

# THE PLAYERS Championship

Tuesday, March 8, 2022

Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, USA

TPC Sawgrass

## Anirban Lahiri

### Press Conference

CHRIS COX: Anirban, before we get started, if you could speak to the general state of our game. You're coming off a made cut last week at API, snapped a streak of three consecutive missed cuts. How are you feeling about your game as we enter THE PLAYERS Championship?

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I think it's been a work in progress for me. The last month has been a tough one. I've had different departments of my game challenge me.

I think in Phoenix my putting was a big issue. At Riviera I managed to kind of get around that, but my driver wasn't as -- so I've been chipping away working at different departments.

Last week wasn't pretty either. I know I made the cut, but it was a tough test. On the weekend, again, I think my iron play was something that let me down, and it showed because you couldn't hit it offline last week.

Again, this last month has been a challenging one for me, but I feel like I've made steady progress. Even coming into this week, just working on some improvements with my coach remotely, also looking at just tweaking my equipment a little bit. There's always something around the corner I feel that could change it, and I think I found some good rhythm with my driving and my putting.

This week I'm just focusing on getting my iron play and my short game sharp again. I think that's what I need to complete the picture.

Definitely working my way back into playing better golf and getting into some form. Definitely carrying some confidence off the tees and on the greens, and I'm just trying to translate that into the rest of the game.

**Q. This is one of the biggest tournaments on the PGA TOUR. Prize money is close to \$50 million. It's like a huge prize money on offer. So when you are entering into an event like this, how do you approach an event of this stature? Secondly, previously in the five editions you have not played well in this event, five**



**missed cuts out of the seven times you entered in this tournament. So does it play into your mind when you enter a tournament of this stature?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: Good questions, actually, because like you mentioned, THE PLAYERS Championship is actually the fifth major at least among the players. You kind of approach it from the same point of view, and everybody approaches a major differently. Some people will come and play early. Some people will get early during the tournament week on Saturday, take the week off before. Some people play the week before. You saw a lot of the top players didn't play Bay Hill because they wanted to prepare for this.

So to answer your question, it's like a major, and everybody goes about it in their most efficient way. For me personally, I haven't had a lot of success. Definitely I've struggled with a few holes, specific holes, which have not fit my shot shape, and I think that's been the challenge for me here at Sawgrass. There's a few holes that I have to come up with a slightly different game plan, different strategy, which I did the last time and had a little bit of success.

At the end of the day, when you play a golf course, championship golf course that's set up like this, you have to have all the parts firing. Like I said, the biggest difference coming into this week for me compared to previous years is I'm probably driving it the best I've driven it in a long time in my career. That is almost a prerequisite if you want to have any kind of success at TPC Sawgrass. You have to drive it well. So I'm happy about that.

Again, it challenges all facets of your game. So right now I'm just keeping my head down and working on my iron play and my approach play. At the end of the day, we are playing against some really amazing fields. We're playing for great prize money. And your approach has to be the same. You have to go out there and try and shoot the lowest score you can score.

There will be times where, like in Riviera, Joaquin played really amazing and kind of separated from the field, and that can happen. But you have to focus on doing what you need to do and keep playing your game and just trying to build as much momentum as possible because, on a golf



course like this, you can't really slip up. You have to keep your head down and stay focused through 72 holes.

So, yeah, the plan is usually pretty simple. Try to hit as many fairways as you can and then try to take advantage of the pins that you can be aggressive to. I think experience also makes a big difference. The first two or three times that I played here, I made a lot of mistakes in terms of my strategy. I made some mistakes in maybe being overaggressive to certain holes, certain pin positions. So even to that extent, I think I'm better prepared obviously.

**Q. And TPC Sawgrass, this is a course which actually people know about through the island green that it has. It's one of the most difficult holes, the 17th. If you could take us through the seven times that you played, how did you approach that, and how much success did you have on that most difficult hole of TPC Sawgrass?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I wouldn't call it the most difficult hole. It's definitely not the hardest shot you'll hit at TPC Sawgrass. There's a lot of other golf shots that are probably much harder. But it's definitely the most intimidating tee shot because you don't have a choice. There's no bailout. You have to hit it on the target.

I think the biggest challenge over the years has been the wind. If you play TPC Sawgrass on a regular day where you don't have the stadium setting with the stands all the way around, at least three-quarters of the way around, you don't get the wind swirling.

It's almost like an arena. It's built like an arena. So when the wind gets really strong, it can actually circle. When it starts swirling in that cauldron, so to speak, even if the ball gets affected three to four yards, that can be the difference between making a 2 and a 5 or a 6.

So I think the biggest challenge there is to really be committed to what kind of a shot you're hitting because a lot of times you know that, okay, I have to hit it 145, but when you look at the number, it says 130, but you're playing 15 yards in wind. So you say, no, at the last minute, you hit it 140 or a little less, and then you come up short and the reverse happens.

So I think that is the biggest challenge there is to really like believe in what shot you're trying to hit and execute it. That's the biggest challenge. It's not the hardest shot in golf, definitely not, but the challenges are different. They're more mental. They're more -- I think it's also a difficult hole to judge.

And I think over the years the setup has been such that the greens just get rock hard. It's like hitting billiards on a pool table. I think this year I don't know what it's going to be because we've got about two inches, three inches of rain forecast over Thursday, Friday. So that again may change how the hole plays. It will be interesting to see because it's different every year.

**Q. I just wanted to take you back a few months earlier where you spent some time in India and you spoke about perhaps not enjoying golf out there as much. Why do you think that was? Do you feel you've sort of rediscovered that over the last few months?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: That a very good question. I think the simple answer to your question is no, I haven't. To basically break it down, and I've had this conversation with a few people especially on my team as well. I think me personally, I expect to play myself at a certain level. I expect to be able to have a certain amount of efficiency through all the different departments of my game.

I think the inconsistency that has crept up that I just spoke about in different departments can be irritating, can sometimes be infuriating, frustrating, a lot of those negative emotions, and those get in the way of actually enjoying your golf.

Enjoyment doesn't necessarily mean winning or coming top five or top ten. Enjoyment, to me, is to be able to hit the shot as I'm visualizing it or as I'm feeling it or seeing it. And I think that's where the challenge has been for me.

I think I'm very close to enjoying my golf more than I have in the past, and I think to that extent I'm putting the work in that I need to do because it's almost like a by-product of -- I'm not going to say playing well, but a by-product of satisfying your own benchmarks, which I've been far from it for quite a while. And when you play so far below what you expect, the level at which you expect yourself to play, you kind of lose the enjoyment for the game.

So when I talked about it, when I was in India and even now, I think the goal for me is to enjoy my golf, but what does that mean in a broader sense? It basically means I need to get back to playing at a certain level of efficiency, a certain level of consistency to be able to do that. And that's what I'm in the pursuit of.

Like I just mentioned, there's a couple of links, I would say, in the entire chain that have been weak or broken or missing. I'm working away diligently at that to fix it because then it's a matter of kind of building that enjoyment to some positive momentum and just putting two good rounds together, three good rounds together,

shooting one really low round in a tournament. Those are the kinds of things that make it fun. I just haven't done enough of that in the recent past, and those are my goals at the moment.

**Q. Just a quick followup. The sense of enjoying in a broader sense, the motivation, is that a factor as well?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: Yeah, I think they're linked. You can be motivated towards different things. You can be motivated towards results. You can be motivated towards goals, be it FedExCup, be it majors, be it Presidents Cup. Those are all things to play for. Those are motivating factors but also by-products of good golf.

Ultimately you have to be motivated towards being able to play the way you want to play. I want to play a certain brand of golf. I want to play aggressively. I want to play the way I have played when I've played well and when I've really gone out there and attacked the golf course and backed myself to pull shots off.

I think that's a much greater motivation for me at the moment because once I'm able to do that or achieve that, the other things, the secondary motivations, so to speak, then they come into the picture, okay, what am I doing this for? If you don't have the foundational structure and balance, then motivation for something else is meaningless.

**Q. Tell me, you were the one who introduced me to TPC. It's one of my favorite courses. What is it you like about the TPC, and what is it that intimidates you or scares you, first? And second, considering the results that you've had, does it put pressure on you for the remainder of the season?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: To answer your first question, I think with TPC Sawgrass the biggest challenge for me has been a lot of the tee shots. You are almost forced to hit a lot of left-to-right tee shots. You're forced to hit a lot of cuts off the tee. Over my entire career, that's probably been the one shot that is probably not my stock shot or something that doesn't really fit my eye a lot, that's one.

The second thing is also that I've probably struggled to take advantage of the holes that you need to take advantage of. You have to play the par-5s well. You have to play specific holes well, and you have to minimize damage on the par-3s. All the par-3s here are challenging, and I haven't done that well in the past. Maybe being a little more conservative on the par-3s and going for the middle of the green and taking the 3 and walking away and trying to put yourself on the fairway on the par-5s and being more aggressive.

Like I said, strategically, I've made a lot of mistakes in the past. I've had time to reflect and learn from them. So I have to personally have a different game plan this year. Actually, not very different from the one time I played half decent here. But I think those are the big challenges for me.

To answer your second question about pressure, I think I'm moving away from just the qualitative side of it. Obviously, the numbers are there, and they're not pretty. But at the end of the day, I have to focus on what I need to do. I obviously haven't played anywhere near how I should be playing. I hit my irons really poorly, if I look at my stats.

Though one area where I struggled the most is approach the green, which if you distill it, it's just your iron play. We've been hard at work trying to figure it out because, if I'm gaining shots off the tee and gaining shots around the green, my putting most weeks has been decent, there's got to be something that is fundamentally off because I couldn't be doing everything else good.

So we've tried to look at it different ways. I'm experimenting this week a little bit with with my irons. I'm at that stage where I'm trying to find the code because I feel like I'm not too far from putting it all together.

**Q. Thanks. I always feel towards the end of the season you're going to pull it off.**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I don't want to wait until the end of the season (laughter).

**Q. I want to ask, what is your favorite hole at TPC Sawgrass, other than No. 17, if you have one? And what's your favorite memory?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I think my favorite hole is probably the 16th hole, to be honest. I think it's a great finishing stretch, 16, 17, 18. But I think 16th hole, I think it's where a lot of drama happens. Of course, 17th is the 17th. It's an institution sort of. But coming down that final stretch, 16, 17, 18.

16 is a very important hole. I have made eagle there a couple of times in the past. The golf course is tough, we all know that. There's not a lot of opportunity where you can really pick up shots. 16, if you can hit really good shots or give yourself an opportunity, you can pick up a couple of shots, which in the context of the round can be huge. You can be even-par or 1-over coming through 15 and you make an eagle on 16 and you finish strong, it changes the complexion of your round. I think, to me, it's a really important and a really -- my favorite hole because a lot can

happen there.

**Q. Just a quick question. You're last poor results, do you put it down to bad weather, bad luck, or performance?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: No. I think you're a professional golfer because we never take responsibility for what we do. No, I don't think it was weather or draws or anything else because everybody else played in the same conditions mostly as I did. I mentioned it a few times already today. I've had some major struggles with my iron play. I just haven't put myself in position to make birdies. I haven't hit it close.

The few times that I've put myself out of position, I haven't scrambled well. Those things don't add up. If you put those situations in the equation, it's not going to be a good result.

I'm just working on cleaning up what happens in the middle part of the hole. I think my work off the tee has been good. My work on and around the greens has been decent. In between, there's been a major lapse. It's been, like I said, it's a link that's broken and it's kind of glaring.

If I look at how I've played the last few weeks, it's not because I've hit it into a lot of water hazard and I've hit it out of bounds and hit it in trees and chipped out a lot. If you look at most of my dropped shots, a lot of them have actually come from the fairway in the first cut, which is really criminal at the level at which I'm playing.

So it's not that hard. It's not rocket science. Sometimes it can feel like it, but I'm working on it, and I think it's a matter of time before that trend starts to change and go away.

**Q. This season has been sort of a struggle for you. Do you have a road map seeing beyond THE PLAYERS? Do you have a road map for the rest of the season, how you can maybe get yourself in a better position from now?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: The beauty about what we do, Laura, is that you're one week away from being a PGA TOUR winner. You're one week away from being at Augusta. You're one week away from having a two, three year exemption. You're one week away from you having a different kind of conversation with me.

So really the road map boils down to what can I do to play better? What can I do to change the kind of scores I'm shooting. It's not like a systematic investment plan where I'm going to five points a week for the next 20 weeks. It's not like that in golf.

So you just have to try to go back to the drawing board. You just have to try to clean up the areas that are kind of making the scorecards dirty, so to speak. And then you work your way back from there.

I think the most important thing for me in terms of a road map is for me to build some confidence and momentum through the rest of the season. The one thing that's really important is to see myself hit more quality shots in competition. You have to start somewhere. I think that's more what your question is. For me, that's my starting point because once I can start building confidence and momentum through tournament golf -- and you see it on the PGA TOUR, guys that miss four cuts, five cuts in a row and they'll have that big win out of nowhere.

So the road map is really quite simple. You just have to keep working at the quality of your golf. You have to keep working to improve your confidence. To trend in the right direction and to kind of reverse the flow of things and then to let things happen. It's very difficult in our game to let things happen, and that's one of the things I'm guilty of because, when you're not playing well, you're trying to force a good result or trying to force a good shot. You sometimes start pushing against a wall, and you go backwards.

So, yeah, I'm just trying to keep things simple and do all the things I just spoke to you about.

**Q. Many of the Indian pros and even the Asian golfers are very happy with the Saudi investment in the Asian region. You have not spoken about it till now. And also that they are interested, even one of your good friends who you partnered with at the 2006 Asian Games, Gaganjeet Bhullar, also has come out strongly, and he said that, if Saudi does a league, also he will be interested. So considering that you are playing on the PGA TOUR full-time, do you see yourself getting interested in something like that ever? And how do you see the initiatives like the Player Impact Program, which is going to offer \$50 million this year, being a factor in your decision-making to stick with the PGA TOUR or going to the Saudi league?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I'll answer the second part first. The Player Impact Program is basically designed to reward the biggest assets for golf, and the biggest assets for golf are the players, and the players who are moving the needle or really making an impact on people globally through different platforms, be it articles that all of you write, be it social media, be it other ways. The PIP is measured, the Player Impact Program is measured in different ways, and it's a way to reward them for what they're doing for the

game of golf.

I myself, I'm a little far away from making it into the top ten or actually having an impact on the global level, but I hope to get there. Obviously, the PIP doesn't directly affect me because I'm not one of those players yet.

In terms of your first question, I think for me personally the PGA TOUR is an unbelievable place to play. I've been here for, this is my seventh season, I think, and the opportunities you have week in and week out are quite mind boggling. We're playing for \$20 million this week, and anyone who basically finishes in the top 25, 125 is assured a place at a tournament like THE PLAYERS.

These opportunities are very difficult to get and hard to earn. I'm glad that I've earned my opportunities and I'm here.

At the same time, I have a lot of friends who have been playing on the Asian Tour, a lot of friends who were almost out of a job for nearly 18 to 20 months in India, and I'm very glad that they have now a platform where they can ply their trade, where they can hone their skills and they can play golf. The Asian Tour has been great.

So I think if I was to put myself in their shoes or my friend Gaganjeet, I think it's great for them. I think it's a great opportunity for them to have a platform to play. To me, as long as golf's growing, it doesn't really matter, and I'm happy to see that my friends are gainfully employed. That, to me, is a good thing.

Personally, I won't change a thing where I am and where I'm playing. Quite honestly, I'm just focusing on what I need to do. Until I play better, there's no better place to play. I just have to play better first. Let's start there, and then we'll go wherever we go from there.

**Q. What is the status of your card now?**

ANIRBAN LAHIRI: I'm exempt. I've kept my card. Yeah, I'm playing pretty much everything this year.

CHRIS COX: Excellent. Thank you for the time, Anirban, and thanks to everyone on the line. Anirban, best of luck this week at THE PLAYERS Championship.

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