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WILL ZALATORIS

JACK RYAN: We would like to welcome Will Zalatoris into the interview room here at the Hero World Challenge. Will is making his first start since the 2023 WGC Dell Technologies Match Play.

Will, just to get started, what have the last couple months been like and how's the recovery going?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, it's been -- it's been an interesting seven months. You know, kind of a golfer's worst nightmare is feeling your back giving out on the driving range at Augusta 30 minutes before your tee time.

But no, it's been a patience game. It's been a grind, you know, to -- I had a lot of really good advice from guys that have had to go through the same thing and all of them said take your time, no one's ever come back from an injury taking too long.

You know, I think I really started hitting balls probably a couple months ago. Really each week has just progressively gotten a little bit better. I was on a pretty strict ball count, strict amount of time of how much I could practice. Had to spend a lot of time doing rehab basically six days a week. You know, so it's been -- I know way more about the anatomy now than I think I ever really wanted to, but I feel really good right now.

I knew that when I hurt my back in Delaware, you know, I was basically asked by my surgeon, he said, look, there's two routes you can take; you can either do your surgery or you can, you know, do a couple shots and do some rehab and take the prudent route. Which really, you know, you don't ever really know coming back from a surgery what you're going to feel like, especially I think then I was -- I think I was 25 or might have been 26, but no surgeon wants to go in and do back surgery on someone that's 26.

So the patience side of it, you know, when I came back in January I still didn't really feel 100 percent. I tried probably to change a little too much in what I was doing and kind of got away from my DNA of who I am as a golfer.

The other kind of the mental side of it, too, I had been on kind of cruise control of two years of just this steady progression, being in contention at majors, I think not really giving myself the time to fully kind of appreciate kind of where I was physically. I still had the same speed and everything, and it's fun to see now week by week from the first day I started hitting drivers to where I am now, you know, it's kind of fun. I've got almost all my team here and we were kind of laughing because I haven't hit balls -- what, it's been over 55 degrees and I'm seeing ball speeds that I had back when I was healthy.



It's -- like I said, each week it's been fun to see the progression.

JACK RYAN: Looking ahead to your debut here at the Hero World Challenge, why did this week make sense to play your first event in that stretch?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, you know, I had a goal of playing this fall but it was just too soon in my opinion of where I was at. I thought it would have been a little -- needed to be prudent on the timing of it. My surgeon actually really wanted me to play RSM, but when I saw the rain delays, that made me pretty happy I didn't play.

You know, playing 72 holes, having everybody here, playing obviously against the best players in the world, even though this week is an unofficial event, it's still really good for me to get 72 holes and kind of see where I'm at.

Q. Will, it strikes me just listening to you that the last seven months must have been a challenging, emotional, frustrating time. I'm curious what the biggest challenge was for you to overcome.

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I think when I go from ramping up to Augusta, hurt my back on Thursday and then Saturday I'm already having surgery, it's a big swing of emotions. I think the first five, six weeks was probably the hardest.

Then once I was able to kind of just live life, I went back to school, stayed really busy in that aspect. Slowly started -- you know, I think it was probably in the two and a half, three month range of when I was actually able to go out and like be productive and practice.

But like I said, it was just such a slow build-up. One of the more frustrating things was actually I was told I can't play more than three days in a row. I think this was at maybe month five. I had shot like 63-65-64 at home and I was like the last thing I want to do is not play golf tomorrow, especially with the months that I had leading up to that.

But it was really good to be at home. It was weird. You know, it's something that I just -- out of traveling as much as I do, like at home I leave all my stuff in my backpack. It's like, you know, I can actually put stuff away in drawers and not like live on the road.

There was some really fun aspects of that. We did some kind of bucket list traveling once I was healthy enough just to stay busy, really before we end up having kids, going to Wimbledon, knocking off things like that. So we stayed busy and it was a lot of fun during that time. Obviously my mind was still on golf.

Q. When you say you went back to school, what did that consist of?

WILL ZALATORIS: It was pretty funny taking some elective classes when all the kids were 18, 19 in the summers and I'm 27 and I'm writing my resume for work and, you know, a



Linked In account and whatnot. There were some pretty funny aspects in there.

When I left school, I finished up my major but I just had elective classes and it made it real easy to just kind of finish it up.

Q. Think you're getting a job with that resume?

WILL ZALATORIS: So far. So far, so good.

Q. Just going back to the injury a little bit. You said kind of in between when you took the rest off after BMW to when you played again, you did a little bit of changing maybe the swing. Now with the surgery is it still a thing where you're tweaking a little bit of stuff in your swing to release some tension or are you able -- are the doctors saying you could swing the way you have without worrying?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, so I think when I came back, I kind of was going away a little bit of my DNA of who I am as a golfer. I've always been a very hyperdynamic -- my left foot's off the ground like J.T.

Well, the reality is that actually put a lot of stress on my back, and I had a bunch of side bend and maybe my posture wasn't perfect, but my three years on Tour, my worst strokes gained approach was second on Tour. The last thing I wanted to do was change anything.

I think some of the changes that I made were kind of hard to quantify because I could hit it good doing those changes, but I also could hit it really good not doing those changes and it could end up being a detriment.

It wasn't so much of the one, you know, playing four rounds coming back I guess from January through April when I got hurt again, it was more of the second week and the third week that I really was not able to kind of function.

It's something that I've battled for a couple years. I hurt my back probably for the first time like four, five years ago, but it was just, you know, a golfer being a golfer, you know. Just being young and wiry and swinging really hard and pull a muscle. OK, take a couple weeks off.

But really the structural stuff that happened kind of stems back a little bit to the British Open from a couple years back. Then I would even say, you know, the surgery that I had actually was a huge benefit in the sense that I didn't really -- like really thin, wiry people, they don't have a lot of room in their back typically. I had had like some stuff that had popped up, your body tries to heal it, which that ends up putting in less space. So clearing all that stuff out, you know.

I'm probably one of the only people that's gone through back surgery and has actually had better range of motion. It was the stability coming back that was really the hard part.



Q. Just comparing to where you were in Memphis when you won to now, is it pretty comparable in terms of ball speeds and where you're at kind of pre/post?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah. Like I said, it's really interesting because this is -- you know, I really started hitting balls when the weather started getting a little bit cooler back home. You know, yesterday on the range I was -- had a couple of 178s. I think when I was in competition, I was -- ball speed maybe was getting up to the 182, 184 range. Again, even then through 2022, my best year so far, the third week I was still needing treatment, needing some rehab.

So now having a much better understanding of my body and knowing what it takes, like today even just playing nine holes, probably did two hours of work. It's really not as much about the warm-up pre-round as it is the post-round stuff just because if I go play golf for three days in a row, or if any of us do it, you might get a little change in your posture or whatever.

Well, the difference is for me, you know, when I was in college I could just go play 14 days in a row and didn't matter. I played seven in a row my first year out on Tour and didn't have any issues.

The difference is now where I would be a guy that would love, if I had the first week of a stretch, I'd love to go maybe on a Sunday, maybe go play another golf course or go see some friends, or maybe even play nine holes or whatever. But the difference is now I've played a lot of these courses, pretty much all of them, so I don't need to show up that early and I don't need to spend as much time out on the golf course or really on the driving range. It's really just get the conditions, you know, see how that we can's playing and go from there.

Really what we're doing is simplifying stuff. I got to spend a little bit of time with Tiger at NEXUS Cup and really, I mean, he really asked me more questions than really -- than I was able to. It was also the questions that he asked were really kind of thought provoking.

So now as opposed to just looking at videos down the line and face on, I'm looking at videos from my rear side and seeing how my back's doing and seeing how I'm moving.

Q. I was going to ask, how many conversations have you had with Tiger about this seeing how you went through the same surgery?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, so we had the same surgeon. You know, really just at the NEXUS Cup was when we got to talk a little bit about it. His was obviously a lot of -- a lot worse and a much different surgery than what I had had. He's obviously, I think he's had a microdiscectomy or two.

But it was more of not changing who I am as a golfer and my golf swing, but just refining things to where they're a little bit more simple.



So I had always had a big reverse C in my golf swing. Well, the reality is now I'm way more rotational and way more horizontal with what I do as opposed to being more up and down.

Like I said, it's more -- it's just simplifying stuff. It's not changing moves, it's not changing what I'm doing, it's just, you know, think it through, left heel off the ground with a bunch of side bend, that just does not end up to feeling very good on your back.

So really like the one thing that, you know, Troy Denton, my coach, and I have worked on is keep that left heel on the ground. Having the left heel up at impact, yeah, maybe you might get a couple more miles an hour ball speed, but the part I've kind of enjoyed about it is I'm driving it straighter even though it might be 10 yards shorter. I think my best year on Tour I was 150th in fairways hit, so anything I could do better on that end by far.

Q. And less about the physical and more about the mental, what was the most challenging part of the last few months? I guess watching the majors, watching the Ryder Cup, did anything sort of hit home and resonate with you?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I think it was more of just the timeline of, you know, you're given basically what I was told was at 12 weeks, structurally you will be at the strongest point that you'll be at, but you'll have to build back up the stability and that could take 12 weeks on top of that, it could take you six.

So really for the first little while it was just about being able to walk downstairs, walk around my house. Couldn't pick up my dogs for four, five months. Just simple stuff.

Now it's the little things that add up. Like if I travel, I'm not carrying a backpack. I don't sit on barstools just because that's like actually pretty harsh on your disks. It's just little things that add up.

Especially when I came back, like there were a few times when I felt I maybe might have pulled something or whatever, but I knew it was nothing detrimental, it was just part of the comeback.

The line, it was not a straight-line recovery by any means. So I think, like I said, the patience and not knowing when exactly I would come back. I knew it was going to be sometime in the fall, but taking that extra, you know, month I guess of -- since I've really been hitting drivers I think was really helpful and I learned a lot in terms of what I needed to work on. You know, like the left foot stuff, getting a little bit more rotational in general throughout my golf swing, which in reality adds to better consistency and accuracy.

You know, I would definitely say the toughest point was early on, just having no timeline. Having a general idea, but not you're going to be out for this amount of time before you can start chipping and putting. It was I had to clear a lot of hoops before I could get there.



Q. All these back explanations are making my back uncomfortable again.

Curious, did you play that fourth round in a row after those three really --

WILL ZALATORIS: No.

Q. You did not?

WILL ZALATORIS: No. Trust me, between my surgeon and my wife making sure that I did everything to a T, I was definitely doing everything exactly as I was told.

Q. And where did you -- where were you playing?

WILL ZALATORIS: I was playing over at Brook Hollow, a place where I play at in Dallas.

Q. You obviously haven't played competitive golf for quite a while. What's a good week or a successful week, or are you here thinking I'm ready to win a tournament?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I've been playing some nice golf at home, for sure.

I think this week is a lot of almost kind of R&D with let's see how I feel going into the last round physically. You know, this week I'm going to be able to take a lot away from it, you know, regardless of how I play. You know, obviously I have very high expectations for myself and I know what I'm capable of doing even just in one week, but there's little things that once you come back and start playing, where if I hit a certain club 150 yards, well, you throw adrenaline in there and I might hit it 157. Well, seven yards on Tour, you could be plugged in a bunker or you could be over the back of the green and have nothing.

So the little things kind of like the feels of playing a round and playing through wind and playing through different conditions, there will be a build-up to it. I'm not going to -- I'm not really -- you know, I don't have a certain score or place or whatever. It's more of if I put 72 holes together pain free and we're able to take away a lot of things of what I can work on over the next month before I start up for the next year, you know, either way it's a positive.

Q. Now, obviously as young as you are and your trajectory's just going up, up, up, how much harder does that make this that you're suddenly just having to wait and put that on hold?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, you know, I kind of -- like 2023 I almost just kind of threw it in the bag and, you know, kind of -- there was a lot to learn physically on my end. So I feel like I know myself better physically, know myself better mentally. So I think there's going to be a lot of positives that are going to come from this time off. It's not like I just sat around and didn't even watch golf or think about golf. I was watching guys every day seeing how some of my buddies were playing. So my mind was always there, but when you're not able to have a club in your hand...

And my mission every day is to try to get better, whether it's in the gym, whether it's just thinking through other things. You know, I think like I said there's a lot of positives that come from that time off, even though 2023 for me was kind of a loss year.

Q. When you said your microdiscectomy surgery was a lot simpler than Tiger's, let me just ask you, what does your appreciation of what Tiger had to go through and the fact that like you he's making his umpteenth number of comeback this week?

WILL ZALATORIS: It's ridiculous. There's no other way to put it. What he's doing and what he's gone through with his body, especially to come back and win another major after everything that he had gone through.

And mine, like I said, was on a much lesser scale without knowing exactly what he had done. It's mind blowing to me in so many aspects. And we all appreciated it. I remember watching on the range on my iPad when he won the Masters and I remember even having like a little bit of a tear in my eye thinking through what that guy had to go through to win another major.

Yeah, this was my first time really having any sort of surgery in my entire life and going through that recovery process. The fact that he's had to go through so much and still be as good as he is, even up in his late 40s now, still being able to go out and just play in majors is just -- there's no -- there's no other words to put it besides just putting it in the list of remarkable things that that guy's done in his career.

Q. Was the 2019 Masters win kind of motivating factor for you during these last few months?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah. You know, I think the beauty on my end is that I'm only 27 and I have a lot of golf ahead of me. The fact that he did it in his 40s and had gone through I think multiple back surgeries and let alone what's gone on with his knee and his leg and everything is just, I can't put words in it.

I was told early on that injuries and surgeries are almost as much mental as they are physical, and we all know that he's one of the strongest mental people -- strongest people mentally on the planet. Now having a better appreciation for it, like I said, it's truly remarkable.

Q. Was a microdiscectomy broached as a possibility in the fall of 2022 before you played in the spring and what were sort of the pros and cons of that? Was the idea to try everything you could to avoid it?

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, just because of my age, you know, I'm able to heal faster than others. At that age the recovery time was going to be the same, but there was no guarantee that a microdiscectomy was going to be better than the rehab and the shots and everything



that I had gone through. It was definitely considered, but it was not recommended.

And the beauty of my surgeon and my team over at Texas Back Institute and Mike Duffy, they laid everything on the table and they sent my MRIs and everything to dozens of other practices. When I'm able to sit there and have, you know, over 20 different practices confirming exactly that I'm going down the right path, even though that time-wise I couldn't stand the timeline of it, was very reassuring and there were no second guesses.

Q. Did Tiger recommend you be patient? There's a sense that he wasn't with the first one, the very first one that he had.

WILL ZALATORIS: Yeah, I can't speak to his side of it on what his surgeries and everything that he had to go through. But again, like not only just him but a lot of the guys, especially some Champions Tour guys where they've played 20-plus years competitively where they said, look, you're 27 years old, take your time. There's no reason for you to rush back into the fall and try to find your game and possibly have to reinjure yourself. Just do everything as slow as possible.

I think that gave -- like I said, it gave me a lot of reassurance that I was going down the right path. And like I said, as a golfer I'm extremely impatient, but I knew that there was -- the end was in sight. And like I said, the toughest thing was really just not knowing exactly when I was going to come back.

JACK RYAN: Will, thank you very much for your time and good to have you back here.

WILL ZALATORIS: Thanks.

