

ROUND 4 PRESS CONFERENCE
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SAHITH THEEGALA (-21)



MODERATOR: Good evening, everyone. We would like to welcome the 2023 Fortinet Championship winner, Sahith Theegala.

Sahith, congratulations on earning your first PGA TOUR victory. We're going to start off with some opening comments on what it was like to get that first win on Tour.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, it's crazy, crazy.

Just can't believe it happened. Just a lot of work that was put in and a lot of people that were behind this. It's just golf is really, really hard. You never know when you're going to find a little hot streak or when you're going to go on a cold streak.

You know, I'm just taking it all in as the game's been feeling good and putting in the work. Yeah, my first thought is just like, it feels like such a team win. It doesn't feel like a win just for myself, it's for everyone that's supporting me and kind of got me where I am today.

A lot of really, really good golf the last four days just gives me so much confidence that I kind of went out there and got it today. I didn't really just kind of leak my way in, I really felt like I kept the pedal down and that's kind of what I was missing in the first few times I was in contention.

MODERATOR: And how special is it that your first win came in your native home state in California with over 40 family and friends following a long all week?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, it's the best. To be able to share such a, I don't want to say once-in-a-lifetime moment, but it really is a once-in-a-lifetime moment, you only win once and you never even know if you're going to win, right? So to be able to share this moment with all them is really special and something that I'll never forget.

Even through the highs and the lows this week, they were cheering me on and supporting me, and they've been that way since I've started my pro career. I just want them to know, want them to know that I have their back, too. It's awesome. It's awesome to win in my home state and have so many people come up and just be able to come up and watch.

Q. Congrats. You mentioned the gallery. How much bigger was it today? It sounds like people sort of joined knowing you had a chance. And how did that -- a couple times they started chanting your name. You looked a little sheepish.

What was that like just sort of as you're trying to stay focused and navigate your way

through the 18 holes to have that sort of vocal support?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, yeah, watching golf and playing golf is so different. I feel like personally for me, watching golf I get way more nervous than playing golf, so I know what it's like to be in their shoes and watching. You get definitely more on the highs and more on the lows watching, too, whereas I feel like I've always been pretty steady on the golf course. I'll wear my emotions on my sleeve, but for the most part I won't get too low or too high.

I've told my family and friends that I love their cheering and I acknowledge it, but during the moment, if I make a birdie, I'm just trying to keep my heart rate down out there and not get too excited and just kind of keep playing, because I learned the hard way a couple times you just have to go and get it.

I did look at the leaderboards on the back nine especially and saw that I had a four- or five-shot lead most of the back nine, but just the finishing stretch, and these guys are so good, so I knew I just had to stay as focused as I can and just try to play my best golf coming in.

But it's awesome, especially at 17 and 18 I just kind of soaked it in a little bit, and sure enough I tried to -- I soaked it in on 18 and made a -- I hit three of the worst shots I hit all week.

Yeah, it's awesome just hearing the chants every single hole. It definitely gave me a lot of energy.

Q. We've talked all week kind of about you trying to hit more fairways and put yourself in some prime positions. Today you're in the trees a couple times, in the rough.

Does that kind of just embody kind of your game, the shotmaking that it allows, to be able to win that way?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, yeah, I don't know what the stats were. I did feel like I drove it better today, but I probably hit six fairways, that's just how it always seems to work for me.

I feel like I hit the fairways or the intermediate or just off the fairway today were on the drives that I needed it the most. I fully understand that my long game, especially off the tee's not my strength. Believe it or not, it's gotten a lot, lot better the last couple years. Right out of college I probably would have been 200 strokes gained off the tee, and the last couple years I think I've been just over 100, which I've been making progress.

I always joke that hitting it that bad for a lot of my life off the tee has helped me just be really creative and just find a way to get the ball in the hole and score and hit all these crazy shots and do whatever it takes to get it in the hole.

I feel like hitting fairways is a bonus, and I don't get too stressed out if I hit it offline. I will say I feel like I miss it on the correct side pretty much every time. It might be really far away from the fairway, but it is at least the side that's inbounds or in play or have a recovery shot. Good at that, I guess.

Yeah, I just, I don't let it stress me out too much. Me and my coach have been working on this forever, and we're making progress and that's all I can ask for. I still feel like I work -- probably work the hardest on my short game and just want that to keep getting better and better. I'm getting more and more confident that it's the strongest part of my game and I can rely more and more on it as I move forward.

Q. Is there something that clicks with you when you put yourself in those scenarios, sort of back against the wall, you see a narrow window, something about that kind of sparks that creativity in your game, that shotmaking ability?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, yeah, just growing up as a kid on the range, one of the things I did a lot with my coach and even with my dad is I'll be on a flat range and I'll be like how many times are you actually hitting a dead flat shot, a dead stock shot into a hole at a tournament? It's literally never.

So I would always envision I have a tree in front of me and hit every kind of shot around the tree. I did the classic tic tac toe. I just love working the ball.

Also jokingly I was like, I'm not good enough to hit a straight shot. I don't want to aim at the flag and expect to hit a straight one, I just don't think my swing's built for that. Just kind of a combination of that and definitely seeing small windows and tighter targets is something I've been really working on so when I have -- when I don't have an option, I just have the tight window, I feel like I go ahead and pull it off more often than not. It's bit me in the butt a few times. Yeah, I definitely think I'd like to have that focus on every shot, but I know that's not how golf works.

Q. You have mentioned Zack Sims a number of times this week and his family and the fact that they have welcomed you into their home. How much of a comfort zone was that for you this week driving over to Silverado today with Zack?

You talked to me this morning about how he said, you know, he could feel, you know, good things were about to happen today, but how much does Tom and Jennifer and Zack and the Sims family mean to you?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, they mean so much to me. Zack's truly become one of my best friends over the last three years. He caddied for me on my sponsor invites out of college and on the Korn Ferry, and he caddied for me here in '21. He was supposed to caddie for me in 2020, that's another funny story.

Yeah, he actually just came back from European Q-School, so he wasn't able to get here

until last night, but even having him out here today and his girlfriend Becca, it was awesome having him out. He's legit the nicest person I know on the plant, the most optimistic guy.

Traveling on the road with him for a year rubbed off on me for a bit. I was always a little bit pessimistic about stuff, but yeah, Zack's the man.

I can't thank Tom and Jennifer enough for hosting me. This is my -- I don't remember if I stayed with them in 2020. I think I did. I think this is four years in a row staying with them. It truly feels like a home game. They've cooked me up some really, really nice meals over the last three years. I think they're cooking up some nice stuff tonight, I might go back there and eat there. Yeah, I just feel like I'm one of their kids, feels like a second home to me up here.

First tournament that I've played four times, and I've probably played this golf course outside of the tournament, I've probably played it 10, 15 times. I played the Napa Open, which is sponsored by Zack's company, Purefect. Yeah, he's one of my best friends.

For him to be here, and I saw him and we got a picture with the trophy after, it means a lot to me.

Q. My question is, when you shanked your drive on 6 into the ninth fairway, when you were coming out, when you hit out, did you hit the lip of the bunker or did you hit a tree?

SAHITH THEEGALA: I didn't do either, actually. I chunked it. Both times, both times I hit in the fairway bunker today I needed to hit like a chippy hook and both times I just got under, I just got under and chunked it both times, so I just chunked it.

I saw it hit the tree softly and I was like, oh, boy, I hit it right behind that group of oaks there. I got lucky, I had a little opening behind the trees and the bark.

Yeah, just flat out chunked it. And I knew right when I hit that tee shot on 6, I literally hit it right of the cart path maybe onto the other hole, I was just really hoping it wasn't in that bunker because it's probably the bunker with the biggest lip on property.

Yeah, I just chunked it. I was happy to walk away with 5 there.

Q. You were talking all week about playing more loose. Every time you got in trouble today with a bogey or something, a couple holes later you bounced right back.

How important was that for you to shake those bad holes off and get right back on track?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, I feel like that's been a strength of my game for so long. I just, I feel like my bounce-back stats are pretty good. I have a pretty short memory on and off the golf course. I don't remember a lot of things. You can ask my girlfriend back there, I really

don't remember that well. It works out well in golf, works out well in golf. I have a short memory, for sure.

I feel like you definitely have a vibe at the beginning of the week whether you're playing well or not, and when you're in the heat of the moment, you don't really think of that, but this week I just felt so relaxed and felt like my game was in a really good place. I probably practiced more than most of the guys in this field leading up because I was so fired up about not making East Lake, and I was disappointed and I had a hard time putting the sticks away for a bit. I just kept reminding myself that I'm playing really well.

And my caddie, Carl, does an incredible job. We'll make a bogeys and our conversation from the last fairway won't change. We hardly talk about golf, to be honest. We talk about basketball, sports, cars, life, you name it. So just him keeping kind of a consistent vibe throughout has also really helped after a battle.

Q. You've talked in the past about your pride and your heritage.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah.

Q. I'm curious how much this win, especially on the heels of Akshay winning earlier this summer, there's a lot of people in India.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah.

Q. How much can this mean for golf in India, do you think, and how much does that matter to you? Obviously you were born and raised here, I understand.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah.

Q. But with that sort of background and the family connection?

SAHITH THEEGALA: No, it means a lot to me because a lot of my family's still back in India. I'm very proud of my Indian heritage. I just love seeing other Indians sort of rise to the occasion in sports.

Neeraj winning a couple gold medals, I think it was the first gold medal in track and field for javelin. That's huge for the country.

I was really lucky to play with Shubhankar in the practice round and meet his hole team and his dad and his coach. He had a great showing there, I was pulling for him so hard. One of the nicest guys I've ever met. I think he finished like seventh there. He's been having a nice little resurgent season kind of.

Anirban texts me all the time and he's obviously been great for the Indian game, too. Obviously with Akshay winning and Aaron Rai finishing second at the BMW, so a lot of really

cool like role models and people to look up to for the Indian people.

And hopefully we're breaking some stereotypes about athleticism and competing in sport and all that.

It means a lot to me, for sure. There's a lot of things I do in daily life where that stems from my culture and my heritage. My parents are the first ones from their family to be in the States. Yeah, means a lot, and I think hopefully this is the start of something really good for Indian sports.

Q. A year and a half ago at Scottsdale you come so close.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah.

Q. And just today you come out of the gate like nobody's going to touch me. Were you thinking like that, I'm just going to go out and get this, grab this thing?

SAHITH THEEGALA: It's funny you mention that. I think that's the last 54 -- I've only had -- this might have been my third. I vividly remember I got this weird feeling on hole 5 today. I was in that greenside bunker and I looked over at the leaderboard kind of on accident and I saw a three-shot lead, and I remember making a putt on hole 5 the last round at Waste Management to have a two or maybe a three -- at least a two-shot lead.

I just remember thinking today, it's like I want way more than that. I want to just keep playing how I've been playing the whole week and see how far ahead I can get.

I remember at Waste Management I remember thinking I've got a couple tough holes coming up, like I've just got to hold in there and stay around the lead. It was nice to be able to draw back on that. I hit that bunker shot to a foot, which was really nice. Yeah, it was a hole --

I was so, so much calmer today. At Waste I was just kind of thrown in with all the top guys in the world and that might have been my 10th PGA TOUR start that year on a sponsor invite.

Yeah, much calmer and chiller atmosphere this week and I think that helped.

But just drawing off of that experience was big because I just remember how much that hurt. I'm such a competitor and that one really, really hurt. I thought I did it all to put myself in a position to win and to not come away with that, it hurt. But it was such a good learning experience knowing that it's legitimately not done until the last putt drops. It's not done.

So I definitely draw on that one, and Sanderson Farms my first year, too. I draw on those two experiences a lot, and now I'm glad I have one where I get the job done.

Q. Can you speak about your father and the inspiration he was to you growing up?

I believe he also encouraged family members, young family members to get out on the course with you?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, my dad's the reason I'm here today. He introduced me to all sports, most specifically basketball and golf. Just loved watching it on TV with him.

All he knew when he came from India was academics and to study. Him and my mom did such a good job of just kind of learning how to almost hybrid parent between this Indian culture and American culture and let me play sports, let me spend a lot of time on sports. Put me in basketball club, and my mom drove me to so many practices when my dad was still at work.

Just the combined efforts of them to kind of understand that this was my dream and my passion, and then for it to become their dream and their passion, especially my dad.

My dad, he just loves sports. He's a competitor, too, although he's never really, really played sports.

Yeah, I think at first it was hard for maybe some of my family and even friends to understand why I was trying to chase playing professional golf. Seems like kind of a pipe dream, but my dad had my back the whole time. He just believed in me from the start and knew that this could be a thing.

It's tough not to get emotional just thinking about everything he's done. He's always had my back, even through my wrist surgery in 2018 and '19 thinking I might never play again, him just having my back and keep on pushing me.

He also did such a good job of -- he was really hard on me, but also one of my best friends. Always told me to have fun, the main thing was to just enjoy it, because if you don't enjoy it, there's no purpose in doing it, life's too short.

Yeah, it was just such a right combination. Now he's the happiest person I know. Zack's the most optimistic I know, my dad's right there with him.

Yeah, it means the world to me. My mother keeps him in check, for sure. My mom keeps him in check. Sometimes he loses a touch of reality a little bit, but they make a good duo.

Q. You shared with us that you're really comfortable with the Silverado north course. How did that affect your strategy going out there with the lead on the final round?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, it actually affected it quite a bit. I'm realizing how awesome it is to come back to a golf course over and over. I was lucky enough to come back to a lot of courses the second time this year, and coming back here for the fourth time, I felt like I've played here a million times, especially in tournament conditions.

Because it's tough to replicate tournament conditions. You can play a golf course -- for example, LACC -- 40, 50 times, but to play in a tournament was totally different. To play this golf course with so many rounds, there's just certain holes where like hitting driver on 4 is kind of an intuitive thing where I feel comfortable doing that because I know exactly where the lines are and where the little branches are that it could hit, just little stuff like that.

Definitely helped me out on the greens. There are a lot of greens that are really, really tough reads, but because I've hit those putts or similar putts before. Again, it's a little bit intuitive just seeing some of the breaks better.

There's a couple holes out here, which I think is big, where the short-side's actually better, where if you leave it long side on some of these holes, you have a really, really tough two-putt. Sometimes it's just better firing at the pins.

I was a little more aggressive with the iron game especially on the par 3s. Yeah, just a combination of everything.

And I'm a west coast guy, so I feel I do really well on kikuyu and poa. And these greens, shout out to the grounds crew, they kept them really, really pure, and it's hard to keep poa pure in the afternoons, but they were rolling true.

Q. It feels like we've seen you grow a bunch in a myriad of ways over these last couple years, but I've heard you talk quite a few times about your body and some of the work you've done with Josh.

What are you able to do -- what has that made you able to do or how has that changed you as a player?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, I feel like I've said a few things, the most important thing to me, but really we only have one body. I've learned throughout the years that I just want to be healthy.

You know, whether that's putting more work in in the gym or taking more rest days, me and Josh just figured out I just need to be healthy. I've kind of had a new commitment to the gym, probably started later in college. My trainer in college was pretty hard on me, too, but I was already working with Josh, which was great. The strides we've made the last few years has been incredible.

Strength-wise, I'm really not a whole lot stronger. I definitely am stronger, but my flexibility's way better, my mobility's better, my stamina's really good. I never get off a golf course tired anymore, which is awesome. My back and wrist have been two big things that we've really worked hard to keep healthy, and knock on wood, I've been healthy since my surgery. Haven't missed a single event because of injury in four-plus years.

It's tough. This game is so taxing, especially I love the game and I play a lot so it's very taxing. But I feel like we're on a really good path and he definitely knows what he's doing and he knows my body really well.

We have another -- we just sat down last week. I was down in L.A., went to see him in the gym and we kind of set out a plan for what we want to improve on this year, what we did well last year.

And yeah, one of the big things also, I asked a bunch of guys my rookie year about like, hey, is there like just one overarching piece of advice that you'd say, and a lot of them said just take care of your body from an early stage.

I completely understand why so many guys spend so much time and money on recovery and training and doing all that because you just have your one body and you need to be as close to 100 percent as you can be week in and week out to be consistent. I'm definitely taking that more seriously.

Q. And second, do you have a primary swing thought or is there anything that you consistently go to?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yes. I have -- it changes from week to week, but I've based my whole game kind of around the anti-left. My whole life I've taken the left side of the golf course out of play, whether that be aiming way right and slinging it left or aiming left and working off the trouble. Whenever I get a little bit wayward, I just go back to -- a lot of -- it starts from my setup, but the one kind of swing thought and key that I have to kind of take the left side of the golf course out is just turn my body a hair more through impact and swing just a touch more left.

Me and my coach Rick have been working so hard on setup, takeaway, rhythm, all that. We don't really mess with my positions or swing much, but I think we're on the same page about taking the left side of the golf course out of play.

Today I hit a couple left with the 3-iron and I noticed I had a pretty nice lead. But 16, that 3-iron I hit on 16 kind of was the one where I took the left side out of play, just kind of leaned on it a hair and hit a really nice cut in there after missing a couple 3-irons left. That's kind of the overarching one I would say that I have pretty consistently.

Q. When you won last December at QBE, you said that your dreams didn't get past getting your Tour card.

What do those dreams look like now for you?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, I think I'm going to have to do a little reevaluation.

I've never been super result or goal oriented in my golf. I just -- you guys are probably sick of

hearing me say this, but I'm just trying to make progress and stick to the process and just try and get .0001 percent better. Even that much better is good enough for me. Obviously trying to get the most out of it.

Yeah, I never -- my dream was always to get my Tour card. Did I think I was going to get it? Yes. I didn't know when. I knew I was going to work my butt off to try and get it, and it really didn't go further than that.

My dad's always had the belief in me that I could come out here and compete and win. But as a player, I feel like you don't have that belief until you do it necessarily. You know, now I do have that belief because it actually happened.

But yeah, I don't even know what my dreams are going on from here. I think it's just to keep giving it all I have and doing it for my friends and family and everyone that supports me. Just seeing how far I can go in this game, just trying to get better. I really am addicted to just seeing how much better I can be. Being around some of the top players in the game a lot more recently has fired me up even more just to see if I can be in the mix as kind of one of those guys.

Yeah, I guess I'm just going to keep sticking to what I've been doing. I think it would probably be easy to get sucked into certain things or looking at stuff different ways, but I'm going to keep looking at it the same way I have been and just do my thing.

Q. You've talked about all week kind of -- or just going back that you're not someone who thinks about winning, you just want to get in contention is what you've said.

Is there a point today where you really let yourself think about a win and what it would mean?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, there was a point. It was after I hit the tee shot on 17. Yeah, I really -- you know, again, I've been lucky enough to kind of win at the junior, collegiate and I should say pro, but like the mini-tour level.

I can't stress enough how good the game -- like how good golf is right now. The guys on the mini-tour, the level of golf they're playing is pretty crazy. I think a lot of people don't realize how high a level of golf those guys are playing. They're just a few weeks away from playing on the PGA TOUR, they can compete.

There's a lot of examples of it, Akshay being one of them, Ryan Gerard. There's a lot of guys that kind of had no status and played their way on.

I know how hard it is to win and compete on a weekly basis. That's why I feel like I don't think about winning that much.

Again, I've just been lucky to win at every level. That's kind of been my way of going about it

is just put yourself in contention as many times as possible because that means -- means that there's a little more consistency to my game, which is kind of always what I've leaned on.

I haven't been a guy that gets extremely, extremely hot and then goes extremely cold for a long time. I kind of just have a high floor I feel like, and I'm trying to expand that ceiling, get that ceiling higher.

But yeah, I just -- the whole time today I just wanted to keep the pedal down. Really tried to not look at leaderboards at all on the front. Caught one on 5. I didn't really even have a target score in mind, I just knew if I put it in the right positions, I can go low out here.

I think the greens were -- I thought they would be a touch firmer today, but they were probably the same as yesterday so I was able to get aggressive with some iron shots.

Yeah, I didn't think about winning until 17. I hit the tee shot, and I wish I did a little better on the last hole, but I really wanted to go for it. I'll put that on Carl.

Carl's strokes gained caddying this week was through the roof. He caddied like a -- actually for the year it's been incredible. It's better than all my stats combined, but I'll give him a minus one caddying on 18. I wanted to go for it, blast it by the green but he wanted me to lay up and I laid up. Just a terrible layup shot in the rough, but it's all good, I guess. A win's a win.

MODERATOR: Perfect. That's all the question we have. Sahith, again, congrats on that first win. Thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Thank you, Haley. Thank you, guys.