

U.S. Amateur Championship

Sunday, August 18, 2024

Chaska, Minnesota, USA

Hazeltine National Golf Club

Jose Luis Ballester

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're here with Jose Luis Ballester, the 124th U.S. Amateur champion. What's going through your mind right now?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Again, I think I'm still not conscious of what just happened today. Super thankful to have the opportunity to live this moment, especially on my 21st birthday. That's what I'm considering now.

Q. What does it mean to you to be the first U.S. Amateur champion from Spain, only the second to win a USGA, period?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Super sweet. Again, we have many great Spaniards, many great legends, and being able to add my name into that history, it's pretty sweet.

Q. How do you plan to celebrate your 21st birthday, or is this the ultimate of all your birthdays?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: It can't get much better than this. Probably go back to the hotel, grab a nice dinner, hang out with my friends, and that will be it.

Q. Where does this rank on your list of birthday celebrations?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Has to be the top one.

Q. When you think of all the people in Spain that you just listed in the past, none of them have ever won a U.S. Amateur. How do you try to describe that people you looked up to still didn't do what you did today?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Pretty sweet. Again, they have done many more things than I have accomplished yet. Again, just having my chance to put my name into history, especially doing something that none of the Spaniards did, even the best of the best, it's pretty special.

Q. Did it feel like a Ryder Cup out there today? He had



probably 99.9 percent of the crowd rooting for him, and I don't know how many people were in your group, other than maybe your coach and your friends.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: I knew it was going to be like that from yesterday. Again, I kind of liked it a little bit. It's true that, when the other guy is feeling it and he's kind of grabbing that momentum and you see all the supporters that are going for him, it can be a little depressing. So it's important to face it with a nice mindset, and I think I did.

It's always hard to win no matter what championship it is, and today was hard again. Pretty grateful that I could close it on 18.

Yeah, I mean, I didn't bring many guys here, many friends, but the guys that came here are absolutely my closest friends. So pretty happy that they were here and they were more than enough.

Q. Your coach and assistant coach at Arizona State were here. I heard you, there was another guy that kind of surprised you this morning. Who was that? On the 1st tee. I heard there was another friend that came.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Well, a really good friend of mine came here yesterday. One of my best friends, if not my best friend. So super special to have him here, even in this room. It was a great birthday present as well to see him rooting for me today.

Q. And his name?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Navid.

Q. His last name?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Last name is kind of hard, Mousavemi.

Q. You were magical around the greens all week. What is it about you Spaniards and your short game?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: I think it's in the blood, it has to be. Again, I've been working a lot on my short game lately. Even with my wedges, I feel like I was really good this week.



I found something on this rough that kind of helped me the past few days, and it worked really well. The only thing that I was trying to focus is not to slide it through the ball and lowering my hands a little bit on the setup, and the ball was coming so nicely and smooth. So it worked pretty well, so happy with it.

Q. You talk about kind of blocking out the fans and kind of liked it in a way. Is there a certain practice you use for that, or what do you actually do to block that out?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: It's kind of hard to find a similar scenario in practice in what we see in these events, especially in the championship final match. Again, a lot of visualization, visualization of what I want to see.

I have some things I like to think in the hard moments, especially with the crowd, just imagining that I'm on the range and the only guy behind me is my coach Victor. So those small thoughts really helped.

Always sustaining the pressure, talking with my caddie has really helped. So those are the key things.

Q. Then 16, what kind of lie did you have on that second shot?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: It was awful, really, really bad. I think I got kind of lucky with the break because I hit the tree. Honestly, the tee shot didn't seem that bad, but the lie was terrible. It was blocked by that branch of the tree, and it was a lot of rough behind the ball. So I just chopped it, and the ball didn't even come out.

Q. What's your mindset as you go -- now he's got all the momentum with him. 17, he hits a pretty good shot, and you obviously hit another pretty good one in there. Just describe your mindset, what club you hit.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: 17 was a tricky one, especially because they moved the tees forward. It was playing a little bit different. He hit a great shot, kind of similar as I did this morning, but the ball trickled to the left.

That pin, I'm not going to say anything, but it was pretty close to being illegal, I feel like, because I hit a great shot, and I hated the putt that I had. It was super fast, couldn't really touch the ball.

He was probably on the better side than I was. I was there this morning and two-putted, and he was where I was, and he three-putted. Just trying to put it in movement and didn't leave myself the easiest putt, but I could make that

one, which was important.

Q. In 2016, it was here that Rory shushed the crowds at the Ryder Cup. Was there a moment today, where I know you didn't, but you kind of wanted to?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: I felt that a little bit, especially on 15, when he won 13 and 14, that I kind of gave him those two holes, and all the fans were kind of shouting his name. I was kind of like, eh, these Americans, huh?

(Laughter)

But it is what it is. If this tournament was in Spain, it would have been a completely different story. Again, trying to stay in the moment, present. Whenever those things happen, I look at my caddie and kind of smile at him, and the best thing to answer is kind of with your game.

What Rory did is pretty great and special, but I think it's even better to just like be cool than really do anything, and just show what you can do with your game.

Q. I was watching you warm up this morning, and it seemed like you were one-handing a few shots. Was it a good warmup?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: That was yesterday, right? Like just smacking it like that?

Q. Yeah, maybe.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: I don't know, when I'm feeling really confident and with a good rhythm, I'm really good with any kind of trick shots, and I was kind of smacking it in the air.

Q. I was referring to you weren't satisfied with your warmup?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Oh, with one hand this morning? I hit a couple bad shots on the range this morning. I don't really care that much about how I hit it on the range as long as I feel warmed up and ready for the 1st tee.

I was a little bit accelerated with my rhythm on the first few holes, but then I kind of got into rhythm again and feel pretty confident the last final holes of the morning match.

The warmup for the afternoon match was much better.

Q. What did you do on 18? Obviously you guys tied 17. You look like you -- he hit first and put it in the bunker. He smoked it in the fairway there.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Mine was a good driver. It came kind of spinning, which it was even better because the ball just landed soft on the fairway. Then I had a weird number, 169 meters, playing like 185 yards, something like that. The wind was just slightly into off the right.

I was juiced. I could feel the adrenaline in my veins, in my forearms. I was talking and discussing the play with my caddie, and I'm like, okay, how do you see it? He's like hard 8, play like a little draw and maybe like a smooth 7. I've been hitting the smooth shots and the punch shots really good all week. Some of the smooth shots that I hit coming down the stretch were like those knockdown shots.

Again, yeah, it was probably the hardest moment of the round, but I just believed in myself, and I pulled out a really good shot.

Q. You showed little expression --

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Smooth 7.

Q. You showed little expression all day, all week. What all came out of you afterwards, after it was all done?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Started crying. I don't know why, but as soon as the match finished, I started thinking a lot about a lot of -- sorry, I started thinking a lot about my family and friends, especially my mom and my dad. It's been a hard summer for me. I wasn't feeling really good and like some personal issues. My grandma isn't feeling very good. She's pretty sick.

It was a hard summer back in Spain, so I feel like all those emotions kind of came out thinking about my family and my friends back in Spain.

Q. Did you spend most of your summer back home?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: The first month is always pretty busy, if you play European schedule. So I was pretty much competing all around Europe. But from July 14th till August 9th, I was in Spain.

Q. What would you think your grandma would say about this performance? When you get to talk to her, what do you think she'll say?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: She'll be super proud, super happy. She's probably crying right now.

Q. Your last name is Ballester, but your short game looked like Ballesteros out there. Do you look up to

him? He was a magician around almost any club.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: That's what everybody says. Unfortunately, I didn't have the chance to watch him play that much. Again, it's always nice to hear that comparison, especially with his last name and my last name, about his short game. I'm pretty happy they can say that about my short game.

Q. Alberto, your caddie, how is he related to you? He's got the same last name.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: He's not family or anything, just a good friend who's known me for the past 10, 11 years. Yeah, he's married to a woman here in the states, but he lives in Spain, and they always come here in the summer for one month in August. I'm like, hey, I don't have anybody to caddie for me this week. Are you available for this?

Actually, it was in his bucket list to come to this event at least once in his life. Especially being inside the ropes was pretty special for me, for sure.

Q. You guys shared a special embrace walking up the 18th green after you hit your approach shot on the green and Noah had hit his. What was that moment like walking up with him arm and arm?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: We just looked at each other and said, okay, let's enjoy this final walk.

Q. Both you and Noah knew, whatever happened today, you're both going to be at the Masters and the U.S. Open. How did you approach this match? Was it just gravy, I get all these perks of being a finalist? Would you have viewed this others a success if you fell short today?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Kind of both. I felt like the biggest match was probably yesterday, especially the way I played felt like almost more important than the victory that I had today.

Again, when you come to this final and to this kind of opportunities, you want to write your name in history. Today was a great day. Thankful that I could do that.

Q. How did you prepare last night? When did you leave Hazeltine after you won your match? What was kind of your prep for those 12 to 15 hours before you went off this morning?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Did pretty much the same I did every day. First I went into the hotel. I asked Luis if I could

borrow his yellow shorts, and he was like yes.

Q. Yesterday you said that you didn't have the yellow pants. You actually meant the shorts?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: So I went in his hotel and grabbed them.

Q. So you borrowed Luis' shorts?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Yes. Then I went straight to dinner, grabbed some sushi. Then played 30 to 45 minutes of ping pong, which I've been doing every day. It's pretty funny because I get really, really pissed at ping pong because I feel I'm not great. I feel like that's where I bring all my emotions out so I don't do anything stupid on the course. So did that.

It was hard to fall asleep yesterday. Yeah, I woke up at like 3:30, couldn't even sleep any longer. So just went into the gym early in the morning, warm up, and get ready for today.

Q. Would you have made the top 64 of ping pong players in this field this week?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: I would like to say yes, but probably not.

Q. Did you get any pieces of advice last night from any of your mentors that were especially important out there today?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Sergio called me yesterday night. We were talking for a little bit, and he gave me a couple of advices. The most important one was continue to be myself. That was key for today. And the other one was how to deal with the crowd, right?

He's been in that position multiple times, especially on this course, in the Ryder Cup 2016 playing against Phil, one of the best Ryder Cup matches ever. So he told me just stay patient in your game, and the best way to demonstrate to the other fans, it's with your game.

Q. Are you going straight from here back to school?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Yeah, fortunately.

Q. That trophy is going to make you a pretty popular guy out there, no?

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: Maybe, but we have Leon Marchand that just won four gold medals. So I'm just going to be like the second guy, I guess (laughter).

Q. What drinks go in there tonight?

Q. He just turned 21. He doesn't know anything about alcohol.

JOSE LUIS BALLESTER: We can drink in Spain at 18, but I'm not a big drinker. Some strawberry tequila maybe.

THE MODERATOR: Enjoy that, Jose Luis. Congratulations.

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