

PRE-TOURNAMENT PRESS CONFERENCE
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AKSHAY BHATIA
AARON RAI
SAHITH THEEGALA

MARK WILLIAMS: All right, everybody, thanks for joining us and we would like to welcome this unique trio of players, Akshay Bhatia, Sahith Theegala and Aaron Rai.

Just a few months ago these three players reached the Tour Championship together. All players from Indian origin, which is really, really unique that three did that in a 30-man field. Now they're here together in a 20-man field, so pretty significant.

We'll just start off with a couple of questions each and we'll hand it over to the media for some questions.

Sahith, happy birthday.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Thank you.

MARK WILLIAMS: Sahith, I just want to ask you first about your season. The Presidents Cup must have been a highlight for you, making that team, being on the same team as the world No. 1 Scottie Scheffler, and you're paired with him tomorrow in the first round. Just speak to that a little bit and how meaningful that is.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, it meant the world to me. I'm not a huge goal setter, but one of my goals last year was to make that Presidents Cup team.

It was very fulfilling to make it, especially not being picked, just to make it on points. To knock that goal off was awesome. Getting to spend time with some of the best players in the world in that kind of intimate team setting is so different than how they are on a day-to-day basis. It was really awesome because I got to know them outside of their competitive golf self. That's one of the highlights of my golfing career for sure. The camaraderie during that event was insane.

Yeah, the season as a whole last year was an incredible success. I'm very lucky -- actually one of my main goals every year is just to stay healthy for the whole year and I did a good job of that last year and I felt like I played really well consistently throughout the year. Didn't get a win but just wanted to put myself as close as possible in contention on the weekends. That's kind of my goal moving forward.

Yeah, last year was awesome, and to be paired with Scottie fresh off some time off is a little humbling. I'm going to hit my first couple shots and compared to his first couple shots, like



OK, world No. 1 there by a lot. Yeah, just excited to be here.

MARK WILLIAMS: Akshay, we'll come to you next. You've been in the Bahamas before, you won on the Korn Ferry Tour, I believe you played in the pro-am here last year, but I also believe that as a kid you followed Tiger Woods around at Sherwood when the event was there.

What's it like now for you to actually be in this tournament competing?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I feel like it's a pretty iconic event. I grew up not too far from Sherwood where they used to host it. Just watching that, I was there when Zach Johnson and Tiger went to that playoff and it was the coolest thing ever.

But playing in this event for the first time is unbelievable. I've always wanted to be a part of this event. Last year being in the pro-am and seeing all the 20 guys, not being part of the field was motivation to make it here because it's such a, you know, fun, small, laid back event that it's a nice starter before the season gets going again. It's really nice to be here.

MARK WILLIAMS: And Aaron, we'll come to you. I recall when you first came to the PGA TOUR and you played at the Genesis Invitational, which Tiger's foundation is involved with, and you had never seen him in the flesh and you said to me that you weren't in the pro-am so you were going to go out and follow him for a few holes. Then yesterday you're here and winning the Hero Shot right in front of Tiger Woods. So what's that experience been like for you?

AARON RAI: Yeah, it's been amazing. Like a lot of golfers of this generation, I would have grown up idolizing him. Being able to watch him play nine holes was amazing even a couple years ago at Riviera, to meet him, to watch him up close and personal, see how he prepares, shots that he plays was an absolute privilege for me.

When I got the invite to play this week, I think I was on a high for the next few days that followed it. When I found out about the Hero Challenge, I was incredibly nervous yesterday teeing it up. I think Akshay was in the same position there. Yeah, just an amazing experience to be here playing his event and to be around him, it's a true privilege.

Q. How strange is it, for all three of you -- I mean, we try to own those of Indian origin because we don't have an Indian player on the PGA TOUR, we used to, but at the same time all three of you actually have different goals, you want to play the Ryder Cup, you want to play the Presidents Cup. You know, like Aaron has I'm sure dreams of getting to the Ryder Cup and both of you do. How different is it, how difficult is it to balance those kind of nationalistic goals, because there is a lot of following for you in India?

SAHITH THEEGALA: I guess I'll start on it. It is interesting because I personally just am -- I love both sides of it. I love my Indian culture and heritage. I was just in India a few weeks



ago. Just all the positive feedback and all the love I get from there is incredible. It's the first time I've been back since I've turned professional.

It's awesome both ways because they're my family and they just love me -- we're just family, right? They'll say congrats on your career and then forget about it. Careers don't matter. It was really cool to see how much they watch me, how much they cheer me on and it motivates me more as well.

Got to talk with a couple family friends and family over there that started playing golf because I had success playing golf in the States, so that means a lot to me and it's important.

This year's been eye opening. A lot of Indian kids and minorities in general have come up and stated that they play golf because of me or they play sports because of me, and I never would have thought that.

It's just been awesome. I think when -- I can't speak for these guys but I think we're all on a similar page, we're super competitive, so whatever goals we have in front such as making Presidents Cups, Ryder Cup, we just want to get there however we can and hopefully the game speaks for itself.

Yeah, it's been awesome to be able to represent both sides because I was born and brought up in California, in LA, and I'm proud of that, but I love -- my whole family's Indian and I love the culture and love the heritage and love that I can be a representative for them as well.

Q. Aaron and Akshay?

AARON RAI: I think Sahith summarized it really well there. Half of my upbringing is very British, but again all of my close family is Indian origin. That culture runs very deep even in British Asians. Certainly this year has felt different for me even being in the U.K. with kind of British Asian kids and families taking more of an interest in following a couple of events that I played in Europe which really felt quite different.

It's amazing to hopefully all three of us to set good examples. I think that's all we can do. Whatever effect that it has is something that we can't control, but I think if we keep playing well on the course and keep holding ourselves the right way away from the course, then hopefully it's only going to create positivity and that's all we can ask for.

In terms of achievements and goals moving forward, I'm not really a big goal setter, but I think if you keep focusing on progress and improving and keep trying to become a better version of yourself in whichever way that is from a golf perspective, mind perspective, body perspective, then hopefully after a period of time you get to these points, whether it's a Presidents Cup, whether it's a Ryder Cup, and yeah, hopefully those things happen as a result in the future.



Yeah, it's a privilege to be in this position. It's great to be up here with Sahith and Akshay, great guys as well as great golfers, and I think that's even more important than how good their games are.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, exactly what they said. Obviously I think all of us being fairly young and relatively new to the Tour, just to be able to grow the game and inspire kids and inspire athletes in the U.S. and in India is pretty amazing.

I'm hoping to get there really soon, go to India. My mom's at a wedding this week there. Either had to spend three days at a wedding there or come here. It's such a blessing for us that we just play golf, but yeah, we can inspire kids who want to be like us one day. I'm sure we're going to do a good job of kind of representing what we want to. It's such a blessing for me.

As far as goals, I mean, I never was a goal setter until this year. Changed my whole perspective, week to week I change my goals. Whatever I was feeling that week or whatever spoke to me is kind of what I envisioned. Yeah, I mean, Ryder Cups, Presidents Cups, I feel like the biggest achievements to make those teams. After not making the Presidents Cup team this year, being close, knowing I was close, it's more motivation to do it next year for the Ryder Cup. I mean, we've got long careers ahead of us, so hopefully we'll be on a lot of teams.

Q. I wanted to ask you, in India we keep saying that we manage to produce champions despite the system, you know? The system has not really helped our athletes or in many other fields to reach the level if they did not have, as I've seen in all three of your cases, the kind of family support and the parent support that you guys have.

Aaron, growing out of the English golf system and his father supporting him and always being with him. Sahith, you have your parents that I know your stories. Akshay, you didn't go through the college system, which is such a defiant pathway in the U.S. I just wanted to hear from you how important that family support has been and if you can give us an appreciation of how different it has been for you guys.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, family's everything, especially in our culture. We support everyone. But when you're an athlete and you have people sacrificing everything for you, putting all their effort toward you to hope to be successful, it's a big -- you know, it's a big thing because, you know, this life's not easy. Life's never easy, but when you have family you can come back to that no matter what love, support you, you know, it's a huge impact on how we are as people and how we are as athletes.

So it is -- it's so important, you never take it for granted, especially realizing how much they did for you even though you could be a knucklehead from time to time.

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, I've been lucky enough to meet Akshay's parents and Aaron's



parents and they're some of the greatest people I met and completely checks out with the kind of people these guys are. I have the greatest set of parents as well.

It was a tough balance. I give them all the credit in the world because I don't know how they did it, you know, growing up in India and then trying to balance the academic, the cultural, the new society, new life they live in California. They were able to balance it out so well with me and my brother, giving me not only athletic opportunities but instilling academic importance. A lot of that was my mom, for sure. My dad took care of a lot of the sports side. Practices, both of them. I would be nowhere without them, and my brother as well.

Yeah, a lot of credit to them. I don't know how they did it with so much unknown, especially because what you said, the system. I get my yearly updates from Shubhankar when I play with him at the Scottish.

The system is tough in India and I know it's getting better, we're pouring more money and more resources and better coaching and just kind of developing kids from a younger age to have success in sport. I know a lot of the money's still being eaten up by cricket, but it seems like there's more programs and more good things going in that stance.

I expect to see a lot of great athletes coming out of India soon and great athletes of Indian origin around the world. Yeah, I think it's obvious to say, without familial support, you can be the greatest athlete in the world, but without my parents I would not be here right now.

AARON RAI: Yeah, I think family support is probably the biggest part of the journey to get to this point and I think still continue family support and the people around you. I think because golf isn't necessarily the biggest sport in an Indian background, whether you're from an Indian or American background or an English background, that there's a lot to learn about the sport to encourage your child to figure out what the best path forward.

I was extremely fortunate with my dad, he was very good at tennis but then put a lot into my golf from a young age. My mom worked a couple of jobs and kind of took care of the house stuff. So they worked together amazingly as a team. My siblings were amazing growing up as well.

It takes a lot of understanding and a lot, as Akshay said, sacrifice to even get to this point. You realize when you get to the PGA TOUR and some of the higher levels of golf that it just keeps on going because everyone around us just that much better and it keeps pushing you to be better.

I think it's not just it has to be that way to get to a point, I think it's a way that you have to embody, it's a way that the family has to embody and the people around you to keep growing and to keep getting better. I think that's something that even if the system isn't the best around you in terms of whether it's English golf or American golf or Indian golf, but if you have that kind of bubble around you that is all pushing in the direction and has a lot of support, then I think you can achieve anything you set your mind to.



In terms of the Indian system, I'm not really familiar with the opportunities that are available. I think this sport is growing from what I can see. I think there is some really good examples of Indian golfers as well around the world on the Asian Tour, on the European Tour, there's a good pathway from the Indian Tour to now get to the DP World Tour. I think all of these things will continue to improve over time.

As Sahith said, I think in the future, whether it's golf or other sports it's only going to become more popular and there are only going to be more Indian athletes in the future.

Q. If you create one of the great images in golf this year when you celebrated Bob MacIntyre's winning putt on the balcony of the Renaissance Club, how enjoyable was that for you and how nice is it that both of you are here this week?

SAHITH THEEGALA: Yeah, that was an awesome moment. I think the media painted it out in a very favorable for me. Honestly, I love watching the finish of golf tournaments, and that crowd at the Scottish Open was crazy, especially the following for the last group with Bob. I'm not gone in a lie, I was definitely rooting for him. I love Adam Scott but I was really rooting for Bob there just to see his reaction because I know it would mean the world for him to win that.

It was pretty surreal watching it live. It felt like the putt took 30 seconds to get to the hole. I'm sitting there, oh, he must have missed it by now, the ball hasn't gone to the hole. To see it in slow motion drop in and the reaction, it was unbelievable. I was kind of scared that the balcony I was on might fall, everybody was jumping up and down. That was a really cool moment just to see how much it meant to him and all the followers around.

Yeah, just to have my parents here, really good family friends here, my girlfriend Juju here, just a great support makes the tournament that much sweeter. Golf's a lonely sport and the success that you have wouldn't feel as good if it was just your only success. It's the success with the team, success with the family and friends that makes it that much sweeter. I'm very lucky that I get that support all around the country, especially West Coast Swing where most of my family's able to come out. It's awesome, it means a lot. Especially my parents, like I said, I wouldn't be here without them, so I just want them to have a good time, too.

Q. Aaron, you know what it's like to win the Scottish Open. How did you feel when you won it and the way you won it as well?

AARON RAI: Yeah, it was fantastic. Funnily enough, Sahith was probably 10 yards to the right of me and on a slightly lower level, me and my dad were watching it from the balcony of our room and we were right behind Bob's putt.

It was just, honestly it's probably one of the best atmospheres I've ever experienced. Even though me and Sahith were not in there, it was just fantastic to watch it. And what happened afterwards, I had goosebumps just being there. It was an absolute privilege to witness that



moment. Obviously extremely special for Bob. I know we've spoken a lot about it and speaks extremely highly about it and for me as well, that was four years ago now, probably -- well, it is certainly one of my biggest golfing achievements to date.

MARK WILLIAMS: All right. Anybody else? I think we've covered everything. Gentlemen, we appreciate your time and your insights and all the best for your first starts in the Hero World Challenge this week.

