

U.S. Senior Open Championship

Tuesday, June 21, 2022

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA

Saucon Valley C.C. (Old Course)

Ernie Els

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're pleased to have Ernie Els with us today. It's his second U.S. Senior Open. He's won two Open Championships and two U.S. Opens, which are very important.

Ernie, I know you've had a little bit of a chance to look at the course. Can you talk about Saucon Valley as far as what your first impressions are of the course.

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I played nine holes yesterday, and I played nine holes actually Sunday evening. I've had a nice look at the 18 holes, and it's fantastic. Really fantastic. Nice to be up here in the Northeast playing these old style golf courses.

Reminds me of back in the day when the USGA used to play these type of courses in the U.S. Open. But with length and everything, you really can't come to these courses anymore.

Anyway, it's a really nice golf course, and it's got all the elements that a U.S. Open has. It's got the slick greens, high rough, so you've got to have your game here no matter what.

THE MODERATOR: Does it feel like a U.S. Open? We say U.S. Open, U.S. Senior Open. Do you just remove the senior and it feels like a U.S. Open for you?

ERNIE ELS: Exactly. As I say, this is more the way I remember the U.S. Opens. As I say, I think the U.S. Opens of today have much bigger golf courses, but these are the type of courses we played back in the '90s maybe, and it's set up the same way. You've got high rough. You've got to hit fairways.

In my case, I can still move it out here a little bit, so I can still hit 3-woods into places and get it into play the way it needs to be.

The golf course is in absolutely fantastic shape. I haven't



seen a championship golf course like this in some time in this kind of condition. The greens are going to be very fast, very fair, and the setup is just perfect. If you play well, you're going to score well here.

Q. Your two Open wins have come at Oakmont and Congressional, two other Northeast courses. What was it about those courses that fit your eye and what is it about this course -- is there anything about this course that fits your eye?

ERNIE ELS: Just the vegetation and topography. This is classic stuff, you know. Courses are very old here. I think this course I hear is built in 1922, so it's almost 100 years. It's stood the test of time. The way the clubhouses are built up here, it's country club stuff. You can see why people spend their summers up here.

But the golf course has got the unbelievable trees and the turf. The turf up in the Northeast I love. You get that snow in the winter. In the summer, you've got the bentgrass fairways. Really nice to play golf up here.

Q. Holes No. 2 and 16 played toughest here previously. Anything in particular about those two? It's a longer par-4 coming back here, and 16 is kind of short but still seems to cause problems. What is it about those two holes?

ERNIE ELS: 2 is one of the longer par-4s. The front nine has actually got some length. No. 2, I think it's a 480-yard par-4. It goes downhill a bit. Tough to hit the fairway. It slopes right to left a bit.

Tom Pfizer has come in here and put in new bunkers I see. The bunkers are really deep, so if you get in a fairway bunker you'll have a tough time.

And then the second green is also undulating and quite small, so I can see that's going to be a tough hole.

As I said, on the front nine there is another one. I think down 5 is another 480-yard par-4 with a funky green. Then as you say, 16 is a shorter hole. I think it's only about 390, but it's going up the hill and the green is unreal.

You're either going to get the flag positions, but the green is just so sloped, and I can see why -- they probably have a



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lot of three-putts on that hole. Tough to get the ball into the right level.

Q. It's a U.S. Open type test, but does it come down to the putter in the end? Because the greens are so sloping and undulating.

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, absolutely. But like I said to my friend earlier -- he asked me a question, what did you work on your game to get it right for the U.S. Open? I said everything and a good mental game.

Putting is going to be a factor. It's always been a factor for me. In a U.S. Open you've got to get those putts in the hole, especially the cleanup putts. It's tough to get putts within four or five feet here because of the slope, so the hole-out putts you've got to be good at.

That comes down to also ball striking. If you can get the ball in the right area on the green, you can have easier first putts. When you get it out of play you're going to be struggling to get the ball where it needs to be, and that's where putting becomes a factor again.

So it all comes down to getting your whole game to where it should be. You can't really be struggling with driving too much because that, as I say, is going to get you tough second shots.

Q. How is your game shaping up? Do you feel like you're in a good place preparation-wise?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I came here early. I had a week off last week. I'm just playing nine holes a day, trying to conserve energy (laughter).

In any case, I'm playing nine again this afternoon and then I'll play nine again tomorrow, so I will have seen all the holes twice. So it's coming on nice.

Q. What are your career goals at this stage?

ERNIE ELS: Good question. I'll be 53 this year, so I'm still young out here.

Q. Yes, you are.

ERNIE ELS: Thank you (laughter).

There's so much going on in the world of golf. We're looking pretty good out there on the Champions Tour, but with everything happening now, it seems like we're an afterthought, which is a real shame.

You just look at the list of players this week, just

unbelievable records they have all around the world. I'm not just talking about the United States.

Yeah, we were looking pretty sound there for a while, but with things going on now, I'm not sure what our future is going to be like, to be honest with you.

So it's a little scary for a lot of guys. A lot of us, we've had good careers so we're pretty sound, but you still want to play and compete. That's what this Champions Tour is all about, is giving us another chance to showcase what we do.

Hopefully it will continue. We've got great sponsorships on the regular Champions Tour. Thanks to the USGA and so forth giving us opportunity to play major championship golf, but we'd love to see that continue and keep going because there's some unbelievable stories out here on the Champions Tour, great careers.

Q. As a follow-up, you mentioned things changing in the world of golf. Do you feel like that's affecting, trickling down now to the Champions Tour players as well?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, there's talk everywhere, just like you guys. You're talking about it. Some of the guys that are playing out there, you look at the guys out here, it's a different deal. These guys are proven champions, major champion winners, TOUR winners that supported the Tours around the world.

I guess we missed the boat, and that's really sad for some of these guys, because these guys have supported these Tours all of their careers, in some cases, close to 40 years.

Yeah, we'd like to see our Champions Tour grow. We've got great sponsorships, good support, but it's scary times for a lot of people.

Q. Ernie, you talked a little bit about the Champions Tour possibly being an afterthought with everything that's going on in the world of golf. Not going to give anything over there any shine, but do you feel like coming to these golden age courses might be a great way for guys of my age, guys of your age, to see the guys that they grew up watching coming to these old courses and actually playing again?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, absolutely. That's what you see. You see exactly what you're saying. You see people come out and come and watch us play because we're kind of the golden age of the game in many cases.

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maybe 300, 320. It's maybe just a handful of guys. But we've got other skills and we've got great short game skills and we've got management skills and so forth.

There will be a great story line again coming out this week, you'll see it. You'll see some guy that's qualified from somewhere that's going to make a run this week, and you'll get a guy that's almost 70 years of age that's going to make a run too. So it's a way of playing the game where everybody's still got a real legitimate chance to win if your game's there.

I think that parlays into a lot of players coming to watch us. They can sometimes hit it longer than us off the tee or might putt better than us here and there, but we get to score on the board. I think people love to see that.

Q. Ernie, are you going to play St. Andrews?

ERNIE ELS: Yes, I'm eligible to play, and it's one of my favorite places. I would not miss it for the world, especially on the 150th edition.

I was fortunate enough to win USGA events and Open Championship events, so they've looked after me well through the years.

Q. Last year we said was your first U.S. Senior Open. What did you learn possibly at Omaha Country Club that's going to help you this second time around?

ERNIE ELS: Omaha I didn't have much -- I didn't really have my A game there, so to speak, and I struggled a little bit. It was very undulating. It didn't quite, as we like to say, fit my eye.

What I learned was you guys set it up -- like I said before, you set it up like every other year. You've got to keep the ball in play, and I didn't quite keep it in play there. I didn't manage myself well there.

I'd like to do that a bit more this week. Got to be more patient about it.

Q. You mentioned guys with great resumes. Steven Alker, how do you explain -- I mean, that's probably the story of this TOUR, guys like that who maybe didn't have a career before 50. What do you see in him that you like?

ERNIE ELS: He's not a household name, but in our professional game we've seen him play. He's played in Asia, Europe, Australia, all over the place. He's the type of guy, he kept himself in pretty good shape. He's very athletic. So he's a young 50-year-old player.

He hits it pretty good, pretty long, and he's been working for this day. You could see he kept himself occupied on the Korn Ferry Tour, which is very competitive. When he came over he was ready to play.

He's just grown in confidence. He's really a player -- as we've said earlier, one of the story lines that you find out here on the Champions Tour is you get guys that are ready to come and they deliver. So he's done that.

Q. Ernie, the last two Senior Opens here were very well-attended. When you played your practice round, did you get a vibe that this was going to be a good spot to get some fan support while you're playing?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah. I mean, we can see it today. Today is kind of more the official practice round on Tuesday. Sundays, they don't normally come out in the evening and definitely not yesterday. Today they're here in droves. You can see that.

We're going to have great support. This is Pennsylvania. This is really golf country. There's a lot of courses around here, so it's really -- it's one of the sports people like to play in the summer. What else are you going to watch this summer? I don't know how your baseball team is doing, but the golf is here this week (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Ernie Els, thanks for your time. Best of luck this week.

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