



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT: TOM WATSON
Wednesday, June 22, 2011

MODERATOR: I'd like to welcome Tom Watson to the Dick's Sporting Goods Open, his first visit back to En-Joie since 1976. Tom, coming off of a big win about a month ago at the Senior PGA Championship, maybe just get us started, talk about that, and then where your game is right now.

TOM WATSON: Well, thanks. My game is actually in pretty good shape right now. I played in a tournament that I started in Kansas City five years ago called the Watson Challenge, trying to determine the best player we can in the city. It's only for the Kansas City golfers, the amateurs and the pros. We had the tournament there and I ended up winning that tournament and still kept the challenge alive. Why can't anybody beat a 61-year old, broken-down pro?

I actually played pretty well, drove the ball well there, that's -- I'm playing pretty well right now. On this golf course, you have to drive the ball well, and if you don't drive the ball well, you're going to get into the rough and you're going to be -- make a lot of bogeys on this kind of course. It's in excellent shape. I'm probably at somewhat of a disadvantage because I haven't played this course, I don't remember it, since 1976 and a lot of the players who have played it the last four years on our Tour, so I hope to get to know it a little bit better and I have a chance at the end of Sunday to have a chance to win.

MODERATOR: You just were at St. Andrews last week?

TOM WATSON: I was.

MODERATOR: Did you get a chance to play there at all?

TOM WATSON: Well, I hit some shots there, I was there on behalf of Master Card, the sponsors. But I did get a chance to go over to the Himalayas. I'm not sure if anybody's been at the Old Course of St. Andrews, but they have a huge putting green called the Himalayas. It's aptly named as the putting green is full of huge contours. They had 27 holes cut in there and I had a chance to putt that for two or three hours.

Had a great time doing that: The course is in good shape. It's chock-a-block full of players starting at 6:30 and ending at about 11:00.

MODERATOR: Okay. If you have a question, just raise your hand.

Q. Can you -- that Kansas City tournament sounds interesting. What is that again?

TOM WATSON: It's the Watson Challenge is what we call it. I started it about five years ago. I wanted to create a tournament just for our local players. Basically it's -- it really is just for eight counties. You have to live in those counties to play, can't be outside of those counties, and it's for the best pros and amateurs and they qualify through three different ways to get in there and it's -- we have a nice event, nice dinner before it starts and it's run like a real professional tournament and we have a little purse there.

Q. How many times have you won that?

TOM WATSON: I've won it the last four years. Lost in a playoff the first year.

Q. So you're the best player in Kansas City?

TOM WATSON: I can claim this year that I'm the best player in Kansas City for the past year, yes.

Q. Congratulations.

TOM WATSON: Thank you. It's well received. I wanted to create some more interest in the game. A lot of times -- when I grew up, the pros at the golf shops, they really were golfers. They played a lot of golf. On Mondays when the golf shops were closed, they would get together and go play somewhere and the competitive spirit was really high.

Over the years golf has changed to the degree where these clubs are open on Mondays, create some revenues, keep them solvent and there's a lot of work that goes on. Pros have to work and they want a day off and they want to play golf sometimes. My point was get back in the competitive spirit, to play in the events that will qualify for this thing and we've --

Q. How long of an event is it?

TOM WATSON: It's a three-day tournament, 54-hole medal play.

Q. Thanks.

MODERATOR: Back there.

Q. Joe Comings, YNN. What, if any, are some of the changes that you've noticed to this course from the last time you came?

TOM WATSON: Well, the major change is the conditioning, the conditioning's excellent. These greens and fairways are pure. It may be my imagination, but I think the fairways are maybe a little bit more narrow. The trees have grown in just a little bit from 35 years ago. Is that my imagination? I don't know. I suspect it might not be. It plays narrow, really do have to drive straight to play well.

Q. Tom, you mentioned not really being an even field, a lot of guys have had a chance to play this course in the past. Do you feel like you're caught up playing a practice round a bit?

TOM WATSON: No, I haven't. These greens, these greens are tough to putt. I remember them from 35 years ago, there are a lot of putts that are kind of up and over like this, you get a lot of those types of putts, which is the toughest putt there is. It's a real shotmaker's course. You can't spray the ball and do well here. That's my goal this week is first put the ball in the fairway and then I'll be out there practicing putting, trying to get my stroke down. I putted pretty well last week when I won the tournament I was talking about in Kansas City. I practiced hard on my putting for the same reason I'm practicing hard here.

Q. So why, after 35 years, what brings you back?

TOM WATSON: Well, it's just time to come back. I played -- my schedule, I play a limited schedule, I play about half the events on the Champions Tour, maybe a little bit less than half, and kind of tend to play in the same tournaments every year, but I had a long lull in here between the Senior PGA and the Open -- British Open Championship, I wanted to play at least once, throw in the (inaudible) challenge there and stay competitive for the British Open.

It's great to be back. The people are just so generous up here, it's really a pleasure to be back up here. Things haven't changed much in 35 years except the golf course is just in great shape, just beautiful shape.

Q. A lot of people -- Chris Whalen from Fox 40 Binghamton. A lot of people have been saying when we've been talking that you're the guy to beat this year.

TOM WATSON: This old guy?

Q. I'm sure it's not the first time there's been a target on your back. Being you're not used to the course, do you feel some added pressure on yourself with all that talk going on?

TOM WATSON: No, it's no added pressure, it's the pressure I put on myself. If I don't drive the ball well, that's pressure. If I drive the ball well, it frees up that pressure. That's the key to play this golf course.

I enjoy -- people ask me why do I continue to play. I continue to play because I love the competition. I'm a competitor and I enjoy being in that competition and hitting the quality shots it takes to win, put myself under the pressure to do that. The game of golf is a series of victories and failures. A few weeks ago at the Senior PGA I had some good victories in there. I had some failures, but I had, overall for the week, I had more victories than failures. I hope to have the same type of week here this week.

Q. Golf has kind of gone through a little bit of a downturn a little bit over the past couple years. What are your thoughts on Rory McIlroy and what he brings to the game of golf as a whole?

TOM WATSON: Well, I am duly impressed by Rory; I was before and I am now more so. Rory brings a freshness to the game, plays the game like I do in a lot of ways and plays really quickly. He makes a decision, then he hits it. I wish more people played that way, especially on the Tour. We might be able to play in less than five hours out there. What I love about him is his humbleness and his sincerity, especially talking with you people. He's very open to talk about his failure at the Masters and he said -- you know, he talked about it frankly and sincerely and that's refreshing from a top player. It's very refreshing.

Q. Tom, can I talk about the differences between when you broke in making your debut on the Tour versus the young guys coming out today?

TOM WATSON: The difference is, first of all, qualifying to get on the Tour is different. We had two qualifications to get on the Tour, now there are three and they may even change that and I hope they don't. We had to play under the old top 60 rule, which if you were in the top 60 money winners, you were exempt for the next year. If not, you had to qualify Mondays. It's changed to an all-exempt Tour for the top 125. That's the big difference right there from a competitive standpoint.

The other difference is course conditioning is so much better today, more consistent. We're playing the same speed greens, we're playing the same types of bunkers, so we go week in and week out, we play very similar golf courses, whether it's good or bad, you want some variety.

We're playing for an enormous amount of money, which is a lot different than when I started, which was thanks to Arnold Palmer at that time, it was a lot different before Arnold Palmer. You saw the Arnold Palmer effect and the Tiger Woods effect.

And the other thing that's different is we're given so much more now than we ever were given before. We had to fend for ourselves when we first came on the Tour. Now they spoil us, the Tour and sponsors spoil us. It's appreciated by this person. Dick's and the way this tournament spoils us. Before, there were things that you never had before. You had to either bring your practice balls and hit your own practice balls or pay for practice balls. Now they're free practice balls. Food, you went in the clubhouse and if you're lucky the tournament would give you half off on your chits, but you would eat the food at the clubhouse and there would be no private place to go to eat. You wouldn't have a private dining room for the players, you had to eat with everybody else, and that's okay.

Transportation, cars, big difference. This week a car is provided for our use for the week. Before, you had to rent your own car or take your own car out, which a lot of guys did. Airplane travel is -- well, let's put it this way: Airplane travel was easier back then than it is now because you could go to the airport a half hour in advance and walk on the plane, and now it's an hour and a half advance to walk on the plane. There's more time spent in airports now thanks to Osama bin Laden, Those are some of the changes that have happened and we've got it really good, let's put it that way, we've got it really good.

Q. This is a little bit dusty at this point because we haven't -- we haven't seen you in a while in this town, but what you did at the British Open a couple years ago, how has your life changed when you walk through airports? Are you more -- how do people respond to you now after what you did at the British Open?

TOM WATSON: Well, I'm more recognizable, that's for sure, and the topic of conversation almost exclusively is about the 2009 British Open tournament. This all for a guy who finished second, that's the way I look at it. I'm humbled by the response, still am. I was trying to win a golf tournament just like I did all my life. I came close to beating the kids, I scared a few of them, and it was an opportunity lost. The ball was in the air at 18 and I had a flashback to '77 to Turnberry at the 18th hole and the ball was in the air there, that was perfect.

Q. Do you personally reflect on it much yourself?

TOM WATSON: I'm sorry?

Q. Do you reflect on it much yourself?

TOM WATSON: No, only when you guys bring it up or other people bring it up, and as I said, it's brought up consistently. It's very nice that people bring it up and say the things they said.

Keep on saying the same thing, but the people who responded to it at my age said,

you know, Tom, you gave me kind of a second breath of life. I look at you doing this against the kids, I gave up on doing certain things, maybe I gave up too early. Some of them say, you know what, I did give it up too early. I'm going to go back, I'm going to try to do the things I did before when I quit because I thought I was too old to do it.

Q. If I could follow up on that, your first encounter with Stewart Cink and his family after the British Open, can you talk about that?

TOM WATSON: Yeah, my wife and I, after the tournament was over, I was disappointed but we had eaten at a little restaurant called Wylde's (ph) which was at a little town near Turnberry and we ate there. It was pretty emotional experience going there with people and it ended up there was some joy at the end and we get back to the hotel and we're walking up the stairs and there's Stewart and his family and he's clutching the Open trophy right there, just walking around, and I said to him, I said, Pretty good feeling, isn't it, and he just smiled. Didn't have to say anything.

Q. Tom, is it a comment on the improved course conditions or the level of play that scores now are lower than they were in the B.C. Open days on this course?

TOM WATSON: Well, when you have consistent fairways and greens, and the fairways are rolling right now. I don't know if we're going to get any rain tomorrow, I think rain's in the forecast tomorrow. The fairways, they're motoring, so it will shorten the course if you can put the ball in the fairway. This course definitely has an advantage to the long hitter because the bunkers are positioned out there and if you can carry the ball longer than I can carry it, it considerably widens the fairways, so you've got to go with people that may be able to do that.

Again, straight drivers is necessary. Conditions do make for lower scoring, the greens are in great shape, the fairways are in perfect shape. You're not going to get a bad lie there, but don't get in the rough. If you get in the rough, you're going to get a bad lie. You're not going to be able to advance it. There's places out there that are really, really tough.

Q. And is there any different approach when you're in a tournament where you know scores are going to be low as opposed to PGA where you know 10-under par is going to be a good score every year? Here it seems --

TOM WATSON: Well, inform me, what has been the winning score here the last several years?

MODERATOR: 15?

Q. 19.

TOM WATSON: 19-under? Wow. Who was that? Was that Boss?

MODERATOR: Lonnie, I think.

TOM WATSON: Lonnie. Lonnie's a pretty long hitter. Well, I don't know what course they were playing but this course seems a little tougher to me than that. You had better hit it straight here. Straight is the key. You cannot hit it sideways and do very well.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Tom.

TOM WATSON: Thank you.