

Valspar Championship

Wednesday, April 28, 2021

Palm Harbor, Florida, USA

Innisbrook Resort (Copperhead)

Justin Thomas

Press Conference

HALEY PETERSON: We would like to welcome Justin Thomas to the 2021 Valspar Championship media room. Justin, this is your first tournament back since the Masters, and you'll be making your fourth appearance. Tell us about the addition of this tournament to your schedule.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I'm glad to be back. I love this tournament. I love this golf course. It's just always in a tough time of the year schedule-wise. It's unfortunate because it is an unbelievable golf course, and I really do think that a lot more top players would play if it wasn't the case.

I was going to play last year until the pandemic hit, so I was glad to be able to still keep it in my schedule and come this year, and yeah, I'm glad to be back.

HALEY PETERSON: You just played the course. Can you speak to the Snake Pit and what challenges it poses for the week?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, the golf course is right in front of you. It's not anything that's tricked up. It's not anything that's hidden. It's all right there. You see the narrow fairway out there and you've got to hit it, and if you don't, you get out of position, you're really just trying to somehow make a par, and the greens are small and severe.

I think they're pretty receptive right now, but I think as the week goes on, if we continue to get weather like this, they could get very firm come the weekend, which would make it extremely difficult.

You know, it's one of those places you can shoot over par so quickly, but if you have control of your ball and you hit it in the fairway to where you can put the ball where you want on the greens, you shoot a couple under each day, you're going to be doing pretty good. It's a great test. I like golf courses like that, but at the same time, you can't just kind of slap it around. You need to be playing well and have control of your ball.

Q. After the emotional win at THE PLAYERS



Championship and then up to the Masters, did you really need that break after the Masters, and what have you been doing?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I probably wanted it more than I needed it. I always try to take time off after Augusta, whether it's -- definitely one week off. Harbour Town is another good example. That's a course I'd love to play every year, but I played Harbour Town after Augusta before, and I'm just not in the physical or mental state to be able to play a golf tournament after the grind the week of Augusta. Taking two weeks off was nice. I like to get just away.

Obviously right now it's a little bit different in terms of where I can go or where I can travel or whatnot, and really just take some time off, whether it's hang out with some friends or just get away from the game. But yeah, just relax and really just -- almost just kind of reset, if you will.

I kind of feel like it's breaking the season up a little bit almost into two parts from how much we've played so far this season and the rest of the season, so I really want to feel like I'm fresh and ready to go, and that's the case.

After taking some time off and relaxing and resting, just getting back into it and trying to keep getting better and better each and every day to where we feel like we're peaking come this big stretch coming up.

Q. Have you ever played Kiawah before, and if you have, your thoughts?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I played it when I was like 10, and I really don't remember it at all, to be honest.

Q. Do you remember if you broke 80 when you were 10?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I don't. The only thing I remember is that my dad putted it off I think it was like the third green, and he's always -- at least when he played, especially back then, he was a really good chipper and putter, so when I watched him putt it off the green, I was like, these greens are pretty difficult.



Q. If you look back to either coming out of college or the year you spent on the Korn Ferry, what do you consider the weakest part of your game, what did you consider the weakest part of the game, and what did you do to improve it?

JUSTIN THOMAS: In college and coming out, I definitely -- my off-speed short irons were definitely the weakest part of my game. I feel like I hit it long -- I assume that's what you're talking about in terms of a specific part of my game. I hit it far enough in college. I didn't hit it much shorter than I do now, but I hit it plenty far enough to the yardage we were playing, especially on the Korn Ferry where it's a birdie fest to where the greens were softer on the Korn Ferry than they were in college because I felt like in college golf they set the course is up about as hard as they could. Being able to have that off-speed wedge, take the spin off of it, lower the flight if it gets a little bit windier, just have more control, that was something I struggled with. If I had a back pin from 95 yards, I would feel like I had to land it in that four-yard window past the pin to be able to keep it close because it would spin back. I think that's something I see quite often honestly from college and players that are just coming out, and that's something I really, really worked on and learned and something I kind of view as a strength of mine now.

Q. Do you remember what made you think this is what I need to work on? Was there ever a moment or did someone knock some sense into you or what?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I remember playing practice rounds with like Phil and Rick and those guys and Jordan playing -- when I'd qualify for a U.S. Open or luckily my rookie year playing practice rounds with them, whatever it was, and just seeing the shots that they would hit, especially Phil being as good as he is with his wedges. As funny as it is, JJ Van Wezenbeeck with Titleist, he was on the Korn Ferry with me, one of the reps, and we just were kind of -- I remember it was so weird, I remember in Boise we were talking about it, he's like, I think that's a shot you can improve on, and I was like, you know, that's right, it is a shot I've been working on trying to improve on. And then however many weeks later it was when I won my first event in Columbus, in that playoff event, had about 80 yards to a back pin and I hit a nice little dead-arm lob wedge in there to about three feet, and that next week I remember getting a text from him saying, I'm glad to see all that practice paid off.

It's funny you remember little things like that, but it was nice to be able to hit a shot like that after I'd been working on it.

Q. Just curious, I don't know how much you get to play practice with Rory at home or how much you've been around him here over this busy stretch, but are you at all surprised the struggles he's going through recently, to the point that he'd bring on another coach? Just wonder if you guys commiserate at all about these things.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I'm very surprised. I think we all are. Rory is one of the most talented golfers I've ever played with, but I think something that is very underrated and people don't realize is how hard he works. I mean, he's out there a lot, puts in a lot, a lot, a lot of hours, and he's very similar to me to where he always wants to get better, probably to the point where it hurts him at times, like it does myself. I've often spent time with my putting or my golf swing trying to perfect it when in reality I just need to make work with what I have.

I have no issue with him getting another opinion. I mean, that's something that we've always talked about, my dad and I. It's like, hey, if what you're -- you don't need to necessarily completely change and go change coaches and trainers, but it's like, hey, if you feel like something isn't working -- my dad has always said that to where if we couldn't figure something out in the golf swing.

We did it with Matt back in the day when I worked with Matt Killen on my putting; if my dad was like, hey, I just can't figure out quite why he's doing this, can you look at this. It's just having that second opinion, and sometimes hearing it said a different way just clicks for you, but then sometimes altogether a different coach just might -- the methods and theories might make more sense to you.

He's clearly to do what's best for his game. He's not just doing it because I was playing poorly with this coach and I just need to change coaches because I'll start playing better. It's like, he likes what he's saying. But the thing about Rory is I know he's going to work through it and he's going to win a lot more tournaments and a lot more majors. I still and always will have maybe more respect for him than anybody because he's one of the nicest guys I've ever met for how much success he's had.

Q. I know you went through a little bit of a lull yourself earlier this year before you won at THE PLAYERS. Are these things a matter of just from the outside you're not as far away as it seems? Like in other words, like in Rory's case, he's probably not really that far off maybe.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, he's not. It never is.

But you never are as far off as you -- we're never as far off

as we think we are, but it's just internally. When you're out there and you're not playing well and you're down on yourself, you feel like you're so far away. It's a lonely sport because you obviously have your caddie out there with you, but it's easy to just kind of get down on yourself, at least for me, get kind of in a dark hole and feel helpless.

It's a terrible feeling. It's hard to explain.

But at the same time, if you're out here for 25, 30 years, you're going to have a lot of those. You're going to have a lot of slumps, if you will, it's just about minimizing those slumps and making them as short as possible and learning from them I would say.

Q. The players impact program, I'm wondering how much you've thought about it since this has come about, and also, how much will you pay attention to it? There's a lot of metrics that go into it. How much will you actually pay attention to it and try to figure out where guys stand and things like that?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I'm not going to pay any attention to it. I mean, I'm not -- obviously it would be great to be the most popular, if you will, but I'm not out here for a popularity contest, I'm out here to win golf tournaments and win as many as I possibly can. If I play good golf, I'll do just fine on that program, and that's the main priority.

But it's a cool deal. It's fascinating, and obviously a lot of people have a lot of different opinions and thoughts on it. I mean, guys like Tiger and Phil that have pushed the game and got the purses where they are, got the game of golf where they are, they deserve to be on that -- to be where they're going to be on that list. Anybody that thinks otherwise, I just highly disagree with it.

The reason why we are where we are is because of a certain couple people kind of in each generation and each era, whatever you want to call it, and they're definitely a huge part of that.

I'm not going to pay attention to it. I'm not going to do anything differently. I'm already pretty active on social media. I'm already pretty active in trying to help out other media outlets or other organizations, charities, whatever it is, whether it's internally or known, but no, I'm just trying to play good golf, and the rest will take care of itself.

Q. Was there a boys' spring break trip this year, and how has that whole thing evolved?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I have a place in Nashville, so we got the band back together, if you will. Smiley and his wife are in Birmingham, so it's an easy drive, and Rick and

Jordan both weren't playing, so we just got together because we don't get to spend that quality time away from a golf tournament really ever. Smiley and his wife have come stayed randomly at our house when they've been down in south Florida. I obviously live on the same street as Rick so I see him and Allison all the time, and Jordan and Annie we'll see at tournaments. But it's at tournaments, it's not like fun, it's like let's go hang out and do whatever we want all day. It's like, all right, we want to go play golf, let's go play golf and the girls can rise with us, we'll have a couple drinks. It's fun. We just want to relax and just be the high 20s, 30 year olds. We don't want to feel like we're necessarily kind of held into doing what we have to do or like okay, I'd love to go to dinner tonight but I have an early tee time tomorrow or whatever it might be. It's like, hey, let's just all get together, relax, just laugh, listen to music, just do stuff that we wish we could do but with our busy schedules we aren't able to. So I was really glad that we could because they're some of the best people I've ever met, and it was nice for us all to be able to spend some time together.

Q. Paul Casey is going for the rare three-peat. He's got three TOUR wins, two of them at Valspar. What is it about the Copperhead course that you think is such a good fit for his game?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I think it's a ball striker's course, and Paul is definitely known as a really good ball striker. When he's on, it's really impressive. I mean, the sound his ball makes when it comes off his irons, compresses it, it's a short, compact move. It's fun to play with and it's fun to watch.

I think there's some holes out here you've really got to drive it well and you've really got to hit it straight, and I think he hits it -- drives it really well but he doesn't move the ball a lot. It's a very tight little draw, I think, when he's hitting it well, or at least from my vantage point. There's not many golf courses that don't fit Paul Casey's eye or his game when he's hitting it well, and I think that's proven over the years.

Q. Will you go to Kiawah before the PGA Championship?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I won't. I'm not going to have time to. I'm playing, I think, five -- well, I guess the next two and then an off week, and in my off week I just want to relax and stay at home. I might try to go a day or two early, something like that.

Q. Seeing as you were born in Louisville and I'm looking for every reconnaissance I can get and every data, do you have a Derby pick?



JUSTIN THOMAS: I don't. It's so funny to me. Every single year on the Derby, all my friends text me because they think because I'm from Louisville I know everything about horse racing there is when in reality I don't. I don't know much. I do know that it is -- especially the Derby, the favorite does win a lot, especially it has in the past, and that's such an easy thing to say, but the cream rises to the top when it's a situation like that.

Yeah, to answer your question, no, I do not -- I can't give you some in-depth analysis, and if anybody is listening, don't text me because I don't know.

Q. I keep hearing good ball striker. How many bad ball strikers are out there? What percentage of players would you say are bad ball strikers, yourself excluded, of course?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, there's some. There's some. It's like anything. There's plenty of guys in basketball that suck at free throws, but they're really good basketball players or there's plenty of guys that are in football that are maybe -- they're bad route runners but they're good catchers. There's plenty of things in my game that I can improve on. But yeah, there's some.

Q. If I were to ask you about Jason Dufner, what comes to mind?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Duf. Do you know I'm staying with him this week? Is that why you asked that?

Q. I did not know that. I'm not sure I wanted to know that, either.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Duf, man, he's --

Q. Let me be more specific. In what ways do you think Duf is underrated?

JUSTIN THOMAS: He is extremely intelligent, especially when it comes to the golf swing. If I'm sitting with him, Jordan and I, I can't really give anything to that conversation because they know a lot more about the golf swing than I do. Like I understand where I want it to be, but I don't -- I just can't speak that. I'm more feel and they're more mechanics, and Duf studies a lot. It's about everything, even stuff going on in the world or stuff going on in sports. Like he just knows a lot, and he's really, really intelligent, but you look at him and you're like, what the hell is this guy doing, he doesn't know what's going on.

He's so quiet, but he seriously is one of the nicest guys. He would do absolutely anything for any of his friends, and

it's a really cool thing, but at the same time I love when Duf gets going because he will literally say anything to anybody and he does not care who's around, and that makes him Duf.

Q. Is he a good ball striker?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Duf is a really good ball striker. He's my roommate this week. He knows where I'm sleeping, so I can't say too much.

Q. Will you give us the plus and minuses for weeks you have a family member as a caddie?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I mean, the minuses are definitely personal, and you don't want to get in some kind of fight because it's -- it's not all great out there. Most of the time it isn't great. Unfortunately the caddie is there to be the sounding board and the other side of your frustrations. If that person doesn't handle that well, then that's probably not going to be a good situation.

But the good part is you're comfortable with them. I mean, everyone is different on the golf course. I'm not somebody who -- I mean, I love my dad to death and my dad is great, but other than my dad, I wouldn't want any other family member on my bag because I'm a little -- I'm intense, I'm serious, I don't want a buddy out there to just kind of like laugh. It's not a hit-and-giggle to me. It's serious. But some people treat it a little bit more that way, and it's not wrong, it's just how they are.

So for me, it's probably I have a lot more in the minus column than the plus column.

HALEY PETERSON: That's all the questions we have. Appreciate you taking the time, Justin, and best of luck this week.

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