

Waste Management Phoenix Open

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Scottsdale, Arizona, USA

TPC Scottsdale

Justin Thomas

Press Conference



DOUG MILNE: We'd like to welcome world No. 3 Justin Thomas. We appreciate you joining us for a few minutes prior to the 2021 Waste Management Phoenix Open. I know it's a place special to you, you making your seventh start here and coming off back-to-back top-3 finishes in the event. With that said, just a few opening comments on being back here at TPC Scottsdale this week.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I did not know this was my seventh time here. That's pretty bizarre. This is a great place. It's obviously going to be very, very different this year. Even for a Tuesday, today you didn't hear that constant buzz that you always hear just with the fans.

You know, I'm not sure to be honest with you what the amount is that's going to be here, but I'm sure it'll still have a great vibe and atmosphere to it. Yeah, it's a great golf course. You know, with the rain and I guess you could even say snow that they got last week, the greens are a little softer, but it's very pure and very lush as always.

Q. As far as this season goes, you're making also your seventh start of the season. Just a great start, four top 10s and the other two just outside the top 10. Just kind of assess the state of your game as you're heading into the week.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's been a good year so far in terms of FedExCup season, if you will. But there definitely was some events in the fall that I would have liked to have finished off a lot better. Kapalua, as well.

But I feel overall my game is getting closer. It's getting better. In terms of this week, it's not exactly where I'd like it with the off week that I had. I put a lot of preparation in and time, but today was a good day of prep in terms of where I felt coming into the start of the day. So hopefully it'll just continue to get better every day to where we're in a good spot coming on Saturday and Sunday.

Q. Just curious when you're out there on the course, this tournament has a specific look to it, the structures

that are built, the people that are everywhere. Just how weird was it looking out on the course and seeing it not designed and fought built up the way it normally is?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It's weird, before you even get on the course. I noticed yesterday just literally pulling into the golf course and not seeing the huge grandstand and everything kind of going down 18 and behind the green. Like I said, I didn't even get a chance to get to the golf course or out on the golf course for it to look different. But I mean, a little thing like going to the range this morning or the putting green, I was able to just walk down the cart path and walk the shortest point as opposed to going down on 1 and then going behind 2 and then up the hill and behind 9 and around.

But that's kind of the case it's been for a lot of tournaments this year. This one is obviously severely different. But it definitely makes for shorter steps for the week.

Q. I wasn't out in Hawai'i, so first time to really talk to you since things happened there. Can you kind of catch me up on what you've been doing in regards to what you said there and how do you feel that's changed who you are as a person?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, like anything, it's an ongoing process really. I don't expect to be a totally and completely different person now than I was then. It's just like my golf game. I'm continuing to try to progress and get better each and every day and each and every week. I've had some great conversations with a lot of friends, and the amount of support and sponsors and family friends that have reached out, that's probably meant a lot more than a lot of people know. That's kind of what's helped me get through all this. But a lot of great talks with sponsors.

Even for instance like last night, I had a talk with Titleist and a lot of the high-ups in their company just in terms of the stuff that they've done as a company and diversity and inclusion training, and now like I have the opportunity to kind of be a part of that training with them. They sent that invitation out to me, and that's -- it's stuff like that to where just like they're wanting themselves to get better, they are offering me if I want to be a part of that, too.

Again, like I said, it's stuff like that that kind of has really

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kept me upbeat and kept me in a great mood and kept me very optimistic about the growth that I can have. I will say that I apologized many times for what I said, but I didn't publicly say, which I feel terrible about, that I didn't apologize to the people that were affected and offended by what I said, and I feel like I should take the time now to say that.

But yeah, as a whole everything has been going well.

Q. Is there anything specific your parents said to you? What was their advice?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, they're parents. They're just here to support me. They want to make sure I'm okay. They were worried sick about me. They just want to make sure I'm okay. That's the main purpose. I mean, no offense to them, but that's their job isn't to sign me up for stuff and to call and talk to me every day about certain educational things.

I mean, they're parents. They're here to support me. They're here to love me. They're here to tell me that they're there if they need me, and they've been great because they're in a tough position to where they probably don't want to bring it up, but they also want to make sure that I'm okay.

There's not really -- it's a tough one for them to judge, but they've done a great job. They've been great.

Q. Similar to Adam's question, just curious over those past few weeks what's the biggest thing you've maybe taken from it or learned from it? And secondly, has it been any sort of distraction at all?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, clearly it's been a distraction. I mean, I think that kind of speaks for itself. But the biggest thing that I've learned from it is that I made a mistake and that I have a tremendous opportunity to learn and grow from it, just like I do in my golf game, just like I do in my everyday life. This is a part of my everyday life, and I have the opportunity to try to turn this into a positive and learn and grow from it as much as I possibly can.

Q. I'm sure you've probably heard the USGA and the R&A today announced some proposals regarding distance, things like possibility of limited driver lengths or maybe regulations on the ball. Just curious your kind of overall thoughts on distance and the whole distance debate and maybe where you stand there.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I didn't know that. I mean, I think that they -- I think distance is what it is right now

because of us, and I think because of a lot of the players are taking the training and becoming more athletes and becoming stronger and more optimal in their distance. It is what it is.

I mean, if you give us different stuff we're still going to try to find a way to hit it as far as we possibly can. I don't think there's any reason or it's not necessary at all to change the golf ball. I am fine with them maybe not going any farther with it, but I think Tiger said it a while ago that they missed that opportunity probably 20 or so years ago. Companies have put billions of dollars I would say -- I mean, I don't know that, so I'll say millions of dollars into the construction of golf balls and equipment, and to be perfectly honest, I think it would be extremely selfish of the USGA and the R&A to do that because of all the hard work that they've put in to make their equipment and golf balls as great as they possibly can and maybe just take a step back and realize that we're doing some pretty awesome things with the golf ball and the golf clubs, and also look at your everyday golfer and go up to him and tell him that you want him to hit it shorter because just the top .001 percent of all golfers are hitting it too far, if you will.

I think it's not a very good decision, but you know, I'm not sitting in the boardrooms and making those decisions. But hopefully the right thing will be done.

Q. A little different direction. I'm curious if you've played much golf with Rickie Fowler lately, and I'm wondering if any discussion comes up about his struggles of late. Are you a sounding board at all? Does he ask advice? Do you sympathize? Just curious how that has gone given what he's been going through lately.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I haven't played with him in a while. Him and myself and Jordan are all sharing a house this week, and I saw him for the first time in a while, so it was good to see him. I know we go from seeing each other every day or every other day at home to almost a month. We were separated a little bit.

But no, my job is -- he's one of my best friends. Look, it's tough out here. I understand that. And he's going through some swing changes, and the hard part about it is it's such a fine line out here that very, very small progressions could not really be shown too much, if that makes sense. Out here you have to make a big jump or it takes one crazy good week to really make a big difference.

I'm here for anything and everything him or any of my friends would want. But it's not my place to step in and say something unless I'm asked. I would look at that more as a coach's role or an agent's role or a caddie's role or sports

psychologist, whatever. But I mean, I'm here if he or anybody would ever want to ask stuff to. But again, that's not my role, and I know he's really starting to feel a lot better about everything. I think that's the reason he's been playing a good bit, and I think that's one good thing about him is he's going to play his way into it, and once he has that one good week, all that confidence will come right back and this will all be forgotten.

Q. When you're playing with him away from the TOUR, is it just for fun, so maybe some of these things wouldn't come up anyway?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, obviously it is for fun. It's just at home, whether it's just a little money game or we just want to go out and go play one afternoon or whatever. But for him right now as he's going through the swing changes, I've never seen him work harder than he has the last six months or even year. He's really, really put the time and effort in, and it's really cool to see because that keeps pushing me. Being down there in Jupiter, you kind of -- you always get a good eye on your opponents because you see what they're doing and stuff that Rick is doing and working on his game, it really is motivating, and it's awesome, and I'm happy and proud of him.

But for him, like I said, it's just about kind of getting through it, and when we go out and play those rounds, he's working on his changes, and the good part about that is it's not a golf tournament, so he's able to overdo it and overcompensate because the misses aren't as big. But because of those misses, they'll help him once he gets out here and gets more comfortable.

Q. Is it crazy to think he's not in the Masters at this point?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Oh, it's beyond crazy. Yeah. It's one of those things you just don't -- there's a lot of guys that you just wouldn't even expect that they're in that situation. But he's got a lot of time, and I've got nothing but faith. He's playing here at a place that he loves and plays well it seems like every year, so I wouldn't be surprised to see him play well this year.

Q. NBC is debuting a simulcast this weekend; it's a live gambling show and more and more states are coming online with legalized sports getting. What are your thoughts and/or concerns about what this is going to do for you and for the TOUR?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I didn't know that, and I -- yeah, I don't know. I don't really -- I guess it's hard to have many thoughts because I just heard about it.

Look, it seems to be the way, gambling and the live gambling on sports. Obviously as a player, selfishly, I worry about any sort of sketchiness going on with whether it's communication within someone that's out on the grounds and could potentially yell or do something to affect a person that would have, say, a wager or something and that's a serious, serious concern. We're out here playing -- this is our job and we're out here trying to win golf tournaments and a lot of people are supporting families and supporting themselves. I would hope it would never come to that.

But at the end of the day you can't sit there and tell me that that's not a realistic chance. I would hope that it wouldn't happen, but I'm sure it'll turn out great, and yeah, I'm interested to see how it goes.

Q. Anything on the apparel front? And if not, how do you go about picking what you're going to wear?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No. If you've got any extra shirts, send them my way because I currently can wear whatever I want. But it's been enjoyable to try different clothing products and really just wear what I'm most comfortable in. If I go to the mall and I see something I like, I see a shirt I like, I go home and I just get it embroidered with the Citi logo on the sleeve. It's definitely a bizarre and odd time and my closet is as empty as it's ever been, but at the same time it feels right because it's a fresh start, and hopefully will be like that.

Most importantly I think Lance, my manager, and I and Excel have been great and they understand, look, this is going to be here whenever you want it, but I need to be playing golf, but I can't get wrapped up and focused on what clothing deal or whatever I want to do. I need to be playing good golf, and I need to focus on that. That's what's most important right now, and whatever happens will take care of itself.

Q. Have you picked out anything special for Saturday for the 16th?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I've got some green pants or kind of some tealish pants. That's about it. It's got to be some shade of green. I know that. Even though there might not be any fans, I still want what small amount there is on my side.

Q. Speaking of 16, what's the most memorable thing that you've heard there, and how much do you expect to hear from fans this week there?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I don't know what to hear this year. I think it'll be kind of -- obviously it'll be weird, but just



having that amount less of people, I think there's so much noise and so much going on on 16 in the past that when people yell or do something, it's not that much of a difference because there's so much constant noise if that makes sense, like a football or basketball game but with less people. It could stand out a little bit more, so that'll be interesting to see. I've had some bizarre moments on 16. I four-putted for double one year. That was about as bad as you could ever feel going through that tunnel.

Yeah, I've made some sweet birdies. I made a birdie last year on Sunday with the Kobe Lower Merion jersey on. That was really, really special. But no, those fans, I don't know what it is and how they come up with what they do, but they're very creative.

Q. And Doug mentioned your record at this tournament. You've had thirds the last few times. Are you surprised you haven't won at this course yet? Is it really tailor-made for your game, or do you see a lot of water on the left coming in?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I didn't until you just brought it up, so now I'm thinking about it. But no, the fact of the matter is I just haven't executed well enough to get it done. I've played well and I've played well enough to be around the hunt, but the year Rickie won, I had a great chance on Sunday if I would have played a really good round to win, and then last year I just didn't play well enough I think kind of in the middle of the week around Saturday.

But the thing about this place is there's a lot of birdies and you need to -- your bad rounds need to kind of be that 68 or 69 range. You can't really afford to shoot 72 or something like that. It's a fun place to play. I feel like if you really have control of your ball you can go around here with very minimal mistakes and make a lot of birdies, but at the same time it is a place that if you're not playing well, it can expose you, and I think that's why I've had a little bit of both. But I do love the golf course. I think and hope it really is a place that I'll win multiple times in my career. I would like to get it out of the way soon so I can stop guessing and hoping.

Q. Talking about the TPC Scottsdale course, we're kind of talking to players about 17 and just getting their thoughts on that, kind of your mindset and kind of what factors dictate how you play the 17th hole here.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, 17 is a great risk-reward hole. Everybody goes for it, so it's not really a lay-up hole. But there is just different ways to, I guess, hit it around the green. Some people hit probably something that stays between the bunker and the green, and the course being

as soft as it is, usually you can kind of hit something low that, as long as it gets over that bunker, runs up on the green. I'm not sure that'll quite be the case this year. Hopefully it'll firm up as the week goes on.

But it's really just about placement on that tee shot for where the pin is because if the pins get on the right, if you get past pin high, you get up there on the green, it really is a tough chip, and then same thing with that back left pin. If you push it too far up that right or even in the right center of the green, it's really difficult to get the ball within 15 feet or so. You're standing -- I've had, I think, last year or maybe two years ago, I hit a great 3-wood right in front of the green and I chipped it right over the back of the green in the water. It's a hole you stand on the tee thinking that you should and you have to make 3, but if you get lazy and you're not paying attention to what's going on you can make 5 pretty quickly. It's a great hole for the 71st hole of the tournament and could produce some serious fireworks.

Q. The course looks so much more wide open without all the structures. Does that affect anything? Does it affect how you play, affect the sound or anything?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It affects some lines off the tees is about the only thing I can think of. I think you guys, spectators would be amazed how often we use something as a target, whether it's some guy in the yellow behind the green or the edge of the grandstand or the ShotLink tower. It seems like you're always able to find something, whether it's a tree or something that's not normally there. I think that's been the biggest difference is we're able to use those grandstands or people as lines or kind of reference points. You obviously don't have that as much currently.

Q. What did you think of 16 when you walked into it, or have you walked into it today?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I haven't walked into it, no. Tomorrow will be the first time.

Q. I know you guys are still voting for a new chairman for the Players Advisory Committee, Kevin, Rory and Russell. Of course being American, but could you see the benefits of maybe Russell or Rory being selected for that role in the bigger picture? And what I'm thinking about here is the talk of the merger between the European Tour and working closely with the PGA TOUR.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's interesting. I think I've really enjoyed Russell on the PAC. I think the TOUR has done a great job of bringing some European Tour guys in or some guys that have played in European Tour events like Jon Rahm, Rory. But Russell I remember bringing up a couple

great points about events, WGC events that because of different categories and getting exempt into the tournament that we just didn't -- some people didn't know of.

I think you can't be very straight-lined and one-dimensional, if you will, in terms of who is on the PAC or who is making the decisions because you need people from all over, and I think Russell and Rory have both done a great job and they've really given a lot of great input. I think any of the candidates are great.

Like you said, it would be great in that aspect of having some -- a little bit of reference of playing more European Tour events than your normal PGA TOUR player and hopefully be able to use that to the advantage of making the PGA TOUR better and also the European Tour where it's seen fit.

Q. Have you voted yet?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I have not. Thank you for reminding me, by the way.

Q. I'm reading between the lines, but does that sound like Russell may have your vote?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I've got to vote first.

Q. We're not that far away actually from a year removed from when this whole COVID thing started. Do you recall what you were thinking that day at THE PLAYERS Championship when the world was sort of changing around us? And can you think back to what you thought of how long this was going to go on?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I didn't think anything of it when we were on the course. Like out there that day, I think it all really, really changed that afternoon and that night. I also played in the morning so I was away from the course, so a lot of the buzz and probably rumors that were going on at the course I was at home, so I didn't know those.

But I remember when it happened, I couldn't believe it. I was basically asleep at the house that I was staying at.

I had no idea how long it was going to go. Myself and all of us have never experienced anything like it. It's crazy. If you would have told me that we'd be testing here at the Phoenix Open in 2021 and going to be testing for who knows how many more months, I would have told you you're crazy. But here we are, and like I've said from the beginning, I'm totally fine with that. I'm happy to be playing on the PGA TOUR and happy to be playing the game that I love against the best players in the world every week.

It sure beats staying at home and not being able to play. I hope that everybody continues to do their job and their part and everyone keeps staying safe. It is bizarre to think that we're almost a year removed and we're still reaping the repercussions from all this, and it doesn't look like anybody has any idea when it's going to stop.

Q. Has the testing at all become routine or is it still -- do you view it as a pain still?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It's very routine. I mean, it's never comfortable getting something shoved up your nose, so it's not like I go there and can't wait and enjoy to get a Q tip shoved up my nose. But no, it is routine. I get in earlier. I probably get in on average like a half a day to a day earlier now than I normally would at a tournament, and it's fine. Like I said, it's just a part of the norm now. It's a part of the routine just like my routine was before, and everyone has to do it. It's not like it's just me.

As long as that means we get to keep playing golf and playing out here on our normal PGA TOUR schedule, then that's fine.

DOUG MILNE: Justin, we appreciate your time as always and certainly hope you have a great week.

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