

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
January 26, 2021

MARC LEISHMAN



DOUG MILNE: We would like to welcome Marc Leishman, defending champion of the Farmers Insurance Open.

Marc, thanks for joining us for a few minutes. I know it's been quite the whirlwind of a day or two, but here we are, and an opportunity for you to try and successfully try and defend your title.

If I can take you back to last year's final round, the 7-under 65, I was looking at some numbers and it looked like for the past four starts here prior, final rounds hadn't been ideal for you. So if we could just take you back to last year's final round and how special that was.

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, it was a special day. Like you said, I've been in that position a couple of times before, one in particular I remember, I think I was leading by 1 or 2, playing the seventh hole and after that kind of fell away. You learn from those sort of things. I was just wanting to take all my experiences, put them in my basket, I guess, and use them all that day. Was lucky enough to have, well, have some good golf, make some putts and came out on top. So it was a really fun day that I'll remember forever.

DOUG MILNE: Well, you're making your 13th start here at the Farmers Insurance Open and you've had additional solid finishes, including a couple of runner-ups. What is it about this place that you think suits your game so well?

MARC LEISHMAN: It reminds me a lot of

home, the grasses that are at Torrey Pines here I grew up on at Warrnambool. It was my first trip to America coming to this golf course for the Junior World in 2001. And you've got to be pretty precise around here, but there's places you can miss it. If you know where those places are and those places where you can't hit it, I think you can get it around if you don't have your best stuff, which I probably showed on Sunday last year.

Yeah, I enjoy being here, I love San Diego. I've got some friends that I've known for a long time here in town. Just love coming to Torrey Pines.

DOUG MILNE: Okay. I've got one last question, then we'll open it up for a few questions. Bringing you to this season, coming off a top-5 finish at your most recent start at the Sony Open in Hawaii, just some feelings about your game heading into the week.

MARC LEISHMAN: I'm feeling good. The Sony Open was great, I played well at Maui as well, just putted a little better at Sony. It's been well documented I didn't have my best stuff towards the middle and end of last year after we had the break. I've got that under control now and that's in the past, so I'm ready to go for this week. Yeah, I feel like my game's in a pretty good spot. Obviously it starts at zero Thursday morning, so you've got to earn whatever you get. Yeah, feeling good about this week.

Q. Marc, a couple questions. How frustrating was that stretch? You had

won Farmers, you finished runner-up at Arnie's and then COVID-19 hit. How frustrating was that stretch until Sony?

MARC LEISHMAN: It was very frustrating. Like you said, I played really good at the start of last year and then once COVID hit, sort of got -- lost all momentum, sort of took me a long time to get used to playing with nobody around. I don't normally play on weeks off, so most of the time that I play it's at a tournament, so it was weird.

But when you go through something like that, I think you've got to try and take the positives out of it. One, I didn't get COVID, no one in my family got COVID, but two, you can't always be on top of your game as much as you would love to be and that just makes you appreciate when you are playing well a lot more. That's why you celebrate your wins, and I celebrated this one pretty well last year. You know, it just makes you appreciate the good things when you do go through something like that. It was very frustrating, I had no idea what I was doing wrong, but we sorted it out by the end of October, by the Masters, which was good. Should be ready to go for this season.

Q. And are you playing next week?

MARC LEISHMAN: I'm not, no. I'm playing -- I'll have two weeks off and then I'll play L.A. and -- well, four in a row from L.A. Yeah, it will be a busy stretch there, so I'll have a bit of a spell before that.

Q. You know Torrey about as well as anybody out there. How much does it play like a major in January, February, this golf course, and what would you expect as far as USGA's setup about how much (unintelligible) these greens once the Open arrives in June?

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, I think on a firm year for the Farmers Insurance Open, it does play a bit like a major. The rough's not up as much, the fairways aren't quite as firm. It's just not quite as fiery as what a major would be. This year for the U.S. Open I think it's going to be really firm, really fast. I think the rough's going to be up. I think it's going to be tough, it's going to play like a different golf course.

The good thing about knowing this course as well as I do is around the greens. The breaks don't change on the greens. They have the greens quick for this tournament as they will for the U.S. Open. You'll still want to be missing it in certain spots, you're not going to be wanting to missing it on opposite sides of the greens or anything, so I think in that respect it's going to be -- that's what I'm going to take out of this week as far as preparation goes for the U.S. Open, just really try and chart the greens maybe more than I have in the past and be ready to make those putts.

Q. And to follow that up, Marc, they made changes before last year's tournament and obviously you handled them well. Did you think that there were any real significant changes or things that stood out to you?

MARC LEISHMAN: There was only -- well, there was a few. I mean, the first, they moved that first bunker past the second one so that now, well, I certainly can't get over the bunkers on the right on 1. Apart from that, the tee shot on 10 is a little different, just that bunker's very well positioned. I think it's -- come U.S. Open, I think that's going to be a different club off the tee than what it is this week. I think you have to be a little bit more conservative there. No. 13, there's a

new bunker there. Apart from that, it's not too different. I think they've just done good things with the drainage and just a few subtle things with bunkers which are going to make a big difference. I think for the most part it's only those few holes that it's going to make a difference.

Q. Marc, welcome back to San Diego. Curious, for golfers that might not be as familiar with the course as you, how productive can you be this week as it relates to the U.S. Open given that it will be a different time of year, it will be a different setup?

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, I think there's certain holes that you can learn a lot. The lines won't change off tees or anything, but on the other hand, there's -- like 10, there's going to be big differences there when the fairways are rock hard and the rough's up.

I think the big thing for me this week and for guys who aren't as familiar, I think you've just got to learn the breaks on the greens. They can be tricky with being on the slope of the -- you know, going down towards the ocean. Having played here so much and growing up on the ocean myself, I don't actually -- it comes natural to me, but I think that can be where it becomes tricky. I find reading greens in mountains very difficult because I didn't grow up in the mountains. So I think being around the greens is where you're going to have to -- that's where most of the preparation that you're going to soak in this week for the U.S. Open will happen.

Q. And from a broad perspective, it's been 13 years since it's been here, how does Torrey stack up and compare to other U.S. Open venues that you've played?

MARC LEISHMAN: I mean, it's great. It's such a good golf course. It's a strong, strong course, particularly when it gets firm. I've never played it extremely firm like in July or June when the U.S. Open is. Every time I've played it apart from when I was 17 years old was in January, so it's going to be new for me as well. But it's an awesome venue. I mean, spectacular views, like the course is great and the city and the crowds are going to be hopefully here. Yeah, it's a great venue and one that I'm really excited about if you can't tell. Normally U.S. Opens aren't my forte, but I feel like this one is probably one I've been looking forward to for a while.

Q. I wanted to pick your brain briefly about Xander Schauffele. What do you see, what stands out with his game?

MARC LEISHMAN: He has no weaknesses in his -- well, in his artillery certainly no weaknesses, and then mentally he's as strong as you get. He gets a sniff of victory and he normally grabs hold of it. He's a great player, and as good a player as he is, he's as good if not a better person, which is probably even more impressive.

Q. And mental makeup at his age, it seems he does have moments late in tournaments, I think in all of his wins I think he birdied the final hole, what about that mental makeup at this stage of his life?

MARC LEISHMAN: He just loves the fight. We all do, but I was lucky enough to -- well, not lucky enough, I played with him at Maui when he won there a couple of years ago. I think he shot 60 or 61. He just gets a sniff and embraces it. He wants to be that guy at the end of the game with the chance to win it. And I don't actually know how old Xander is, I would probably guess older than what

he is, but he's certainly got that mental strength and the maturity that's going to take him a long way.

Q. I was just curious, so many great international players on the PGA TOUR. Is there -- have you noticed any trepidation or have you had any trepidation coming to the United States. I saw this morning Australia's had less than a thousand COVID deaths, we've obviously had over 400,000 in this country. Is that ever a concern for you or your fellow international players?

MARC LEISHMAN: I've been in America the whole time. I wasn't able to go home this year. Yeah, I mean, you don't want to get COVID. I know people, not firsthand but -- well, I know guys who have had it, but I know people, some of my friends have had friends that have passed away from it, so obviously there's a lot of bad stuff that is happening and it's caused a lot of chaos over here.

I guess it's concerning for everyone, not just the internationals. Hopefully we can get on top of it, get these vaccines under way and things will start getting under control. I'm not a doctor, I don't know the ins and outs of it, but hopefully it starts getting better soon.

Q. Well, you are a PGA TOUR golfer so let me ask you, how well do you think the PGA TOUR has handled it to be able to compete with all these tournaments and crown champions with minimal interruption obviously after last summer and still be able to play pretty safely?

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, I feel very fortunate to be still -- to still have a job. I mean, the PGA TOUR has done a great job with testing. It's been smooth, it's been

effective, I think. For us to still be traveling around the country with very few cases I think is a credit to them and what they've done. Hopefully it will continue to go that way. I'm proud to be a PGA TOUR player and be looked after by them.

Q. Marc, happy Australia Day.

MARC LEISHMAN: You, too, Bernie.

Q. It's like saying that sitting here with a glass of red wine in my hand here in France. Listen, on that Australian theme, and this has been going on for a long time, you've benefited from it, but how important has the Australasian Tour swing been over that Christmas period and have you missed it this year given what's going on in the world with the pandemic?

MARC LEISHMAN: I did miss it. This is the first year in my career or maybe in my life that I haven't been able to go to Australia at all for the entire year. I haven't seen my parents for a year. It's been an interesting one. I guess golf has caught the brunt of it in Australia with no tournaments last year. I did miss it, I love going back and playing. Hopefully we can do that this year and get things back to normal. It's just hard when you have to go back there and you get put in a hotel room for two weeks with no key. But I get it, it's working. I'm not criticizing at all, I'm just saying I'm probably not willing to do that.

Q. A quick followup question on the back of your answer. What's it sort of worth being of that Tour, sort of hitting like sort of the Hawaii event, in many ways hitting the ground running for you. A lot of guys are have got rust in their game.

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, it's definitely an

advantage I think with the Australians coming from the summer down there and having just played tournaments, and then when you are at home and the weather's nice and you want to get out and play golf and be active. It's pretty easy when -- well, I live in Virginia Beach, it's pretty easy when the weather's miserable and cold and wet to just stay in inside, not do a whole lot, put on a few pounds. You get there a bit underprepared, like you said, and I feel like when I come from Australia, that's probably not the case.

Q. You mentioned earlier just that the difference between how you were playing right before the break and then it took you a little while to get going afterwards. I was just curious, how different is that? Like is it a really slight marginal thing, is it something with just one part of your game, or can you really tell that something is off and different?

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, I just didn't feel like me over the ball, which it's a weird thing to say because obviously it wasn't someone else holding the club. But the way -- to get a little bit technical, the way I was getting into the ball was causing me to stand too far away from the golf ball, and from there things just don't go well for me.

Yeah, it was a little thing, but little things can turn into big things and then when you start hitting bad shots, it starts getting in your head. It just goes pear shaped from there. Yeah, it was a tough second half to the year, but I'm on the other side of that now and I've got things under control with my game and my putting. My putting dropped off a little bit last year also, but when -- it's hard when you're playing and you feel like you're not playing for. Anything, I was missing cuts by big margins, so it's hard to be fully in it when

you're playing that poorly.

Q. And who helps you figure that out? Is that something that you come to yourself? And also, like you have obviously enough experience now with the ebbs and flows of PGA TOUR life. Does that help you when you miss a few cuts, say, or is it still like a moment of panic?

MARC LEISHMAN: I wouldn't say panic. I've had the same coach for 20 years, so he came over. Had to do that two-week hotel quarantine when he got back, but he was kind enough to do that to come over and help me. He picked it up after about a day or two, what I was doing. I would never have picked up what I was doing. So I owe probably my play since the Masters to him making that trip and doing that.

Yeah, I'm not a person who Panics easily, but I will say that I was getting pretty annoyed. I would get on the golf course and things would start going downhill generally in the first few holes. You get pretty down early on in tournaments, which is not a good spot to be in. It didn't affect my life off the golf course, but certainly when I was on the golf course I wasn't very happy when you're shooting numbers like I was shooting.

Q. Happy Australia Day, mate.

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, you, too.

Q. Mate, 10 weeks out from the Masters and this particular time of year, sort of January through end of March, you're traditionally putting together some of your best work. Can that be put down to looking forward to the Masters or your preparation? You sort of ramp up your preparations over this period of time,

because looking at your results over the years, this sort of three-month window before heading to Augusta's always quite a fruitful one for you.

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, I think it's a combination of a few different things. I love playing in California, it's grasses that I grew up on, kikuyu, poa. Generally a little chilly, a bit windy. Hawaii's also windy, which is what I grew up in. Then I love playing Bay Hill, I've had a lot of success there.

I wouldn't say it was preparation for the Masters. I think it's more just enjoying the courses, enjoying the cities that I'm in. After a Christmas break, you're sort of keen to get back out there and you're fresh and I think that's got a bit to do with it as well.

Yeah, combinations of a few different things, but I think loving the courses, pretty much every course from Maui all the way to the Masters I really love playing and I think that makes it easy to play well.

Q. When do you start thinking about Augusta?

MARC LEISHMAN: I mean, you're probably always thinking about Augusta, to be honest. I'll start working on some shots for Augusta probably two months before, but it's mostly with the longer stuff. Mostly my 3-wood, to be honest, is what the preparation is about, get that 3-wood turning over, make sure the clubs are fitted right. Not that I can't hit it the rest of the year, it's just that I know I'm going to be hitting that four or five times a round on that golf course, so I want to make sure that it's ready and I know where the misses are going to be and that I'm going to pull that shot off more often than I'm not.

Yeah, that's I would say, two months. I would

give myself a good solid 60 days to just ingrain that 3-wood in. But everything else, it's still a golf course that you have to have your good stuff, you've got to play well at. Like any golf course, you've got to drive it on the fairway and you've got to hit your irons well. What I enjoy most about Augusta is probably the greens and how much imagination you need to have on them. I do enjoy that about it.

Q. I'm just helping out a few of the guys back in Australia who weren't as dedicated as B.J. getting up at 5:00 a.m. They want to know if you can just sort of run through your season goals, sort of short and long term, what you're hoping to achieve throughout the rest of this season.

MARC LEISHMAN: Yeah, I would like to win, I think that's fairly -- a fairly standard one for me. If I can get a win, that's a good year. In 2017 I had two wins, I would like to equal that if I can, but I'll work on the first one first.

I'm not a huge goal setter, but I do just want to do everything that I did last year better. Hit a few more percent of fairways and few more percent of the greens, just improve. I feel like if I do the process the right way, I feel like results take care of themselves. So I don't really like having results-oriented goals, I just like making sure my process gets better and then the results take care of themselves. If I do have a chance to win, I'll give myself a chance on a Sunday, I'm going to try and win, that's a given. If it happens to be the second one or whatever, I'm going to still have the same idea. If I get a sniff, I want to win, and hopefully I can just give myself chances, that's all I can ask for.

Q. And then, mate, is there any

difference I guess when you're a defending champion? Does it add pressure internally or externally, and if so, how do you deal with that?

MARC LEISHMAN: I don't think it adds pressure. Like I've said before, everyone still starts at zero on the first tee. You've got to earn your way to have that chance to win on Sunday, and then that's probably where the real work starts, when you do get a sniff and you've got to try and get that trophy. Yeah, I just want to give myself a chance.

DOUG MILNE: Marc, well, we sure appreciate your time and wish you all the best of luck this week. Thank you for joining us.