

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
January 24, 2023

JUSTIN THOMAS



MICHAEL BALIKER: We will go ahead and get started with Justin Thomas here at the Farmers Insurance Open.

Justin, back in action after a couple weeks off. How was the time off in preparation for this week?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It was good. It's getting that time of year in Jupiter, Florida, right now that really reminds you why you live in Jupiter, Florida. It's been beautiful, nice weather. It's been a great time to practice and kind of work on some things.

Yeah, I mean obviously Hawaii is always the start of the calendar year schedule-wise, but there's something about the west coast, I feel like once you get to Torrey Pines it really gets going. Put in some good work and enjoy the time at home to get ready for a big stretch.

MICHAEL BALIKER: You mentioned Torrey Pines. This is an event that you've prioritized having back on your schedule. I guess why is it so important for you to be at this event playing this golf course?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It's a good golf course. When I first played I struggled with the North Course, it just didn't fit my eye. There's definitely a number of holes that are still difficult and maybe not totally comfortable to my eye, but I feel like with the changes, it's not a place that you need to go shoot 67 on, 66 to keep pace. It's a very challenging sneaky course and the fairways are very narrow. The rough I feel is longer this year so you definitely need to hit the fairways. As soon as I played the U.S. Open here a couple years ago, I quickly realized and remembered how much I like Torrey South and how great of a golf course it is and I felt like it was one that I needed to get to again.

Q. You've been working with Mr. Nicklaus on golf architecture. I'm just curious if working and learning about that helps you prepare for courses like Torrey Pines?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, you know, it's very unique. There's different -- there's definitely different little things here or there that I'm learning. You know, little stuff of, you know, every hole, where is this green draining to, where is it going to and that's obviously going to be the dominant side the slope of the green is going to. obviously out here we're playing very difficult pins and pins that have little subtle knobs and things like that that can change it up, but as a whole, the green is going to be one direction and the hole is going to be one direction, little things like that.

I think I'm not necessarily out there on the fairway, oh, because I was out there with Jack

while he was doing some architecture stuff, like I know to do this. It's still I need to hit my 8-iron this far, I need to hit it close to the hole and I need to make the putt, but it's definitely been a really cool learning experience.

Q. J.T., a couple for you. First of all, the Saturday finish last year you were here, did it change your week much, and was there a positive to it because it kind of shortens the week schedule-wise for you, things like that? How did it work out?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It was incredible, I got to watch football on Sunday. I was ecstatic about it. Even so much so that I pushed the Tour that we do it during the entire playoffs because I love football and I love watching football.

It's easy for me. I mean, I'm not playing the previous week so I just come in Sunday versus Monday. It's just, the weirdest thing is just actually out of habit, you know, the cut's after Friday, the final round's Sunday, so it's just little things that you're saying, it's like when you're playing a course that's rerouted or when they changed East Lake, everybody always says 5 is 5 but it's really 14 now, little things that don't make a difference.

Q. But it was a little bit of an adjustment?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No, no, it wasn't an adjustment.

Q. OK. The other thing is just having the two courses to learn, and you obviously did that early in your career and then you went away, what have you learned about the North and South Course differences now that you didn't know before?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I think the South is very -- it's been very similar, it stays very similar. A lot of the courses in my opinion on the west coast, it just depends on how the weather's been or how firm or soft they are and this year it's clearly softer. But the rough to me again seems longer, it seems lusher, so that's going to make it more difficult. But in terms of into the greens and around the greens, it's easier because they're softer.

Now, granted we have weather like this and we get a little bit of wind, it should be respectable and a little bit firmer come Friday and Saturday, but yeah, everybody's got to just kind of take the courses for what they are. There's nothing tricked up or hidden. You stand on the tee and you look down there and there's a really narrow fairway down there and you need to hit it, and if you don't hit it, you're just trying to make par, that's pretty similar on both courses.

Q. Going back to football real quick, do you have one team that you're really rooting for?

JUSTIN THOMAS: The Bengals, they're the closest to home in Louisville growing up. My mom's from Pittsburgh and my dad's from Ohio, is a Bengals fan, so we would go to the Bengals-Steelers game every year growing up.

I'm not a die-hard, it's not like Alabama football where I live and die with, but it's a fun team to root for. I hate to say that I love Joe Burrow because he took a beating to my Crimson Tide, but it's hard not to like him and root for him and just be optimistic about what he's done with the Bengals.

Q. Justin, you talk about getting involved with architecture and specifically with Torrey there's been obviously a lot of talk about the North Course with the redesign that it underwent. Do you think that either course, maybe there's an archetype for a certain player that fits both courses or do you think it's just go out there and play your best game?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I would clearly say whatever Jon Rahm's game is is pretty good for Torrey Pines. It seems like that's -- not that his game is bad for any course, but seems like he does all right around this place.

That was something visually to me that when I played the South Course I didn't remember was how much it favors a left-right ball flight, especially off the tees. When the greens get firm, having I feel a left-right ball flight's going to hold the greens a little bit better, a little bit more control and that's something that he obviously does but something that when I'm playing well and feel like I get in a rhythm, that's like the ball working left-right. So visually just it appeals to me off the tee and around the course.

I even said today, I played the North this morning and it's -- the fairways are so -- it has a little bit of like Olympic vibes to it where you may have a fairway that goes left and the fairway slopes right and if it's firm the fairways are damn near unhittable. There's really a good amount of pitch to them and it puts a big-time premium on driving.

Q. Justin, you mentioned Jon and the run that he's obviously been on. As somebody who's obviously won a lot, how difficult is it to kind of go on something like that, especially with the talent that the Tour has, can you speak to that? And then what's the challenge of kind of knowing that it's a long season and dealing with that?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I'd say it's both. The hardest part I think is getting there obviously, but when you're in those zones and in those rhythms, golf just comes so easy. It's hard to explain or it's hard to -- you know, I feel like for me, like I almost kind of like took it for granted, the couple runs I got on. Like when it's coming easy, it doesn't seem like there's any effort, it just seems like you wake up and you're going to shoot 65 or 6 and it's just like things are going your way. Even when you're not playing well, missing in the right spots. And obviously all the best players in the world, I mean they end up finding their way around contention come Saturday Sunday or on the weekend.

But when you start driving it like he does, hitting his irons like he does and you get just a halfway decent putting week, yeah, he's going to be tough to beat. I think even when some people and I'm sure himself included would say he was in like a slump or whatever prior to

that, he was still in contention, had a chance to win a lot of tournaments. It's just trying to get over that hump of like OK, I'm not that far off. It's a very, very, very fine line out here, there's a lot of really good players. It's just once you get out there and maybe done a couple times, just kind of remember some of those things that you've done prior.

Q. Justin, I wanted to ask, I know it was 2014 you finished top-10 here, you were just getting ready to start your Korn Ferry Tour season. What do you kind of remember about that week and how you played? It was kind of your first high finish on the PGA TOUR and what comes to mind when you think about that week?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I'm surprised you don't have a Bengals hat on today with the beat that you took. Sorry about that.

Q. You guys did get us into the playoffs five years ago with fourth and 12 with Tyler Boyd so I'll always appreciative of that, I'll be rooting for you.

JUSTIN THOMAS: For sure.

As funny as it is, what I remember most about that week, I putted unbelievably. I remember I was at the Monday qualifier and I was about to tee off. And actually for the Monday qualifier there was a net for a range and I was about to hit balls in the net and got the call from the tournament director saying that I got an exemption. So I was very pleased to, you know, unfortunately shake the guys' hands and the person doing the scoring and head out here.

I was in I think like 11th when I finished and Gary Woodland, who's now become a very good friend of mine, he three-putted 18 and made bogey for me to finish top-10.

You know, now looking back at it, obviously I'm not ever rooting against the guy but I was probably rooting against him pretty heavily when he had that whatever, four-, five-, six-footer on 18. That got me into what I thought was going to get me into Phoenix and I was there and I didn't know Gary very well at the time but we have the same agency and very cordial but not really close with him.

I'll never forget, I was on the chipping green and I kind of saw him and I was like I don't know him really well enough to say anything and I'm just hitting these chips. He just walks past and he stops and looks over to me and goes, "You're welcome," and just keeps walking. That was my best or most vivid memory of that whole experience.

Q. And then just kind of in general, that experience parlays that into the Korn Ferry Tour season this year, do you think that helped you and you were able to succeed and have a bunch of high finishes and then get your Tour card for the regular season?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah it, helped a lot because it was a bizarre week or just finish because I finished 10th but I think I was like four out of the lead. It was a very bunched

leaderboard. I was very close to winning the golf tournament.

And just knowing again like I played well but didn't do anything special, I just made the putts when I needed to and kind of kept myself out of anything crazy trouble-wise, and just knowing that I could come out here and compete against one of the best fields of the year and finish top-10, come pretty close to winning gave me obviously a lot of confidence going back to the Korn Ferry Tour and knowing that I could win and compete out there as well.

Q. Last one from me, I know for Musselman, he was your high school teammate and he got status through Q-School last year. What's it like seeing him have pretty much a full season out there and get to try to join you out here?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's really cool. We don't have a huge Kentucky or Louisville presence in professional golf or on Tour, just kind of the way it is. Obviously we don't necessarily have the weather of a Florida or California or anything in the south. Being a lot smaller, it's fun knowing Coop as long as I have. I know my dad and his dad have known each for a very long time. Yeah, he's a great dude and he's obviously a great player and he's someone that seemed to kind of get better every stage that he's played from junior golf on. Not many people have done that. I know I'm pulling for him and going to watch how he's doing this year.

Q. J.T., after that first Torrey appearance, Torrey kind of fell off the schedule for you a little bit. Why was that?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Just like other tournaments I missed, just scheduling. Playing in Kapalua and Sony and then I played Palm Springs a couple years in a row, so like I'm gonna start the year four in a row.

Like I said, I kind of struggled on the North Course, it wasn't really appealing to me. So that was, I mean, a reason and it just I kind of got to the point and I feel like I'm at a point now where I feel like if I didn't feel like I could win the golf tournament because of maybe the course or just given the situation in the schedule, there's just no reason to waste my time to go and that's just kind of how I felt.

I played in Honda in the past and that was another thing that just, yeah, I'd love to play the Honda, I've won and I've played well and it's in my backyard, but I just can't do it. I'm not going to play six in a row leading up to Augusta. It's unfortunate. We're fortunate to have a lot of great unbelievable tournaments on our schedule, but I can't play them all.

Q. Along those lines, the new designated events, how has that changed how you've had to look at your schedule this year?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It's changed a little bit. I didn't play Memorial last year, I'll play that this year. I haven't played Bay Hill since my rookie year, so I'm going to play that this year. For the most part, not a lot has changed. It's just I would say those two events.

MICHAEL BALIKER: Justin, with that, thanks for the time.