

THE PLAYERS Championship

Tuesday, March 8, 2022

Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA

TPC Sawgrass

Justin Thomas

Press Conference

MICHAEL BALIKER: We'd like to welcome our defending PLAYERS champion Justin Thomas back to TPC Sawgrass.

Justin, you were here a couple weeks ago, so not quite your first time back since the victory, but just as you reflect on the seven-stroke comeback on the weekend and just that entire experience and what you were able to accomplish here last year, what are some of the initial thoughts or even emotions that come to mind?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, excitement is definitely one of them. It was a special weekend, a lot of great memories. I mean, it's just a special place here at Sawgrass, and I know this is one that all of us get very, very excited for on the schedule.

It'll probably be a little different once I get out on the course and start seeing stuff a little bit more, but it definitely was -- I think this morning was kind of the last time where I'll maybe take just the muscle memory of walking in the locker room and wanting to go right and actually being able to go left now into the champions' locker room is a nice adjustment that I'll be able to make going forward.

MICHAEL BALIKER: Making your first start since solo 6th at the Genesis Invitational, taking two weeks off since. How do you feel the game is trending coming into THE PLAYERS?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I've been playing really well. I've been working really hard and feel like some really good things are coming but just need to stay patient. I just kind of haven't gone on any of those runs the last three tournaments that I feel like I usually do in tournaments, and I think that was the difference of honestly not winning the tournaments and finishing where I did.

Just got to keep staying patient, keep working hard and letting good thing happen.

Q. Along the lines of staying patient, and this is kind of based on the last two weeks, how hard the golf



courses have been playing, but through two rounds last year you were seven strokes back, I believe. Can you allow yourself to stay patient in that situation knowing the degree of difficulty of the golf course, or can you still get frustrated?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It probably depends on how you're seven shots back, if that makes sense.

I think last year I was playing well. I just had a -- I remember I made a bad double on my first hole on Friday, so just little things like that to where -- and I doubled 17 on Thursday, so it was like -- those doubles are just, you can't make those. I was very fortunate to win the tournament making two doubles like that.

I think it's a big difference of kind of grinding and scrambling and not playing very well and just making a lot of putts or kind of stealing one here or there and barely making the cut and being seven back versus I was playing solid, I had just a couple bad holes, but I really felt like I was playing a lot better than that and then being seven back, if that makes sense.

Here I think every golf course is different, but I know here that you can make up a lot of ground, or at least I feel comfortable doing so. It's obviously very different in how the golf course is set up and what kind of weather you have, but I know that if you hit fairways out here, I feel confident and comfortable enough around here that I know that I can make a bunch of birdies.

Q. Obviously we've seen a lot of athletes in sports all across have their PR blunders, their missteps, what have you. Obviously Phil has been in the news for the last two weeks. How long do you feel like Phil is going to be in a sort of penalty box or put himself in this self-imposed exile, and how long before you think he gets back in golf's good graces?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I don't know. I mean, I'm sure a lot of it just kind of depends on who you ask. There's plenty of people where it's like, look, he said some things that he shouldn't have said and everybody does stuff like that and he should be able to apologize and move on.

I think a lot of people are probably just a little bit upset at

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

how it happened or how he went about it. At the end of the day, he's proven himself in the game of golf. He doesn't owe the game of golf anything. He's done plenty for it and for us.

Now I just think it's more of what he wants. If he wants to try to come back and play X amount of events or if he wants to try to create his own thing, if he wants to do whatever he's got to do, nobody knows what's going on inside of Phil's head beside Phil, and I think the last couple weeks have proven that more than ever.

Just hopefully he's doing okay, but it definitely was a bit of a shock for all of us, some of the things that he said. Yeah, I guess he'll just come back whenever he feels like he's ready.

Q. I know you recently played with Coach Saban, and he had said when you win a championship you don't have to defend, just go out and have fun. How much do those words resonate with you and your thought process this week?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It did a lot. And it's so true. Obviously you're a defending champion, but I don't have to defend anything. I'm not defending this title. The PGA TOUR isn't going to come to my living room and take my PLAYERS Championship trophy from 2021 from me after this week. That's mine forever. I don't have to give anything back, and my name's always going to be on that trophy.

I'm just going to go try to win it again. That's all I'm going to try to do. It was very -- I was glad to hear him say that, but it was also funny to see the coach that I love to watch give interviews almost come out when they're like, Coach, you've defended a lot of titles and national championships. What do you think this is going to be like for Justin, you could just see his hands getting into it, like he's not defending anything kind of thing.

It was funny to watch. But I am very glad that he said that because it definitely resonated well with me.

Q. If you look back to your first time and compare it now, what is the one most striking thing that has changed about this place in the time you've been coming here?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I think the obvious one, it was May when I used to come here, and now it's March. That's definitely -- it's two completely different golf courses in a sense.

Last year was probably the closest that we'll ever play it to the May-type conditions. I obviously had success last

year, but I personally like the golf course a lot more in May than I do in March. You run into this potential of the weather that it looks like we might have this week, but hopefully we'll get lucky.

But it's a lot firmer, it's a lot faster, it's harder. It puts a lot more emphasis on putting it in the right place in the fairway and on the green and a lot harder to chip around the greens. But that being said, it can still get firm and fast and you can get a lot more wind, it can be colder.

Although it's just two months apart, whatever, it was probably -- yeah, I guess it was about two and a half months or so apart. It does feel like two totally different golf courses in May versus March.

Q. Talk about the decision behind taking the two weeks off coming into this. I know you haven't played those two tournaments in a while, but is it kind of a good time to reset with everything coming up with this and the Masters and everything?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, the Honda is an event clearly I would love to play. I live there. It's a place I've had success at. But I've said it a million times, it's just, we have to take off somewhere.

I just spent four weeks on the West Coast. It wouldn't have been a very smart decision for me to play the Honda with the amount of travel and just mentally, physically, because for me I don't want to shoot myself out of the year in February. I feel like there's so many great tournaments in golf left throughout the rest of the year that I don't want to put myself behind the 8-ball so early in the year.

Yeah, it's just one of those things, it just doesn't fall in a great place in the schedule, but it was also nice to take two weeks off. I'm going to play three weeks in a row starting here and then I'll have a week off before Augusta and Hilton Head, so I'm excited for this stretch.

Q. Tiger is one of four getting inducted into Hall of Fame tomorrow; how old were you when you became aware of who he was, and what influence has he had on you and the game since then?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Whew.

I would say the PGA at Valhalla was the first I can really remember. I know I watched his tournaments before that, but nothing like specific or vivid memory like being at Valhalla when he won the PGA. I would say that's what I first remember.

What he's done for the game since then is just



monumental. I don't think I could even come close to putting it into words. He's been a massive impact and influence on me, and I'm very happy that I got an afternoon tee time on Thursday so I can go watch him get inducted. That's going to be pretty cool, a special night.

Q. 64 in the third round here last year. We've seen you shoot 61 at Medinah, some other low numbers. Just curious, are you pressing to shoot really low, or do those just happen? What's the mindset?

JUSTIN THOMAS: They just happen. I think the amount of rounds where I felt like I was going to do something like that going into it and it never happens is pretty -- often I'll have a great warmup or it's just kind of like I'll be in that position, I'm seven or eight back on a Sunday or a Saturday, and it's like, let's get off to a hot start or let's get it going today, it doesn't work that way, or at least for me it doesn't.

Anytime you're out of the present, it doesn't work out well.

For me the times that I'm staying in the moment, I'm just taking each hole, each shot for what it's worth, Medinah was a great experience that whole week because I felt like I had nothing at the start of the week and really started Thursday like all right, we've got to find something out here and then made a couple birdies and got on a little bit of a roll, and then once I got in the fix I felt comfortable and then Saturday was one of those days where you're a little bit unconscious and you just keep making as many as you can.

I enjoy it. I enjoy that challenge of trying to go low, and the few opportunities you get to shoot a number like 59 or something like that, it doesn't -- you don't get those chances that often, but I look forward to hopefully having some more of them.

Q. Looking at your record starting maybe in Hawai'i and coming into this tournament, it looks like you're playing based on the finishes a little bit better than last year coming into this tournament. Do you think you have played better in the West Coast Swing than last year?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Definitely. My game is in a lot better place. I'm a lot more confident. I'm in a better place mentally.

I just feel a lot better about everything.

Like I just said, it doesn't necessarily mean anything great is going to happen, but that's the fun and miserable thing about this game that I've decided to play.

Yeah, I feel a lot better about the presentation that I'm doing, about the process I'm kind of going about it. Just everything that's getting -- trying to get me ready for golf tournaments, that way when I go out there I can try to get in a little zone, a little bit of a focus and just let things happen versus maybe when things aren't going as well I need to try to make them happen or force them to happen, if that makes sense.

Yeah, I feel a lot better about things at this time this year than last year.

Q. You've gone from earlier in the year when the courses were too easy to last week when it's over the top, and it made me wonder about this week where they've said for years that this course doesn't really favor anybody. Is it any more predictable or less predictable depending on the conditions, whether it's soft or whether it's super fast? Does that create a different dynamic for who would play better?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Here in general or --

Q. Sawgrass, this course.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I've always said and thought that -- I think being in March it's definitely going to favor more of a long hitter than it did in May just because of how firm it would be, but you look at the winners, and it's crazy, it truly is a place that -- at least I don't think it favors one shot shape. I mean, you have enough run-ups to where you can -- if you're in the rough you can kind of run it up on the green to where you don't need to play it through the air and fly everything on the green or greens that run away from you. They can get kind of firm and fast, but it's not like an Augusta or like last week or wherever where you just need to have crazy high launch and high spin to hold the greens.

It's just whoever decides to go out and get it the best that week.

So I think to answer your question, no, I don't think it's necessarily one or the other. Definitely the weather conditions can change things a little bit, but like I said, I think with it being in March would favor a longer hitter, if anything, but for the most part it's just who plays the best, I guess.

Q. You said sometimes winning the Race to Dubai is a goal in your career. Is it still a goal for you? Is this year maybe too early?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's definitely a goal. It makes more sense for guys in the U.S. to do it on a Ryder Cup



year just for the sake of being able to count the event. We're so fortunate to have so many great events on the PGA TOUR but also so many great events on that Tour that I would love to play both.

But just, again, if I'm skipping an event that's 25 minutes from my house, it probably doesn't make a lot of sense to fly across the world for some other events.

But no, it would be a massive accomplishment of mine and it's something that I do take seriously and would love to do at some point.

At the end of the day it's going to be one of those things where if it makes sense and I'm playing well in the correct events kind of thing, and hopefully we can do it one year.

Q. The PGA TOUR hasn't at least made any statement about the Russia-Ukraine issues, and yet there are sponsors that sponsor events on the PGA TOUR that are still operating on Ukraine. Actually what's on your sleeve, that bank is operating in Ukraine, as well. Do you have any thoughts on that and have you talked to the TOUR about making some kind of statement?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I have no thoughts, and no, I haven't spoken to the TOUR about it.

Q. This event has been played more than any other event on TOUR without having back-to-back winners. Do you have any particular theory why it's so hard for defending champions to win it again?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I'd say because it's one of the deepest fields in golf and it's really hard to win golf tournaments. The fact of the matter, it's really hard to win a golf tournament once, and it's really hard to win it again. Obviously a lot of expectations and pressure come with it, but I think first and foremost it's look how deep this field is. It's just really hard to win a golf tournament when you have top 100 -- most of the top 100 players in the world.

I would say that's first and foremost the biggest part of it.

Q. Weather forecasts are prone to change I hear, but if it does actually happen what they're forecasting what, are some of the biggest impacts we'd see throughout the golf course and some of the more challenging shots you'd face?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Well, I've heard horror stories from Tiger and Freddy and some guys about having to hit 5- or 6-iron into 17 on those cold north wind days, and I haven't experienced that. I'm not saying that I would like to, I'm just saying that I haven't experienced it.

I mean, when you get wind and cold temperatures like that, it's just a different animal, and it's really just a survival-type thing.

It's not like I'm going into this week preparing any differently. I know that short game is important around here, as hard as it is to chip around the greens and hitting fairways, and you've got four par-5s so you have the opportunities to make a handful of birdies or try to capitalize on those holes, but at least to me it's just more of a take-what-you-see and are experiencing that day, that morning, that hole, whatever it is, and just kind of go from there type thing.

I don't get too wrapped up in the draw or what's the weather going to be like Friday or what's the wind going to be, because at the end of the day, weather people are wrong all the time. There's no reason of getting too wrapped up in it.

MICHAEL BALIKER: Justin, thanks for the time and best of luck this week.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports