

Arnold Palmer Invitational

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Bay Hill, Florida, USA

Bay Hill Club and Lodge

Chris Kirk

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Chris Kirk to the interview room here at the 2023 Arnold Palmer Invitational presented by Mastercard.

Chris snapped a winless drought of more than seven years on the PGA TOUR with his victory at last week's Honda classic in a playoff over Eric Cole.

Chris, if we could just get a comment from you on what the emotions of the last 48 hours have been like following the victory and how good it's been to get back in the winner's circle.

CHRIS KIRK: Sure. It's been a whirlwind, no doubt. I was first off 7:25 Monday morning in the Seminole member-pro, so didn't have a whole lot of time to recoup. I think I slept for about three and a half hours or so on Sunday night.

But just a lot of adrenaline, obviously, and just trying to catch up with a lot of people that reached out. It was amazing to me to see just the genuine support and how many people were truly happy for me. It's an incredible feeling.

But, yes, winning after almost eight years, my life is so different than it was eight years ago and for the better, obviously. So it just was very, it was emotional for me, no doubt, still is, and something that I really had a lot of years of doubting whether I had it in me to do that again. So hugely rewarding in that aspect as well.

THE MODERATOR: Now we turn the page to the Arnold Palmer Invitational presented by Mastercard, a place where you're one of only two players to finish in the top 10 in each of the last two years. So how are you going to try and keep that momentum going into this week?

CHRIS KIRK: My main goal at the moment is to try to get some rest. Today, Tuesday, would normally be a day where I would be out on the golf course practicing. But I decided that I feel like I do a really good job now of just kind of listening to my body of what I feel like I need. So I felt like I needed to not hit any golf balls today.

So I'm going to get some rest today, and I got a good workout in earlier just to get some blood pumping. Just going to kind of take it easy, for the most part. And then tomorrow I'll kind of ramp up my pretournament routine of preparation and the normal stuff that I do.

But, yeah, this is a golf course that I really enjoy. I've had some good success here. But it's a special week for me. I've been able to play golf with Mr. Palmer and first met him -- I played in two Palmer Cups when I was in college, and I remember meeting him, seeing him at the U.S. Amateur one year. I've played this tournament every year that I've been on TOUR, with the exception of, I think one year maybe I didn't qualify and one year my oldest son was born this week or maybe the week after this or something like that.

So it's always been a really special tournament for me. I'm very thankful I have some incredibly fond memories of time spent with Mr. Palmer. So it will be, it will always be one of the top weeks of the year.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll take some questions out here.

Q. You're very open about your struggle. Just how good of a platform does it provide for you when you win and you're able to talk about that? Do you feel like it helps you and other people?

CHRIS KIRK: It's been great. It's been something that I didn't see coming and didn't expect early on. Early on in my sobriety, I was open and honest about it, just because it felt good. It felt good to be away from the years I spent hiding things and lying to the people closest to me and lying to myself about where I was at in my life.

So it was just an incredible freeing feeling to wake up every day and just be okay with who I was. So that was kind of where it started, for sure.

Now I've had a lot of people reach out to me and I've been able to connect with a lot of other people that are in similar situations and provide a little bit of insight, maybe, or a few



small little tidbits that I can give people of what I've done that's helped me so much. Yeah, it's an incredible, it's an incredible gift that I've been given to be able to have my message influence other people in a positive way.

Q. Besides the benefits across the board in life, how about with golf, what would you say the primary benefit has been?

CHRIS KIRK: Mental clarity, for sure. Towards the end of when I was drinking, physically I was beginning to deteriorate a little bit. I probably didn't look a whole lot different, but I felt pretty bad a lot of the time.

So now physically I feel fantastic. Just the mental clarity and the peace of mind in every aspect of my life is obviously going to carry over to golf.

Q. I want to clarify, I've heard that you skipped the Genesis to be able to play the Honda. Is that correct?

CHRIS KIRK: That is.

Q. If you did do that, what was behind that decision-making and kind of explain some of the opportunities that maybe this new model creates for things like that, for players in your shoes.

CHRIS KIRK: Yeah. So I've played Genesis I think maybe three times in my career and have made the cut once. I would put Riviera in the top 10 of my favorite golf courses that I've ever played, but I just have had a very strong tendency to shoot 74 out there, or 75. And that just has not really done me a whole lot of good.

The Honda Classic is a place where I've had a lot of good weeks and have grown increasingly comfortable on a very uncomfortable golf course. I enjoy the warm weather. I enjoy the Bermuda greens. There's a lot of things that I like about it. I was still kind of going back and forth, and then I saw the forecast for Riviera, that it was going to be cold, and I do not like playing golf in the cold.

So that was, to be honest, it came down to as simple as that. Like, at the Honda it's going to be 80-something and at Riviera it's going to be 50. So that was what ended up making the decision more than anything for me.

Q. There's been a lot made this year about designated events, non-designated events. You've played three non-designated events. Between the ropes, and maybe last week's a little bit of an anomaly because were you in contention and won, but between the ropes, did Sony or AmEx or Honda feel any different to you as a player?

CHRIS KIRK: No, they don't feel any different, the ones that I've played so far. Phoenix felt like Phoenix always does. It's a great event, one that I love.

But every single PGA TOUR event that we play is an unbelievable event and is incredibly meaningful. I think that you saw that from me last week, just how much it meant to me to win the Honda Classic. So I think that the model that the TOUR has is going to be evolving over the next few years, and I think that they will figure it out and they will get it right, hopefully. But I don't think you're ever going to take away just from how important every PGA TOUR event is.

Q. Then also, last week had you run across, crossed paths, with Eric Cole at all before last week? Did you know anything of his story? What impression did he kind of make on you?

CHRIS KIRK: I had not met Eric yet until Sunday. I had seen him around a few times. Just seeing him I just kind of figured he was a 24-year-old rookie. I mean, he looks like he's 24. We have so many good young players that come up every year.

But I was, I read a little bit at some point that he's been kind of a journeyman and been playing mini-tours for a long time and all that kind of thing. So I thought that was cool to see somebody that has that kind of perseverance to be a rookie on TOUR at 34.

Then playing with him on Sunday I was incredibly impressed. I was very impressed by how composed he was. I was very impressed by how he played. I mean, he putted amazing. He hit a ton of great shots. I mean, he looked like he had been there before a bunch of times. He looked more comfortable than I felt, I'll say that. (Laughing.)

I didn't feel like I really had any type of advantage in that situation. My four previous wins were so long ago that it felt like, for me, trying to do it again for the first time. But, yeah, Eric was a super nice guy. I enjoyed my conversations with him out there, and a very impressive player, obviously.

Q. For the record, the windchill at Riv was in the low 30s on Wednesday, just so you know. And you have broken par twice there. I wanted to ask you about the World Rankings. I think you were floating around 47, I think, going into Honda. You know what's at stake, 50, and it's probably a month to go. What kind of tension does that cause for somebody that wants to get back to Augusta?

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CHRIS KIRK: Yes, I was definitely struggling with that a little bit mentally because we do our best to treat every week the same and stick to our process and just go along, but I cannot deny how important the Masters is to me and how much I love the Masters. Growing up in Georgia, that's the pinnacle of golf.

So, yes, I was 47th in the world going into last week and I knew that I needed to stay in the top 50 to get into Augusta.

But I felt good about it. The Honda, here at Bay Hill, THE PLAYERS, are all three weeks where I've had a lot of success over the years. So I felt like, okay, I just need to have one or two really strong weeks and we'll be all right.

But, yeah, it's such a difficult thing because we all, obviously, want our World Ranking to go up, but how do you do that? It's hard mentally to get from, okay, I've got to get my World Ranking higher, back to bringing it back to the small things of how you actually accomplish that.

Q. Secondly, when it comes to any type of pressure on the golf course, how do you deal with it, and I'm talking about Sunday on the back nine, for example, and is it any different now than it was before in terms of handling pressure?

CHRIS KIRK: I still feel -- I get just as nervous now as I did before. Obviously, the differences in my life off the course help a lot, for sure, but I still care a lot about what I do. I really care about competing.

And I think that these last few years have been really rewarding for me because I feel like I've been at a point where if, whatever, if two years ago was the end of my career, I could look back on it when I'm 70 and be like, you know, four wins, made a bunch of money, it's been a great career.

But I didn't feel like I was done yet. I felt like I had a lot to prove, only to myself, you know? What people expect of me or think that I should do is irrelevant. But I really had a strong, strong desire to prove to myself that I still had what it takes to win out here.

Q. Before now, have you ever owned a Honda in your life?

CHRIS KIRK: No, not yet.

Q. Are you going to?

CHRIS KIRK: I am going to.

Q. What's the most miles you've ever put on a car?

CHRIS KIRK: Most miles I ever put on a car? I had a GMC Yukon that I put probably a hundred-something-thousand miles on or so. Early on in my career, I remember driving from -- that was when I lived at Sea Island, driving to Omaha and Wichita and Springfield, Missouri, and all those places, taking three days to get there. That was shortly after my wife and I were married and just the two of us driving across the country. But, yeah, those are good memories, for sure.

Q. You're not at Sea Island anymore?

CHRIS KIRK: No, I'm back in Athens, Georgia. We moved back in 2014, '15, something like that.

Q. This course, what do you like about it? It's been bringing guys to their knees for a few years now here, I mean, very difficult conditions. How does that suit you and fit with your style?

CHRIS KIRK: I really enjoy the challenge here. I love the turf conditions here, firm and fast, good fast Bermuda greens. I definitely have had my most success, putting, short game stuff, on firmer, faster Bermuda. That's kind of my favorite. But it's a great golf course, I think, and really demanding in parts of the game that are my strength. I would say iron play, wedge play is definitely my best strength as a golfer.

This is a very, very demanding second-shot golf course. You got to drive it well out here, but they give you enough space. The fairways are not crazy narrow. The rough is very penal if you do miss. But, yeah, it definitely plays into my hands a little bit with it being a very strenuous second-shot golf course.

Q. Is there anyone that you were surprised by hearing from after your victory, somebody you hadn't heard from for 10 years or somebody you didn't know who contacted you for some reason to congratulate you?

CHRIS KIRK: There was a few. First one that pops into my head I guess is Chipper Jones. He's been -- I've known Chipper for a number of years. We don't exactly talk on a regular basis, but he's a great guy. Growing up a Braves fan, I mean, I'm more of a baseball person than a golfer in a lot of respects. I love the Atlanta Braves, I love baseball. I went and watched warmups of Tampa Bay spring training this morning for a couple hours before I came out here. I mean, I just love it. So, yeah, getting a text from him was really cool.



Q. What's your last memory of Augusta?

CHRIS KIRK: I have not been to Augusta since the 2016 Masters. So my main memory is playing terrible.
(Laughing.)

I played pretty solid in 2014 and 2015. I think I finished like 20th and 30th. Had some really good memories from those two years. We got some cold windy weather in 2016 and I just didn't play great. So I'm really excited to get back and get a little redemption, hopefully.

Q. What did you miss the most about the last six, seven years and did you still watch every weekend?

CHRIS KIRK: It's hard to watch, to be honest, when you've played it and you're not there. I've watched a little bit, but it's so important to me and something that I want to be a part of that it's just, it is a little bit tough to watch.

I remember going -- I went as a spectator in probably 2009 or something like that. My wife went with me, who was my, I think, girlfriend at the time. Maybe we were engaged. I don't remember exactly what year it was. But I remember going and seeing some guys that I knew and saying hello or whatever. It was a fun day. Weather was good, you know, whatever.

But then we were walking back to my car and I just remember looking at her like, I'm not coming back to this place until I'm playing in the Masters. I'm not. I wasn't even on TOUR at that time, but that was just like, you know, you just want it so bad that when it's not you there and you see other guys playing, it's just, it's hard.

THE MODERATOR: Chris, thank you very much for your time. Best of luck this week.

CHRIS KIRK: Thanks.

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