

I feel like it's not like a lot of courses where you can -- even if you're playing bad you can just kind of skank it around and hit it on one side. I know if I'm going to miss this fairway I can at least hit it over here and get it on this part of the green. It doesn't play like that. You really have to step up on each tee, on each par-3, par-4, par-5 and just hit the golf shot that it requires, and then just keep going.

Q. Looking ahead, have you made a decision on if you're playing Honda next week, and yes or no why? And I want to ask your thoughts on going back exactly a year this week and what you recall from that crazy week.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I haven't decided anything in terms of next week.

Thinking about this event last year, I'm staying in the same house. We have a friend that lives here, and myself, Rickie and Jordan all stay in the same house. When I got in Sunday, I was going upstairs and kind of taking my bags, or my girlfriend and I's bags to our room, and it was almost a little emotional because the last time I was up there, and Rickie and I were sitting on this couch with his



wife and we're trying to figure out, what are we going to do, what's going to happen, what's going on; I've never seen anything like this. It definitely brought back some very odd, bizarre memories, but it is, it's crazy to think it's been a year, it's crazy to think we're still in it. But I'm just proud that the TOUR has done such a great job that we're now able to have 10,000 fans or whatever it is this week, so it should be fun.

Q. On that topic, based on your kind of, I guess, bizarre experience of the past year, what are you most looking forward to to getting back to normal in the tournament setting? And do you feel like this week can be a step towards that?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Fans. Not even close. Having fans and having the energy is something that I've missed so much. I think it changes the golf tournament so much.

The pressure, the nerves, everything that goes into it, it just really makes it different. It makes it better, I think. It gives the tournament the atmosphere, the buzz, the adrenaline. It's just everything about it is so fun.

You can make a 60-footer on 17 when you're even par and in an event with no fans, it's just another putt, but when you get a big crowd like we could potentially have here this week or like normal, you feel that buzz and you feel that energy.

It's little things like that that I know I miss, and especially once you get into contention, you just can't compare it. It's totally different. But that being said, we're getting closer, getting better to getting fans back and getting it somewhat back to normalcy.

Like I said earlier, the TOUR has done great in terms of taking that step by step and making sure that we'll be okay whenever we're ready to do so.

Q. I was also wondering how long do you think it will take you to be truly comfortable to interact with fans and even fellow competitors as you did before?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, fellow competitors, I'm fine with it now. I mean, I've been fine with it the whole time, and we all get tested. There's a reason we go through this protocol and we're in the bubble. I'm completely fine with interaction with them. But in terms of outside, that's where it gets tough because obviously everyone is doing most likely what they need to, but you just don't know, and the unknown, it's not -- the thing for me is it's not selfish, I'm not doing it for me, I'm doing it for everybody. I'm trying to make the proper decisions at home and when I'm not playing for the sake of the PGA TOUR because if I do

something that puts myself in harm's way or puts myself in jeopardy of getting the virus, then if I come out here and then I were to spread it or was with somebody or sharing a house with somebody and then next thing you know there's an outbreak, that's my biggest fear of anything is that I -- I think that I will be okay. If I knew it was just going to be me, then I wouldn't have the same worry or fear, but the fear of it potentially spreading or getting bigger because of me is my issue because I just want to be selfless in a situation like this and think about everybody else that's involved in the TOUR, not just me.

Q. I guess you can see a time where you can exchange high fives with fans or get closer to them, sign autographs?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, yeah. It'll obviously happen at some point. The TOUR right now is creating a policy of not doing that, and I understand why. I mean, it's the same reasons I said, but I mean, I even started a couple years ago, any high five, I just fist bump, because it kind of hit me one time that I'm high-fiving all these people, I'm eating food, I'm touching my face and I'm just like, what am I doing? That's not very healthy, that's not very good for me, before, long before all this happened. Regardless of what's going on in the world, I think it's a smart decision for me personally to not be touching random people and then touch my face and eat food.

But it'll all make sense and get back together when it can.

Q. You mentioned tweaks in your game. What are you working on in particular?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Honestly, I think I have been trying to tweak too much or look for things. I mean, I'm just trying to keep it as simple as possible. I think it's easy to search for too much or think that I need to find something when I maybe don't, if that makes sense. For me, it's right now getting consistency in my driver is something that I'm really focusing on. I've hit more drivers and 3-woods the last month or so than I have in a while. Just working on really getting into position at the top of my swing in a place that my dad and I like it, in a place that we feel is going to generate more consistent shots, and that's what we've been working on.

Yeah, just continuing to work on everything else, that's the hard part is you can't focus so much on one thing because then the other parts of your game go astray. That's just kind of in the never-ending chase that all of us are a part of out here.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your good friend Jordan Spieth, who I'm pretty sure that you know. To your

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

trained eye, what's different now than say six months ago?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Not much, really. That's the same reason why whenever I was asked about it, I wasn't worried. I mean, I felt for him. I obviously wanted him to perform better, play better, but I wasn't worried about him. I knew that he would start playing better again, and I know he's going to win again and contend in majors and probably win majors. Like he's too much of a gamer.

But for me, just watching him, he's doing the Jordan Spieth stuff again. He's making hole-in-ones, he's holing out bunker shots, he's making long putts, and that stuff -- he's got that walk, he's got that swagger to his step and that confidence, and confidence is such a huge thing that you can't just turn a switch on and say, I'm confident now. It's all the work that he's put in, all the -- he's practiced so much and put -- just created those reps to where he's able to hit the shots that he wants to do and do it enough to where he's built that confidence back, and now that he has it, he trusts it on the golf course, and it's just kind of spreading throughout his game.

Yeah, I mean, it's great for the game of golf. It's great for him. I also think it's great for me. It'll probably end up pushing me, as well.

Q. Rory mentioned earlier, talking about how so many athletes in other sports when they are at the top of their game and they stay relatively healthy, doesn't matter what sport you're talking about, they tend to stay up there. They stay elite for quite a while. But in golf things can get sideways in a hurry and you see what happened with Rickie and what happened for a while with Jordan and how it can kind of just leave you for no particular reason that isn't injury-related. Why is that about golf, because in tennis the same three players have been dominating the majors for 15 years.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I mean, in terms of other athletes, it's not to take anything away from them, but the fact that it is a team sport helps. If they're able to use their leadership and their knowledge from past experience, if their game maybe isn't at a high level, to pass to younger generations, to younger players, to then bring them up closer to the level that they're accustomed to playing to.

And then when they start playing well again, then they're unbeatable and they go on a Jordan with the Bulls type run or like with Steph and the Warriors did or like what Kobe did and like what LeBron has done a little bit of. And obviously Tom Brady. It's stuff like that to where they went there and he had his struggles this year in terms of the regular season, but then he's able to get to the players,

reach out to the players and kind of tell them what they're doing or help them learn. That way when they get in those big moments, there you go, they win the Super Bowl.

It is crazy because age is such a thing -- in golf especially, it's something that we can play for so long, and age realistically doesn't matter. It does once you get to a certain age, obviously, but we can play out here for 30 years and really be relevant, which is so cool.

But at the same time, like you said, it can go astray so fast, and it's just hard because kind of like what I was saying with Jordan, confidence can just go, but then again, you can just have -- you can be so close in this game and not score as well as maybe you're playing or just have a couple things go on, have some things go on in your personal life, just have some bad breaks on the course for a year or maybe you're struggling with your equipment or whatever is going on.

That's just all on you. You're the only one out there that's going to play each and every day, each and every week, each and every year. You really just have to make the best out of what you have.

Q. You talked about the ebbs and flows and the Nano Shuffle and all that good stuff. Everyone goes through it, but when you are looking for a level of consistency and something like the Masters is approaching a month away, do you find yourself or can you fall into the trap of pressing too much, a sense of urgency or what have you?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I think so. I think that's something that I've done is I've put too much pressure on myself. I've been trying too hard. I think I want to win so bad, and I really want it too bad. Sometimes I just kind of have to step back and let it happen and be more oriented, as Coach Saban would love to hear, not get so wrapped up in the moment and forcing things to happen, but I just need to do all the things that I can control and prepare as well as I can and work on the things I need to work on, and then once I tee it up, just let it all happen. Wherever I end up is where I'm going to end up.

I can only be where my feet are and control where I'm at, and in the off weeks I can prepare for Augusta or prepare for weeks like that, but I can't get over-wrapped up in, Gosh, I tried to hit a couple draws today and I didn't draw it. Like I'm not going to be able to hit the tee shot on 2 or 13 or 10 or whatever. It's more like, okay, well, why was I not drawing it. Okay, well, maybe I just had some heel strikes. Okay, let's focus on hitting the ball a little more in the center of the club, spend a couple days on that and hopefully be able to fix it.

The sense of urgency, definitely I know, I think it's present a little bit in myself, but I also have realized it, so I'm hoping that it helps with that.

Q. Phil dropped out of the top 100 this week for the first time in like 28 years. If it's a record that can ever be matched, who's the best candidate do you think?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, I would -- I don't know how long has DJ been in it or -- I don't know. I mean, there's a lot of guys. You look at Rory, myself, Jordan, Rick. DJ, I think he -- I don't know how much longer he's going to play golf, so I'm not sure if he's going to have however many years left to do that.

I mean, there's a handful of guys, especially as young as guys like Morikawa, Hovland, Matt Wolff going into the top 100, I could see guys like them doing it. Like we were saying earlier, golf is a funny game, and you never know what's going to happen.

Q. The 12th hole has got the back tee available for the first time since the redo. I think it's like 380 or something. Does that change your approach, and what would that be?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Well, yeah, I mean, it's 370, so it's not drivable anymore. I played it yesterday, and it was into the wind. Yeah, you just lay it up. I personally don't like the hole that much. I liked it a lot more before they changed it.

It just doesn't -- it's not like a comfortable yardage or shot shape for me, but that being said, I've made plenty of birdies. I've hit it on the green, and it's a risk-reward hole. If you lay it up, it's extremely narrow and then you've got a green that all falls away from you or some tough pins, so you just have to commit to whatever you're doing is kind of what I've learned on that hole.

That back tee, I'd say there's only one or two people that can fly it up there near the green, and that would be Bryson and Rory, maybe Tony or something like that, as well. But it's just -- yeah, it just kind of depends on what the wind is going to do, and I would think they won't put the tee back there every day. I think they want us to try to give that green a go. I'll take it for whatever it's worth, wherever the wind is, wherever the pin is and wherever the tees are.

Q. Do you have a perfect number when it comes to just laying up in general? What's your favorite number to lay up to?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It depends where the pin is and how firm the greens are. If it's a back pin, if I can get it to

something like 65 to 70, that's perfect, depending on how firm the greens are. Or if it's a front pin, anywhere around 100, because then I can either hit a full lob wedge and rip it back or I can hit a sand wedge that still has some spin. It's so situational depending on wind, firmness of greens and pin.

JACK RYAN: Justin, thanks for your time and best of luck this week.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.

