

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT: JOEY SINDELAR
Wednesday, August 14, 2013



MODERATOR: Could you maybe take us through from last year to this year, your injuries, and then about the whole weight loss thing?

JOEY SINDELAR: Sure, of course. So in the process of getting old, I developed some Brontosaurus-like arthritis in my back. I have lots and lots of it. A couple years ago it started hurting me by annoying this particular nerve in the L4-L5 range and I got away with it for a little while and then it just got worse. I would say in the middle of last year it started getting pretty ugly where I would seize up my quadratus lumborum muscle and put it in like a little seizure mode so I couldn't even take a backswing, so it just shut me down.

We tried a number of things presurgery, tried to do all the appropriate stuff. What allowed me to play here last year, Rob Madden is a pain management guy in Elmira, Dr. Rob Madden, and we tried different injections and stuff and found one that worked and it gave me seven weeks of relief, and this was week six of seven when I went Seattle after this last year. That was the end of it. We tried to reproduce it and, as is often the case, it didn't work. That led us to questions about what's next, and then surgery which occurred in mid November.

My surgery was, by the doctor's account, he was very interested -- his name is Frank Cammisa Manhattan at the Hospital for Special Surgery. I think he does a lot of pro sports teams and stuff, he's very sports minded, he's a golfer, he understood what I was up against. He educated me, talked about not wanting to do surgery unless we had to, but it became pretty apparent that without it there just wasn't any workaround that was going to be any good.

So he went in and by all accounts, by his account, by doctors afterwards talking about it, did a great job. It was just a stenosis repair, which is I guess what I have wrong is what most people my age have wrong if they're going to get it in the back, I was really the most common stuff, which is really the narrowing of the openings where the nerve comes through. As I do my quirky golf swing, it would flickeringly annoy that nerve every time I took a swing. So we did that, he was pleased. He felt like on a pain scale of before surgery, 10 being not able to play because I would go into spasm, he thought maybe he could get me down to a 2 or a 3 kind of a thing where it might still hurt sometimes but I would be able to function.

So I took my quirky old golf swing and went to Florida and -- is this way too long?

MODERATOR: No.

JOEY SINDELAR: It was a blur, sorry to recount the blur. Showed up and after the second tournament, which for us was the ACE Group Classic in Naples, it failed, it went right back to what it did before and I couldn't move, and of course that made us all very sweaty in the foreheads wondering what in the world was going on, and it became pretty clear that I had to change my golf swing if I wanted to play again.

So he felt like he opened up the openings enough that if I could do a couple of things different, that that might work. So I've spent the last five months, six months doing that. My swing to a novice might not look different, but to a medium, more educated golfer, it will probably look quite different. I had to get rid of the Nicklaus reverse C thing that was so famous, so many have done, so many do, but people with arthritis like I have can't do it because there's no room to do that move anymore.

So Mike Bennett -- I went to Jimmy Ballard immediately because he's known to produce golf swings that can work around pain, back pain. I went there. It seemed like too big of a project the way he wanted to do it, so I called my friend Mike Bennett, who's a Stack & Tilt guy who teaches my son Jamie, and he said, I think if you can stand up without pain, I can teach you a golf swing that would work.

So we've been chasing that down relentlessly. He and my physical therapist in Watkins Glen, Amanda Smith-Socarlis, got together and compared notes and put me on this path and I've been doing drills and everything. Even so -- sorry, I'm almost at the end. Even so, four months ago I really still thought I wasn't ever going to play again, it was that bad. I could hit a 9-iron from here to the road, a hundred yards, but that was the end of it.

I went for another injection, it freed me up, I was able to make some bigger swings. We were able to make more progress getting me to the left, actually taking quirks -- I was worried that I was going to have to add a quirk to my swing to work around this, but in fact I was taking the quirks out of my swing to a more normal kind of a golf swing.

So that's what I have. I'm not a golfer yet, but I have finished three tournaments in a row, which thrills me to death. I'm not sure what kind of competitive ability I'll have this week. I'm certainly not at the top of my game but it's moving forward and this shot that I had eight weeks ago from Rob Madden, excuse me, 11 weeks ago, seems to be still helping and allowing me to get further and further away from compressing that nerve on every single golf swing. So that's where I've been.

The weight loss was simply an effort to say, I might get one more shot at this and I would like to give it my best shot and it was really just trying not to be a slob anymore. You know, just McDonald's once a week instead of six times. I mean, I've received great advice, which is don't ever not do any of this stuff because as soon as you're not eating things you love, you're going to fail. So when you're traveling, I eat at McDonald's, I eat Pudgy's Pizza, I eat Little Venice pasta, but just not all the time. I'm

walking a lot and doing a little bit of core exercise. It hasn't been a miracle for my back but it's been good and it's also fixed all of the things that my doctor at home was angry at me about for all those years. So I'm happy I did it.

MODERATOR: Questions?

JOEY SINDELAR: They don't have any film left after all that.

Q. How frustrating have years been for you, and on the flip side, talk about all the people getting help, were guys on TOUR trying to help you as well?

JOEY SINDELAR: Oh, my gosh, this community really, as I've always said whether it's a golf fix or a health idea or whatever, the guys are so generous. You can literally go to Phil Mickelson or Tiger Woods and say, You know what, you're pretty good at this, what is that, and they will share. There are very, very few guys that are not open like that. So it's a great place to commiserate or try to find new ideas or whatever it is you're trying to do. The guys are so generous.

Q. How frustrating the year has been?

JOEY SINDELAR: You know, it's really been almost more scary than frustrating because I honestly thought I was never going to stick the tee in the ground again. Even as recent as three and a half months ago, it just wasn't getting better and I couldn't swing big enough to make a difference.

Then, when I finally got rotating like I need to do, I blew the bursa in my left hip and I had to have another injection for that and that was another 30 days off. But once this last injection happened and I started seeing the light and understanding that in leaps, small leaps, little steps, whatever they're called, I could do it and it's been just a blast. To be able to play in Pittsburgh was eye-watering for me. I stunk, I finished somewhere near last and had no expectations. It was just a thrill to be there and finish and say, wow, I took some swings that either didn't hurt me enough that I had to stop or didn't hurt at all.

So the one great thing that I'm reminded of by my physical therapist is even during a bucket of balls where there's a lot of pain, if I can pull off what I'm trying to do, it doesn't hurt, so that shows me there's a place I can be that doesn't hurt and that's really -- I'm really -- I'm still in physical therapy mode here, you'll see it. You'll see me working hard at non-golf things, you know, posture -- well, they're golf things but I'm not to the feel of the shot yet part of my game. I'm to the okay, my new posture is here and my new this looks like this. So it's still pieces, but that's okay, I'm thrilled to be here.

Q. Pittsburgh was the first tournament you played since all the slew of injuries. What was the previous tournament before that? I guess how long had you

been off?

JOEY SINDELAR: Naples in February basically, so then that would be to June, I guess, was Pittsburgh. I decided I would just start right out with the SENIOR PLAYERS Championship and follow that up with the U.S. Open. Why not, just jump right in. I was so unequipped I could have been playing at a miniature golf course.

Q. With the new swings and all the weight that you've lost, are the guys recognizing you out there?

JOEY SINDELAR: Oh, they pick on me all the time. Yeah, I've heard all the comments and it's fun. To me, I promise you, I didn't know it happened. It just was so regular and so gradual that all of a sudden I was in Florida for a couple months and I came home and I put on shorts that I always wear or pants and it was like whoa, what is that? I started in Florida with my usual shorts that should fit that were squeezing me a little much and they went from squeezing me too much to loose, and then when I got home. It was a steady progression.

Anyway, the guys have picked on me a lot. There is the, you know, the interesting thing is the distance question. I'm not up to speed yet and it's for three pretty interesting things. Is it weight loss, which the guys in the trailer don't think necessarily fully and neither does Amanda, physical therapist. It could be I lost muscle mass and need to strengthen up a little bit.

Is it my new swing, because some of the power lever stuff I was doing with my head tilting back to the right, that was where I gathered my power and I'm not doing that anymore and I have to find that in my new swing.

And part of it was because I've been doing drills for so long, I forgot how to swing hard. I played with my son Jamie a couple days ago in Elmira and he didn't use exactly these words but he was like, Dad, do you have mono? It looked like I was swinging in molasses.

The answer to the question both from the therapists in our trailer, Amanda at home and Jamie, is swing. All the doctors have said what I have, I can't hurt myself. If it starts hurting, it's not the kind of thing that's going to make it worse, it's just going to be I can't swing. So I kind of forgot how to swing full and that's the part that I'm learning right now. It's been a very interesting process.

Q. What's the success now; is it hitting it decent, is it being pain free? What is success?

JOEY SINDELAR: The order has always been from the start safety first, meaning pain free, build a golf swing that's pain free, back that into golf. For me, that meant no more swinging on the right side, tipping to the right, crunching this whole right side,

so that meant get a little left, rotate in that same spot and then move left. So it's like get left, put on the left blinker and go further left. That's safe for me. When my swing occurs over the left half of my body, I'm in a safe place, but that's not necessarily the golfiest place swing wise.

So now we're backing into what can I do, how do I add power, because every time I go up a few clubs the energy in that club wants me to pull back and do the things that I used to do. So I've had to defeat all those bad habits and I'm pretty much up to 3-iron being pretty comfortable. The 1-iron, driver, 3-wood, when I swing hard I still tip a little bit. I was tipping a foot, more than a head width to the right, which again, if you examine guys' swings, lots of guys do that but not when you have my problem. So my this much is worse now shrunk down to this much, two or three inches of tilt back, but it's still enough to make everybody nervous, so that's the line we're dancing on.

So success for me now means pain free, number one, with speed now. They've finally convinced me swing hard, swing as hard as you can because you're not going to hurt yourself and you've shown you can come pretty close with a pretty full swing. So if I can swing hard and not wince, that's really successful. And obviously as soon as you're in a tournament the golf instinct takes over and you don't want to stink.

I mean, I say those are the two things that will make me happy, if I do those two things and the shot still goes in the crowd, I'm not going to be very happy but that's the other part of the deal.

Q. During the rehab process, obviously you're just trying to get back, but how important was it to be back here at Endicott for this tournament so close to home?

JOEY SINDELAR: Yeah, very big, and the timing fortunately for me was good because the shot took place -- I would have loved for this to be my first tournament if that's the way it was necessary, but to have been able to play a few and get the jitters out and get the wow, are the guys going to laugh at me for my new swing or because I hit my 5-iron 20 yards shorter, all that stuff that bounces around in your noggin all the time, I was able to get that stuff out out of town. So I should at least be able to hit some good shots here and I'm here.

These are my friends, and John Karedes and the whole crew and all the Dick's Sporting Goods people are here that have supported me and of course have done such great things for this event, and it would have broken my heart to -- and I would have been here, I would have come here anyway, but to be glad-handing rather than playing would have been good but not great, so I'm thrilled to be playing.

Q. You said there was a point where you didn't know if you were going to play again, so at this point do you feel like you're starting over or do you feel like

you're playing on borrowed time or anything like that? What's your mind frame?

JOEY SINDELAR: The scary part is I worry about the other shoe dropping, which is that shot, the injection expiring. But the hope is that the injection isn't just numbing the nerve, that it broke the cycle, which is what they do those for, which got me to a place where I could then change my swing. But in the back of my mind I'm still waiting for the thump. I can't help it because every day I'm still sore because I'm expanding every day, I'm swinging harder and pushing the envelope, so it's still every day a reminder. I'm sorry, the first part of that was?

Q. Do you feel like this is a new beginning or are you playing on borrowed time in terms of your future?

JOEY SINDELAR: All over that map. It's interesting that I have to literally look at Mike or look at Amanda and say, is this my old swing, because it's now tens of thousands of balls later and it feels normal. It's normal. So normal isn't what it used to be anymore, but I don't know that, I still feel like this is a foot different. You know, a foot in a golfer's world being a lot of change.

So the starting over part isn't as big because it's kind of been my own, the whole process. Just different, weird, way weird to stand -- again, you'll see me go through some postural things and you can tell I'm grasping for elemental straws, you know, basics, but then the swing starts and it's mostly okay. As of the second tournament I was able to say to myself, wow, I might be able to be a golfer again long term, several years' worth and maybe more if this process does help. I'm obviously not getting any younger and 60's going to be worse than 55, but it seems possible right now, if that helps answer your question.

Q. I know you're always looking at, you know, you never wanted to get the surgery done and it happened. Is it something that a surgery can fix anything more or is it now you just have to deal with the pain?

JOEY SINDELAR: Yeah, I'm done surgery wise. I've asked. And for two reasons I'm done. No. 1, Frank Cammisa did a great job and did what he could do. The other little stuff I have really isn't repairable by surgery. There's minor things they could do, but unfortunately with -- you guys were nice enough to put up with my pulmonary embolism stuff three years ago out at the Schwab and I had a bad one from travel. I produced another clot right after this surgery which was quite dangerous because they couldn't liquidate -- the odd thing about spine surgery is when you have a clot, they need to liquidate your blood, but when you've had spine surgery, they can't liquidate your blood. It was a nightmare. So I need to avoid surgery. So unless it's a surgery that's hugely meaningful and would for sure provide a lot of relief for me, they've all said I need to not even go there, so that's likely gone and this will be more adaptive golf.