

# American Century Championship

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Lake Tahoe, Nevada, USA

Edgewood Tahoe

## Vinny Del Negro

### Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the 2021 American Century Championship winner, Mr. Vinny Del Negro.

#### Q. How does it feel?

VINNY DEL NEGRO: A little numb. It feels great. Smoltzy and me were going back and forth, and Jack and stuff. We played a lot of golf together over the years. It could have went either way. I just hit my driver well on 18. I was able to make up a couple of birdies in the regulation and then in the playoff.

And just trying to keep my emotions in check, and just hit each shot, focus in on each shot. But it was a grind all day. Didn't make a lot of putts, left a few short.

We were going back and forth, battling. But I was just fortunate to get it done in the playoff.

#### Q. Our sympathies with you for the loss of your father on Wednesday.

VINNY DEL NEGRO: Everyone is saying, "Why are you walking so fast in the fairway?" And I like to walk fast anyway. But I wanted to walk fast because I was just talking to my dad.

I just wanted to make him proud.

#### Q. When John Smoltz was up here, the classy guy that he is, came in to talk about it and he said, "Vinny's one of the best guys out here. We love him. He was talking to himself during the day, 'stay focused, stay focused.'" He didn't know the personal situation.

VINNY DEL NEGRO: I didn't really want anybody to know. I spent the last week with my dad before I got here. It was a special time. He's been struggling. And then I found out Wednesday morning. I just wanted to represent him well, my family, and my wife. And just kept walking and talking and kind of focused in on each shot. Even if I hit a bad



shot or bad putt, I never really let it bother me like before. I just stayed in the moment. My caddie, Derk, kept me composed. And we're in it. We're in it. Just keep grinding this thing out.

And I was fortunate in the playoff. But at the end of the day you've got to hit shots. And I was able to hit them down the stretch for my dad, really. That's all I was thinking about. However it turned out, it was going to turn out.

I just wanted to go for it on both drives. I hit them good. Had a 9-iron and a pitching wedge in. Didn't really hit the pitching wedge, a little heavy. I just figured with Smoltzy chipping for five, I just wanted to make sure it was right at the pin and play smart.

But at the end of the day it was all the mindset. It was all the focus. It was all just kind of doing it with my dad.

#### Q. When you came down to 18 and regulation with that eagle putt, that did not miss by much. When you hit it, did you hit that pretty solid, or was it just get it close, 2-putt?

VINNY DEL NEGRO: I pushed it a little bit. I don't think we read it quite as much, it was going to go left a little more than I thought.

And Smoltzy had like a five-footer for par. I was, like, I want to be aggressive but I don't want to run it by five, six feet. So I wanted to make sure, make sure it's a 2-putt. If I can slide it on the right-hand side, great. But if not, we can go into a playoff and play another hole.

I was trying to play smart at that point. Of course I would have loved to roll it in. I think I underread it. I think I came out of it a little bit, but focused on my speed.

#### Q. Smoltzy made a clutch putt for the playoff.

VINNY DEL NEGRO: He did. We've been teammates in events before and we've played. And he's such a great guy and a Hall of Fame pitcher. But besides that, all that stuff, he's just a great golfer and a great guy. It was fun to



play with him today. We were going back and forth.

The same thing with Jack. I played a lot of golf with Jack over the years. It was just -- we love to compete. And I was just fortunate to come out on top today.

**Q. You've been out here, like we've mentioned, for 20 years. Jack's been here for 32 years. Sounds like you're all buddies. That's got to help when you're coming down --**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: It does, when you get paired with these guys. But at the end of the day you still have to hit shots. And you can't worry about where they're at or what they're hitting. It's kind of like I just stayed focused on my game plan with my caddie, Derk, and what we wanted to do, the spots we wanted to hit.

It didn't always work out that way. I thought I kept it in some good spots, made some good 2-putts when I didn't hit some great irons into the holes, kind of trying to stay steady and keep putting pressure on John. And, fortunately, I was able to hit some good drives on 18.

**Q. You came into this event at 75-to-1 odds in the box. We're really hoping you put some money on yourself.**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: I'm not a gambler. I'm not really a drinker. But at the end of the day people can have fun with that. I love the competition. I'm a junkie for that. I love to test myself, compete under pressure, with all the guys. All these guys have been Hall of Fame players in whatever sport, actors, entertainers, whatever it is.

American Century is an incredible first-class -- Jonathan Thomas, Cindy, the whole staff makes it special. NBC with Gary Quinn and Jon Miller, the Super Bowl of celebrity golf.

To win it, to be the first basketball guy is very special. But it's really about the people and the memories and hitting some shots under pressure, which I enjoy.

**Q. That was the next question. The first hoopster to win. How good does that feel?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: It feels good. I'm expecting Steph Curry to be up here soon. Ray Allen will be up here soon. They can really play. They're great buddies. I played with Dell for years and Ray for years. And Steph, not only an incredible basketball player, but an incredible golfer. I expect those guys up here in the near future.

**Q. I asked John this when he was up here a little bit ago. So your round today, with your father passing and just saying "stay focused, stay focused," you guys**

**in the NBA, as athletes, you're able to compartmentalize and stay get focused at the task at hand. Did you take some of that stuff from your playing days to this weekend to today?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: Totally. Every time I walked down the fairway, like I said, it was all listening to stories about my dad when I was playing and coaching, toughen up, make the next shot, don't worry about what happened in the past. Get it done. Are you good enough or not? Can you handle the pressure or can't you? Can you hit the shot under pressure or can't you?

That's what I thought about. And it really just kind of relaxed me. I never got too upset when I made a bogey or too upset when I hit a bad putt or a bad shot. I focused on the next shot. And I figured if I did that, eventually I could put some pressure on them, Smoltzy or Jack or Annika, or whoever.

And, by the way, I played with Annika Wednesday. I mean, that was such an honor. She's such a first-class person. And she's to me the greatest of all time. And just an unbelievable ambassador for golf.

And her husband, Mike, was fantastic. And just to play in a practice round was an honor for me and to play in the tournament against her. She's such a fantastic person and not only a great player.

**Q. Going into today, so we talk a lot in golf about people either sleeping on the lead or getting ready, was there anything different that you prepared yourself for or that you mentally prepared yourself for last night and this morning?**

A. No, it's funny. I haven't slept since Wednesday. I've literally slept two hours a night, three hours a night. Up and down. Tossing and turning.

Talking to my sisters, Theresa and Nina, and my mom, getting plans ready for my father's service next week. And it's a three-hour time change back in Boston. So it was constant. But I actually enjoyed that. I didn't really care if I slept. I figure I can sleep this week or whatever. It wasn't a lot of hours to sleep. That wasn't important to me.

What was important to me is making sure my mom, my wife, my sisters, everyone is doing okay with everything. And it was a blessing my father passed. He's been sick for a while. And it was a blessing I got to spend a week with him, talk about a lot of stuff that -- he's been my biggest supporter over the years and just kind of pushed me.

For my dad it was always tough. Push. Believe in

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yourself. Don't give up. I'm not sure I would have been an NBA player or been standing here, or been an NBA coach. So he was a tough guy. And I miss him, but I have the memories. And he was a great dad.

**Q. I heard you were yelling out "lock it in."**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: That's what my dad used to tell me. When I would miss a shot or a game, I'd have a good game, he would come to me, why did you miss a free throw. Or I'd have 25 or 30 points in a game, should've had 35, whatever it was. You can do better. Lock in. Lock in. Tough it out. Hit the shot. Don't worry about the last shot. Focus in on this shot.

And that's what I tried to do. And I just thought about him walking down 18. I kept talking, like, in my head. It kind of calmed me down a little bit because you still have to hit the shot.

I blocked out the fans. Blocked out kind of what I wanted to do, the area I wanted to hit the ball. And I just had him in my head, like -- my father wasn't happy with second place. He wasn't a second-place type of old school guy. And I wanted to come in first for him.

**Q. You did. You had a very long, emotional hug with Jonathan Thomas. Can you tell us about that?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: American Century is first class. What they do for this tournament, what NBC and Jon Miller and Gary Quinn, my buddy do, is second to none. It's the Super Bowl of celebrity golf.

But Jonathan and Cindy have not only been incredible ambassadors for American Century and what they do for this tournament, they're also very good friends.

We spend time with them in Arizona where we live and they spend time there. So I was just happy to be the first basketball guy, kind of share this moment with Jonathan. Jimmy Roberts is a buddy. One of my good high school buddies is Steve Ball in New York and me and Jimmy and Steve are good friends. Jimmy and Steve are good friends.

It was nice to share the moment with special people. My caddie, Derk. I talked to my wife. I talked to my mother-in-law. I'm sure I've got a bunch of messages and I'll get to everybody. But this was really about my dad, and I couldn't let him down.

**Q. When John Smoltz was in here, he said he didn't feel comfortable all day. And about 16, 17 he lost his swing. Did you notice any difference in his play?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: He had a really tough chip -- we both didn't hit great shots on 16. Mine was in the rough, was a little heavy. I kind of pulled it. I was trying to kind of bounce it in there.

I pulled it in the bunker. I left my putt short, which was a mistake. He had a tough lie. And it kind of ran on him. He made the putt. So in my mind it was like, okay, let's birdie 17 and see what happens and let's birdie 18, try to get in a playoff. That's what happens.

John is a competitor. He's a tremendous golfer. He's a competitor. He's a friend. I was just fortunate in the playoff to hit a good tee shot and have a good iron shot into the green.

**Q. John mentioned that he did not chip out because he figured, he goes where Vinny was, he was going to knock it on the green and birdie. He said I had to play that. That was his feeling.**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: I would have done the same thing. I think he had a little bit of a window. It was tight. But I had a pitching wedge or 9-iron or something. He's got to think in his head I'm probably going to get it on the green somewhere and have a putt at eagle or birdie. So I would have done the same thing if I was him. If I had a window and he was in the fairway I would have went for it as well. I don't have any problem with that. I was just able to pull it off, and he kind of had a tiny window. So I was fortunate in that aspect.

**Q. Given your father's health, did you consider not coming out here at all? And did you consider going home on Wednesday?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: I did. I did, actually, on Wednesday morning, when I heard the news. I was kind of in shock. But I had spent the previous week with him. And he was in hospice. And they weren't sure if it was going to be a day or a week. I had flown back there because hospice kind of had taken over. And I spent a week with him. We had a beautiful Father's Day. And we said a bunch of prayers.

My parents renewed their vows, and a good friend of ours, Father Savage, and Katherine, Norman came up. We had a family get-together for Father's Day, which was beautiful. It was kind of touch and go.

It was like he was having some bad times and then all of a sudden he would kind of rejuvenate. And I talked to him Tuesday. And we had a good conversation. And when I left there, we talked about things and how much this tournament meant to me. And he was kind of like, go there

and play well. Go there and play the way you can.

He would come out to Whisper Rock in Arizona, watch me hit balls or play, whatever, years ago. He was like go play, have fun, don't put so much pressure on yourself and get it done. Man up and get it done. Tough it out. That's what he was telling me. That's all I was thinking about.

Then on Wednesday I thought about pulling out, and then I said what would my father want me to do? And he could have -- he passed in his sleep, which was a blessing, because he's had some major health issues the last few years. The last year for sure.

And I just pictured in my head him just talking to me, like, man up, tough it out. Get it done. Don't worry about me. Get it done. That's what he would have said. He was an old Italian tough guy. He's had a triple bypass and strokes and pacemakers. He's legally blind. He made it to 85. I've had my father for 85 years. How lucky am I, a guy that pushed me and was never good enough, and he made me the player and the coach and the person I am.

I just didn't want to let him down. That's really what it was. When I was thinking, focusing, I'm, like, man, just hit the shot. Don't worry about anything else. Don't worry about anything, just hit the shot. And that's what I did.

**Q. And finally, something fun, you get 125 grand. Do you have any plans for it?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: I don't even care about that. I just care about my dad. I care about celebrating with my wife, my buddies and representing American Century, NBC and the tournament the right way. I've been doing it a long time here. It's been incredible.

To be the first basketball guy to me is special. But of course that's great. But at the end of the day it's about the memories. We're all going to pass sometime, but you've got the memories, you know what I'm saying? I'll think about the shots I hit today, the shots I made, the shots I missed.

But at the end of the day, being able to birdie 18, get in the playoff, birdie 18 again to win it and being under the gun like that, that's what I live for. That's what all of us -- we're competitive junkies. I want that moment. Whether I pull it off or not, I was happy to be in that situation.

**Q. What did Steph and Seth say to you when they congratulated you?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: I played with Dell for a couple of years in Milwaukee. Played against other for years. Dell is

such a first-class guy. What he's done with his family, and how Steph acts -- Stephen and their whole family -- the way they represent the NBA. But just their class -- the way Dell has kind of dealt with that. Steph being such a superstar.

I have so much respect for him and the way he plays the game, represents the game. That's what it's all about to me. It's not about the stats or anything else, it's about the work on your craft; are you a great teammate? Do you do the right things? And Steph is about all that stuff.

And Dell, I think, instilled all that into him, with his wife and his family. They've been friends for years. It was nice that they hung around Derek Lowe and some other guys.

But we've played in so many of these events, other events, charity events, whatever, we're always trying to beat each other and push each other and support each other. Today, when John made some shots or I made some shots it was like "good shot." It was like camaraderie.

I wanted to win just like they did, but I wanted them to play well. I just wanted to play a little bit better. That's how it works. It's a good group of guys that they bring in here over the years.

**Q. Did they say something about basketball?**

VINNY DEL NEGRO: Yes, just being the first guy. I told Steph, I can't remember, I think I told him, Let's go, it's your turn. Because Steph is a heck of a player. But Steph has got to focus on his career right now. I'm a lot older, like his dad. And Steph is a tremendous basketball player. He needs to focus on that.

But what a great swing. What a great guy. And I think in years to come, as his career comes to an end, he'll be playing a little bit more. And I expect him to be up here as well.

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