

# Arnold Palmer Invitational

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Bay Hill, Florida, USA

Bay Hill Club and Lodge

## Akshay Bhatia

### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome the winner of the 2026 Arnold Palmer Invitational presented by Mastercard, Akshay Bhatia, to the interview room. Akshay, you just won at Mr. Palmer's place. Could we get some comments on what's going through your mind.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean, very blessed to win his event. Everyone knows when you show up to this tournament how hard it is, an elite field, obviously, and just very honored to win his event. I know he was up there watching and probably pretty proud of how that finish was for this week. And yeah, just super fun. The fans were right there with me, which was really cool. It felt like Arnie's Army for me. So, yeah, very blessed.

THE MODERATOR: I think he was watching. We had a rainbow out on the green just a few minutes ago for the trophy ceremony, so congratulations. If you can take us through, first of all, the 16th hole. That's one that I know you'll remember for a long time.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I think it was 193 yards or 191, and the wind laid down. It was a perfect 6-iron. Joe said, you know, Just hit one of the best 6-irons of your life right here. And I did. I pushed it, you know, the professional push, as we call it, and it landed, you know, a couple feet from the hole, went up to 3 feet, and that was a huge bonus to go from a couple back to just one back.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Akshay picks up his third PGA TOUR victory. We will now open it up to questions.

**Q. You spoke earlier about when you're at the turn -- you're down, I believe, five shots at the turn. Just what was going through your head then and what gave you the confidence then to come out with those four straight birdies?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I was pretty annoyed missing that putt on 9. Obviously, Daniel made birdie and that was just a mental mistake that you just can't make in big tournaments, big golf courses. So I went to 10 tee very angry. And I told Joe that was the first time I really showed

some frustration. But I told him, you know, I said we shot 4-under yesterday on this side, let's just try and do that again. And you just never know in this game. And, yeah, I mean three perfect shots on 10.

Missed it in a nice spot on 11. Made that putt which was huge.

12, hit great shots.

And, yeah, I mean, it was just kind of one of those things where there's so much pressure, so much adrenaline, so many nerves and to be able to play through that I think that's kind of what Joe kept reminding me of, he's like, You can play happy, you can play nervous, you can play upset, angry. And it was a lot of fun, for sure.

**Q. Curious, if you thought of this being kind of a Palmer charge, I mean, that's kind of the famous thing he did.**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean, definitely played bold. I think that was a big thing that everyone knows of Mr. Palmer. And it was really cool. I could feel the energy and the buzz. It was awesome. I'm very fortunate to win this tournament. I know the magnitude of this golf tournament, the winners here obviously Tiger making all those putts, it was just, it was really special and I think the coolest part of today is just the fans, Arnie's Army was out there for me and it was really, really cool.

**Q. Where you're from Winston Salem, obviously a big connection to Arnold Palmer. I'm curious, when did you first know who Arnie was, and is there anything around your hometown, whether it be at Wake Forest or somewhere that kind of reminds you of Arnie?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, so it's funny, I'm not from Winston Salem. Actually, Wake Forest is a small town near Raleigh. But that's, at the time that's where Mr. Palmer went, Wake Forest was still in Wake Forest, the town. And I always would go to this, their golf course, which was, it was called Paschal Golf Course. A municipal, like weeds as their greens. And all the stories of Mr. Palmer playing there. That's kind of the most fond



memory, you know, growing up where he kind of went to school.

So again, really, really cool to be affiliated with that kind of that thing with Mr. Palmer and to win his tournament.

**Q. You've been on the scene awhile now, I mean from 17 years old. I mean, a lot of promise, won a couple times. But what kind of a breakthrough kind of win can it be to win an event of this magnitude as you put it?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean just proving to myself I can do it. I think I went through a stretch last year where I was in contention, and then felt like, not impossible, but it felt like it took a lot of learning from each day that I didn't play well. So again, this is another big step for me going from a non-full or a, you know, I won a full-field event, I won the Barracuda, which is an opposite field event, and now winning a Signature Event is huge. So I'm excited. This is amazing. I never really thought that I could really do this with that amount of pressure. I feel like I've shied away from that. And today I just, I dug down, I believed in what I could do and I executed nicely.

**Q. What kind of a reminder do you get amid all this excitement about how much it takes to win, when you think about, not only the 60-footer on number 11, but the putt this morning hanging on the edge and then dropping and all the little things that go on?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, that's part of it. Winning golf tournaments, there's a lot of luck involved. A lot of things have to go your way. It's just part of the game. But, yeah, I mean I just, I did a lot of great things this week. I had my niece definitely watching over me, who passed away in December. And I saw, when I saw that rainbow on 18, it reminded me of her. So it was really cool, you know, just a special moment for us and can't wait to celebrate.

**Q. Can we ask the name of your niece and what happened, or is that a family matter?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, so her name is Mia. She was diagnosed with a pretty rare disease. And, you know, she was a fighter for a long time. She wasn't supposed to make it past a year old. You know, the coolest thing about it was she was there at our wedding, which was really hard for her to travel. And it was the day of our wedding she passed away, she didn't make it. We tried, obviously tried everything, and had a great support system. But there's so many cool things about that week. She stayed in a house where we got married, it was called Heaven on Earth. She loved the sand. She got to see everyone.

So I told my sister, you know, I've been thinking about her for a long time after she passed, and dedicated this win for her.

**Q. How old was she?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: She was five.

**Q. And this is really awkward going back to a dumb golf question, but you couldn't hit a fairway for about an hour to start the round, and then you didn't miss over the, except for number, I think 12. What happened? What allowed you to dial in your driving?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, this golf course is tough. I feel like my coach and I, we had a great plan at Waste Management of just giving some ownership to the golf shots that I was hitting. And again, it's hard to win. I was nervous, anxious to start the day. But, yeah, I just, you know, I felt like I was swinging it great all week, and I was losing five strokes off the tee. So I don't really know what happened. But I missed it in the right spots. I think the first day I hit it in 12 bunkers, and I think six bunkers in the first six holes. So, again, yeah, it was just interesting. Don't know.

**Q. That wait, wait, wait, moment at 18 this morning. Did you have any sense that it might change the complexion of your entire day?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I don't even know what I was thinking. I woke up so early, did my whole routine, me and Daniel were bumping rap in the workout room at 5:30 this morning. Yeah, I mean, came out, it was a very nervous start going to 17, not knowing how far the ball's really going to go. But, yeah, hitting those shots on 18 were, was really nice to kind of end that day. But I went back, fell asleep, and I was still nervous. So it was an interesting day, for sure.

**Q. And then all three of your wins have come in playoffs. How is it that you are such a strong playoff participant?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I don't know. I mean luck, obviously. But I feel like when I get into a playoff I feel less nervous. And I kept adding pressure, it felt like, to Daniel. Hitting the fairway on 18 is so big, especially for that pin. Once you hit it in the rough you're playing defense trying to hit it in a decent spot. Even where Daniel hit it, it's just so tough. So I just kept putting pressure on him, I felt like, and, you know, had that putt to win and it was nice to see it go in.

**Q. That approach shot on 18, was that an aggressive play call, always the plan, or did the situation call for**

it?

AKSHAY BHATIA: No, it was a perfect golf shot. We were looking -- are you saying in regulation?

**Q. Yes.**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Oh, yeah, that was, no, I was not trying to go at the flag. But you have so much adrenaline, you're trying to hit a shot where you want to hit it full. It was a perfect draw 9-iron, and it just rode the wind too much. But it was like one of the easiest chips I could have had on that hole. So it was nice to learn from that going into the first playoff hole.

**Q. You've been putting well for a while now with that long putter, but this was an incredible putting week. What was the difference that you took it to like next level?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I've been doing the same thing for a long time. And the funny thing is this week I felt like Joe and I do this drill where I throw a Chapstick around and do Aimpoint stuff and try and guess the percentage of slope. And I was really dialed in Tuesday. But I think I just had more awareness of what it takes out here to make putts. Because I struggled with that last year. My putter slides on these greens, and so I think I figured that out. Figured out a lot of things this week with my coach of just how to attack the golf course. And my speed was great. I had a couple 3-pointers, but that's going to happen here.

**Q. What's going to be the shot you're going to remember most from this week?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, there's plenty. The one on 16 obviously was great.

The one on 17 was amazing.

And then the drives I hit on 18 were monumental.

**Q. Anything, you mentioned it felt like Arnie's Army out there. Anything that you heard during the course of the day that sticks out?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Man, I just felt like this -- I mean, everyone was rooting me on. I was just, like it was so cool, I've never experienced that. Like I've experienced it with Scottie. Everyone's screaming for Scottie. So that's what it felt like for me. And Joe was like, Could you even imagine what it was like when Tiger played here? Couldn't even imagine that. So the fans were amazing. I felt like, as soon as Daniel maybe didn't hit a good shot or backed off or missed a putt, it just felt like all the weight on my

shoulders to kind of win this golf tournament.

**Q. As much of the great support you felt, did you find it at all awkward some of the things that were said at Daniel on the last couple of holes?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I wasn't paying attention to what they were saying. I heard a lot of people say, you know, McDonald's or whatever. But, yeah, it's part of the game. It's fun, and this is what we play for. We play for to be in big crowds and big moments and you can't shy away from that, so...

**Q. You mentioned how Joe, when you guys walked to the 10th tee, kind of helped really calm you down. It's still a pretty new partnership between you two. How has that progressed to the point where you guys are just kind of able to dominate on the back nine again today?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean, I really wanted to work with Joe for a long time. Him being left-handed is really, really cool. That doesn't happen often where you have two left-handers. I think it helps a lot with certain shots, how it feels, certain lies. He can do a lot of things that I just never before. And so I think his energy was huge for me. Like, he's done this plenty of times, won on tough golf courses. It's easy to talk to him. And, yeah, we're still really fresh. That's the crazy part.

But I just think we're very, very comfortable. We speak the same language. And my coach, him and I, we just have this bond where it feels like a great team.

**Q. When you think about the shot at 16 and, frankly, the one at 18 in regulation, which was probably a yard away from being pretty special, I tend to recall when you won a junior PGA, did you not, like, chip in for Eagle on the last hole to win? Moments like that, is that something that you feel like you embraced early or relished or had a knack for the moment?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean, definitely you go through phases of, like, can I handle this pressure. But I just love it. Like, when I get in that situation, I'm ready to fist pump. So when I had -- yeah, I chipped in there at Valhalla at the Junior PGA, and then this chip here, I mean, it was, like, the easiest chip I could have had on that green. Like, you can't -- the putt I had in the first playoff hole is so tough. But I had this straightforward chip. I just had to make solid contact and it was going to go within three or four feet.

So yeah, I love the big moments. I think that's what I play for. And you just can't shy away from it when you're trying to win big golf tournaments.

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THE MODERATOR: All right, congratulations once again to Akshay. Thank you.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Thank you, all.

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