

# Valspar Championship

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

Palm Harbor, Florida, USA

Innisbrook Resort (Copperhead)

## Akshay Bhatia

### Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Akshay Bhatia to the interview room here at the 2023 Valspar Championship. If we can just get some opening comments. Congratulations on accepting special temporary membership. As you look back at Puerto Rico you've had an about a week now to process everything, I mean, the emotions at the time. What are you feeling now having accepted membership and playing the rest of this year on TOUR?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, I feel a lot more settled down than I did Sunday, Monday. I think I slept two hours Monday. Just so excited, obviously, to create the opportunity for myself to compete on the PGA TOUR finally.

But, yeah, I mean, I feel good. I feel, yeah, pretty much back to normal, honestly. I mean, it's just another week and just competing out here is going to be fun, full circle. This was my first TOUR event back in 2019, and to play my first PGA TOUR event as a special temporary member means a lot, and for it to happen here, it's pretty surreal, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: If you had to pick maybe one, two things since that first start here in 2019 that you've learned about yourself in that time period, what would you say are maybe one of the two biggest things?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Well, I've said this before and I just said it a couple minutes ago, but I had no idea what adversity meant back in 2019, and I fully understand it now. I've dealt with so many ups and downs in this game as a professional, not being able to rent rental cars, not being able to check into hotels. So dealing with a lot of that outside stuff that I never had to deal with was a big challenge.

Yeah, I mean, just self-belief, learn a lot, play a lot of high-level golf, it makes a big difference. This is my 23rd PGA TOUR event and I'm saying that at 21 years old, which is -- I'm very fortunate for all the opportunities that I've had. Yeah, I mean, there's nothing much more to say

other than just keep learning and keep grinding, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: After this one we'll open it up to questions. I had read that you had said kind of when you were -- as a kid you played in some tournaments with a lot of older kids. You were a little shorter off the tee and had to get creative. Is creativity still a major part of your game today? And would you say that that's a strength that came from doing that as a junior player?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Definitely. I mean, I'm very feel-oriented, but I have a mix of technicality in there. But I've made it to where all my feels are still really good, but making it simple with my swing coach, Chase Duncan, of either changing face angle or changing a bunch of different things that make the ball do what it do.

So I do think that a lot of the feel is still in there, especially the short game, putting, imagination, and hitting shots and curving it a lot is a lot more -- I see it a lot easier than just trying to hit it dead straight or trying to hit, you know, minimize curve. So yeah, it's still in there, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Okay. We'll open it up for questions.

**Q. When you think about Puerto Rico and that week, how do you describe what was clicking for you? And what allowed you to elevate your game to get into genuine contention for the title?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I don't know. I mean, I have a pretty good record on the islands, Bermuda, Bahamas, now Puerto Rico, obviously. But I think I really enjoy the challenge of high winds. I really enjoy the challenge of different types of grass. I mean, we play Paspalum maybe five times a year, which is the green type pretty much on any of the islands, and I've putted pretty well on those islands.

But I just really enjoy the challenge of, like I said, being creative and working balls with the wind, against the wind, hitting 5-iron from 170 versus a stock one is 205. So a bunch of different things that I really enjoy playing in winds. And, you know, I knew that going into that week it was a really good opportunity for me to play well, to get in



contention and try and make it to the Valspar Championship via top 10. I obviously successfully did that.

But you never know with this game. I dealt with high heart rates on the golf course and the crowds started to get slowly and slowly bigger and I would have never imagined that in Puerto Rico for myself, having, you know, 80, 90, a hundred people around watching our group was pretty surreal. I checked my Whoop heart rate after the round, and on my third shot on 18, my heart rate got up to 156 beats per minute, which is pretty nuts.

But just, I've dealt with it so much now and mentality of embracing it was a big thing, and I really embraced it that final round because I knew it was going to play pretty hard, and I was very thankful to finish top 10 and be pretty close to winning that golf tournament.

**Q. What was the moment that you learned what you needed to do to get here?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I had no idea going into that day. I was trying to, obviously, win the golf tournament, but a via top 10 would get me here. And we wouldn't start the Korn Ferry Tour until next week. But I made the putt on 18, walked to my caddie, and he's like, Do you realize what just happened? And I said, No. He's like, You got your card.

And it was just -- I mean, it was a crazy feeling, everything that, just the highs of that was -- it was definitely top on my list right now, even with winning on the Korn Ferry Tour. And, yeah, I mean, it was pretty surreal, and hugging my girlfriend, Presleigh, on 18, I mean, that's just like an amazing moment for us and everything we've kind of gone through these last couple years.

**Q. What have you been told what special temporary member status means? Obviously you're going to get, I guess, unlimited exemptions now. So what is your plan? Like, do you have a bunch mapped out already, and then obviously as that becomes the goal to get your card that way now and -- do you sort of have a game plan, I guess?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: It's very early in this process for us. I know my agent's doing a good job and obviously trying to write in to as many tournament directors as I can. But, yeah, I mean this is the goal, to play on the PGA TOUR, to get my status via the special temporary membership, but we're just going to keep writing in. Hopefully a few events fall my way and we'll see, but if I have a couple weeks off where I don't get into tournaments, then I'll go back down and play the Korn Ferry Tour because I just love competing, I love traveling, and having this avenue of

getting my card this way is very -- it's a very unique opportunity. I mean, not many guys have done it. Will Zalatoris obviously did it and is doing pretty good now.

So I just got to keep learning and playing as many events out here on the PGA TOUR. It's going to be very important for me in the long run, just knowing more of the golf courses and getting used to the travel is a little different out here as well.

**Q. Four years ago you were here the first time and I believe on Tuesday you played with Jon Rahm in a practice round. We have a young amateur in the field this year who is playing with Sam Burns this afternoon. So what's that like when you're 19 -- or whatever you were, 17 years old, and you're playing with Jon Rahm and what do you remember about that?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, it's kind of the same old as you're playing with your friends. He smack talks a lot and he -- it's obviously really cool to play with some of the best players in the world. Obviously, he's one of the greatest players right now.

For me, it was just kind of learning how he dissected the golf course and how he kind of plotted his way around the golf course. But, yeah, I mean, he's been really great to me. We played together at Wells Fargo a couple years ago in a practice round. I've just been very fortunate to kind of get close to some of the better guys out here, and just have the opportunity to play with them is obviously amazing.

**Q. So you found most of them willing to share what they know with the younger players.**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean, he helped me a lot that week about just like mentality, realizing it's another golf tournament, and I took that to heart. It's really -- I believe I can be where he can eventually and, yeah, I mean, there's not much to learn. We're obviously competing against each other and, like I said, building that relationship with him is very important to me and hopefully it continues.

**Q. When you think about what it means to get your PGA TOUR status, when do you think that and the emotion from Puerto Rico, when in your life did that become like a defining dream for you where you were thinking, I want to be on the PGA TOUR?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: Probably, I mean, 12 years old. I honestly -- I mean, my dad has done a lot for me. He's done his thing to get me here, and same thing with my mom. She worked two jobs at one point to help me travel, pay for hotels, and travel the country as a young kid.



But I used to -- I just love practicing as a kid and imitating different guys' golf swings, Fred Couples, you know, so many guys, Gary Woodland, Rory McIlroy, Phil. So many guys.

But I remember going into my dad's room at like midnight when I was 12 or 13, maybe 11, and I asked him, I was like, How do I become the best player in the world? And he is like, What are you doing in my room at 12 o'clock at night? But he said that you got to be the first one there and the last one to leave. And I used to really own that. It's obviously changed now playing so many events in a row that managing your time's very, very important.

But since I was a little kid, I've wanted to be on the PGA TOUR and dreamed about being the best player in the world, and now I have the opportunity to do it.

**Q. Was there ever a time that that seemed like unattainable or was it kind of small steps where it kind of became more and more -- gradually more and more of a realistic goal?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, I think when I turned pro I had a lot of learning to do and it was a lot of learning. I mean, playing on the PGA TOUR, playing different golf courses and very hard setups was very hard to adjust to. But honestly, when COVID happened, obviously it was a really tough time for everyone, but it was a big blessing for me because I put in a ton of work with my coach, Chase Duncan and Raleigh and it was a big blessing because I got my swing to where I was so confident in my abilities again. Then I won my first mini-tour event, which is a very small step, but a big step for me being 18 at the time. And then top-10ing at the Fortinet Championship, used to be the Safeway, in 2019 or 2020, maybe. Top-10ing there and then I was like, yeah, here we go, this is it. And still a lot of learning that year. I mean, playing Monday qualifiers, getting spots when I could is a lot of learning and now the Korn Ferry Tour TOUR has really helped me, just playing a full schedule, playing against really good players, obviously a ton of these rookies out here have done a phenomenal job adjusting to this life on the PGA TOUR and as that is a big part of my, me being here today.

**Q. When you had that moment in Puerto Rico and the emotion, was there any element that you felt like you had proved something to yourself that meant something or had you, had that already happened, had you already proved to yourself that you were good enough?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, I always believed that I was going to get there. I had my schedule set on the Korn

Ferry Tour TOUR. But when it did happen, I mean, just pure joy, obviously. I didn't know how this was going to happen, I didn't know when it was going to happen, but I knew it was going to happen at some point in my career. Like I said, for it to come full circle back to the Valspar Championship is, I mean it's a story you can't write, so...

THE MODERATOR: Thanks very much for your time.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Thank you.

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