

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
August 11, 2020



AKSHAY BHATIA

MARK WILLIAMS: We would like to welcome Akshay Bhatia to the virtual interview room here at the Wyndham Championship.

Akshay, you're a sponsor exemption into this week and you have ties in the area being a Wake Forest resident. Just getting the invite and having the opportunity to play here, what does that mean to you, Akshay?

AKSHAY BHATIA: It's big. I'd like to thank Mark Brazil obviously for giving me this opportunity. It's a pretty special week just being in my home state, not too far from home.

But, you know, I'm really excited. I've had a lot of -- a lot more success in the last few months playing on mini tours and Monday qualifiers since kind of this pandemic's gone on. And we got a break. I got to settle down, gather my thoughts and, you know, I've made so much progress. I won my first pro event last week. As an 18-year-old, that's pretty special to me. So I'm definitely excited and I'm ready to get it going.

MARK WILLIAMS: Yeah, congratulations on that victory. This will be your sixth start on the PGA TOUR. Unfortunately, you've yet to advance to the weekend. What do you need to do to change that this week, what formula will you need to put into practice to get to the weekend?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I don't know if there's a certain formula, but like I said, like I've learned a lot since this quarantine kind of thing started. Like, honestly, when I got out first on Tour playing these tournaments, I definitely had self belief when I was uncomfortable, that's what's going to happen at 17 years old playing against guys who have been out here for a while. But, you know, I've shot many lower scores in the last few months and that's huge for me because knowing that I'm able to do it, knowing that I can play against guys who have played on the mini tours or Korn Ferry or whatever just shows that I'm good enough to do it.

I'm just going to go out there and just play golf, that's all I have to do. That's literally what it is, it's just going out and playing a golf course. There's nothing -- there's no secret to it.

Q. Akshay, I'm just curious, you mentioned feeling a little uncomfortable just kind of with being out here in the fall. Now that you've had some experience, in what ways do you feel like you belong out here and in what ways do you still feel like a little bit of an outsider?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Like I said, definitely getting my first pro win last week was big because, one, that gives me a lot of momentum going into this week knowing that I can go out and

make 10 birdies in a round. I did it last week and I had the lead. I had to keep the lead and I maintained it and I won by 4 or 3. So a lot of it was just believing in myself that I can shoot these low scores.

But over that fall season I struggled a lot with my putting. I decided to make a pretty significant change in using arm lock and, I mean, it's made a world of difference. So I'm just excited to play out here. It's nice to see some familiar faces. I got a taste of the PGA TOUR last fall and here I am, I have another opportunity to do something and have a good week and just enjoy myself.

But honestly, I have my friend on the bag this week and that's just another thing that's made me more comfortable.

Q. So I read you're home schooled and you technically just graduated this spring, right?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah. Actually, I graduated early last year just to get it out of the way so I had some time and didn't have to worry about it when I was traveling during these events.

Q. So I wanted to ask you where you get your maturity and composure having just graduated high school and here you are navigating your way as a pro on the PGA TOUR.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Honestly, I mean, golf's a big part of it. You've got to be mature, you've got to -- you know, this game is honestly the reason I'm the person I am today. It's been my life and I've just, I've learned a lot from a lot of great people. Patton Kizzire, Phil Mickelson, some guys that have been out here Matt Wolff, my coaches, they've taught me a lot of things. I just think listening from people who have had success out here in pro golf has definitely helped my mentality going into certain events.

Q. I just have a question about your short iron play. Sedgefield Country Club is the only Donald Ross original that serves as a regular PGA TOUR venue. The course features Ross' signature small and undulating greens which require accuracy. Personally for you, what are your keys to accurate short iron play and distance control?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I definitely think this golf course, you don't have to hit a lot of drivers, it's not really a bomber's paradise, but I think using the contours to your advantage this week to certain pins are going to be critical because you can definitely take advantage of the two par 5s we have out here.

Then if you can make two, three, four birdies on those short par 4s, as long as you can put it in play, these greens are just so pure that you're going to make putts out here.

So I think the biggest key is honestly just hitting in the fairway. There's not much to it. If it's

140 yards, you just feel it out and hopefully hit it pin high and, like I said, use the contours to your advantage.

MARK WILLIAMS: Akshay, you mentioned you have a friend on the bag as a caddie. What's his name and how do you know him?

AKSHAY BHATIA: So his name's Jonas Hillyard. He's 21. When I moved here to Wake Forest, he was one of the first people that I met at the golf course. He played high school golf, but he didn't pursue it in college, but we've just stayed close and I had had great -- I thought it was a great idea for him just to come travel with me and just have a friend to travel with. Kind of, you know, go through different places and look around.

But like I said, the comfortability of me being with him, someone closer to my age, we can laugh about so many things on the golf course. So it's just -- it's been just so much fun getting to get some of these memories started with him. And like I said, my first win was last week and having him there on the bag was really fun and special.

Q. Just for those of us who aren't familiar with your story, what was it that made you decide to go pro at such an early age instead of going to college?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah. Honestly, I've always had the mindset, I guess, of playing professional golf since I was a little kid, and kind of once we moved to Raleigh, I had more opportunities to play against good players, older kids.

I guess it just didn't ever cross my mind that I wanted to do -- you know, go to school. All my mind was set on was just playing golf and playing on the PGA TOUR and playing pro golf. I've met so many great people along the way, I've learned so much already. It's crazy to think that like this month I would actually be going to college for my first year. Just thinking about that perspective and where my life would be if I was going to college, it's just weird to think about. I don't even know what would happen.

I've just kind of always had that mentality of just learning the hard way and it's definitely been some success and hopefully onward and upward, for sure.

MARK WILLIAMS: Akshay, I'll ask you, you're a left hander. Have you kind of asked anybody else on Tour that's a left hander for any advice or received any advice from anybody just on strategy or equipment while you've been at these events on Tour?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, so I signed with Callaway Golf last fall and just, you know, getting able to understand like what Phil's done with certain clubs, what his thought process is behind that. I've picked his brain so much. He's starting to become one of my good friends and obviously he's a big mentor to me. So I've definitely tried to pick his brain on wedges especially because the lies out here are a little tighter than what I'm used to. So I've worked a lot on my wedges, getting the grinds right.

And then also my irons, I have them grinded a little bit on the leading edge for turf interaction purposes. So I've really leaned on him for sure about that stuff.

Q. During your five events last fall that you were on the PGA TOUR, how did the guys treat you? Do you have any stories to tell, some interaction? Were they wondering who this kid was? What was that like?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, everyone out here has been super nice to me. I'm fortunate enough to know some guys like Patton, Chesson Hadley, Grayson Murray, a bunch of guys, so they've treated me really well. I've gained a lot of respect from guys I played with.

I think probably the coolest story I had, which I'm sure a lot of people know about, is when I played the Valspar as an amateur in 2019 or '18 and I played with Jon Rahm in a practice round. We had a little bit of heckle when he outdrove me with his 5-wood and I hit like a 3-iron or something and then I hit it inside of him. He laughed at that. So I think that's one of my cooler stories, for sure, being out here.

Q. Akshay, sorry to go back to your age again, but you mentioned you have looked up to some of these guys who you're playing alongside, these veteran golfers. Do you bring any youth to them maybe in your conversations, whether it's slang or TikTok? Have you taught them anything like that?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I don't know about that, but like I said, my caddie and I, we talk all the time about TikTok, Instagram, just funny stuff. We kind of keep it to ourselves because some of it might not be appropriate to some of these older guys or they won't understand.

Yeah, I don't know. I try and heckle with some of the guys and I like talking trash to guys I know and I'm familiar with and I know that can understand my humor.

Q. You mentioned earlier about getting sort of a breakthrough win in a pro event. What's the sort of sense of relief to get that first win and what was it like managing your nerves down the stretch of that one?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, I don't know if it was a sigh of relief, but it was just an amazing feeling know that obviously I didn't have -- obviously I played well, but I didn't feel like I had my A-game. just knowing that if I have my B- or C-game, that I can still perform at a high level.

But definitely handling the nerves, there were no nerves, I was just excited to be in that position, because the last three or four tournaments that I played I was in the final group or second-to-last group, so I was just in that position so many times and I was just so excited to finally break through. You know, it was big for me. I just bought a car or I just leased a car and having a little extra money to pay for the car payments really helped me and I'm not as stressed about that now.

MARK WILLIAMS: Just before we close, can you just give us some details on the name of the Tour where you won, what you shot and perhaps the prize money in that event?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah. So it was a SwingThought Tour event. It was in Hilton Head, Old South Links. I shot 63, 9 under the first day, then I shot 67, 5 under the second day. Then I ended up winning \$15,000, so it was quite nice for an 18-year-old.

MARK WILLIAMS: Sweet, **that will help those car payments, that's for sure. What kind of car did you end up leasing?**

AKSHAY BHATIA: I spoiled myself, I got a Mercedes. Probably not the smartest thing to do, but I enjoy it, so I'm not going to complain.

MARK WILLIAMS: Excellent. Well, I'm sorry I didn't have my picture up there for you to look at me, but it probably worked out better. Appreciate the time and have a great week this week.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Thank you, thanks.