

PRE-TOURNAMENT PRESS CONFERENCE
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AKSHAY BHATIA

MODERATOR: Happy to welcome defending champion, Akshay Bhatia, here to the interview room at the Valero Texas Open.

Akshay, one year since you won here. If we can open up with some thoughts on being back.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, obviously a year went by so fast. To be here, and obviously my first time defending a tournament, it's pretty cool. A lot of good memories. And yeah, I've always loved this event, very special place for me and my fiancee, who we met here in 2022. I just love coming back here. The golf course is in great shape, so I look forward to, you know, playing this golf course again and playing in front of the great fans we have here in Texas.

MODERATOR: Obviously impressive week here last year, solo leader after each of the first three rounds and ended up winning in a playoff. When you think back to it in 2024, what are some of the first thoughts that come to mind?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I played so great the whole week. I honestly don't know how I did it, shooting 20 under, Denny and I, and I think third place was 11 under. You step on this property and you realize how hard this golf course is.

Just such a whirlwind. Then going to Augusta the following night, just great memories. You know, I look forward to see if I can get back in that position this week.

MODERATOR: It's your first time as defending champion after not playing Barracuda 2024 the year after you won. Approaching this week, does it feel any different?

AKSHAY BHATIA: No, I haven't really thought about it. You know, I checked into the hotel and someone asked me, he said how ya feeling this week? I said, yeah, it's nice to be back. He's like, so, but how are you feeling? Are you nervous? I mean, I haven't really thought about it.

I feel like it's just another week. I have my mind really set on Augusta next week so it's a great week on this golf course to kind of learn where my game's at, what kind of shots I need to improve on for next week. It's a great golf course for that, very narrow, very tricky. It's obviously going to be windy here. I just kind of feel normal.

Q. Taking last week off for the Houston Open, what were some things that you noticed in your golf game that needed attention from your final round at THE PLAYERS?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I had a great week there. Mentally was something I really figured out, to be in contention, knowing what it takes. Then I putted great the whole week. It really came down to like a couple putts coming in during the last couple holes there on the final round.

I really just kind of talked to my mental coach, my putting coach and tried to understand how I was thinking when I started the round versus when I got more into contention.

It's nice to recognize that, and hopefully I can carry that on if I'm back in contention at some point during this year.

Q. You had mentioned just getting a chance to defend the title, I guess you didn't get a chance to do that before. What does it mean to you that you're in a position that you've earned that opportunity to do something like that, because it's so hard to win a tournament on this tournament?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, it's amazing. I think everyone that's volunteering kind of recognizes me as the defending champ. I've been getting a lot of people saying they're seeing me on the room key this week.

It's really cool, and it's such an honor obviously to come back and defend. You know, it's an event you kind of always have circled on the schedule.

So I look forward to seeing how it feels. Obviously haven't done it before. I've done it in junior golf but obviously a different level nowadays. I'm really excited for the week.

Q. Akshay, just 27 players here invited to the Masters next week. Last year you got your invitation by winning this. What is this week like for the 120-some-odd players who aren't invited to the Masters and how important is it to win so they can get there?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I think it depends on how you look at it. Last year the Masters was such a long shot for me. I had my eyes set on trying to get into the U.S. Open based off of world ranking. Obviously had -- I wrote a bunch of things on my wrist last year to try to keep imagining the number we wanted to get to in the world.

It's such a surreal feeling, you win here, all of a sudden you're on a plane straight to Augusta National. It's something you really got to kind of keep off your mind and try to play this golf tournament and see where you end up at the end of the week.

Q. You said you wrote things on your wrist. What did you write on your wrist?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I remember I wrote -- my goal was to get to 35th in the world by the U.S. Open deadline, so I wrote that one day. Then I wrote "wire to wire," obviously leading every single day. Then I wrote "race my race," I remember that one pretty vividly, I think I

wrote that on Sunday. It was just certain queues to keep reminding myself what my goal is for the day.

A crazy story about that is when I won here, I went to 35th in the world, which I didn't realize, and then at Augusta I finished 35th. It was a really cool story to manifest and be able to kind of accomplish all those things in such a short amount of time.

Q. I'm wondering if maybe it might be underappreciated around Tour and what your impressions are of the 18th finishing hole here at TPC?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, it's a great hole. Obviously rewards a good shot if you go for it, and if you don't, then you can easily walk off with a 6 or 7. The greens got different quadrants. It is a really good hole. Hopefully we get some downwind and you see some guys going for it.

The tee shot's pretty narrow visually with the trees on right and kind of that cliff looking on the left. And the second shot, you have an uneven lie so it makes the second shot even harder because it's such a small margin to kind of hit it where you need to.

It is a really good finishing hole. It kind of brings a lot of drama with 17 being drivable and 18 with a finishing par 5.

Q. Would you say maybe it compares in its own way to some major championship type finishing holes?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, it's very unique. I think you look at 18 at Sawgrass, very unique, tough hole. You look here and with how this golf course can play with kind of a tight leaderboard most years, it can create a lot of drama. So it's definitely a visually intimidating hole, but also if you kind of play it the right way or the smart way, you can easily play it a couple under for the week.

Q. Yourself now already going to the Masters next week, is this week more about a tune-up or is it more about defending the title, and are you trying to avoid kind of complacency this week as opposed to last year?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I feel like next week's more on my mind. Obviously coming here I still want to play my best and try my best and learn every day, whether it's mentally or certain shots or putting or short game, whatever it may be. It's kind of a tune-up week, but it's also very cool to kind of go back to back. It's got a mix of both. Maybe I'll feel different on Thursday when I tee it up, but for now I'm just kind of focused of trying to get prepared for this week but also learn where I'm at for next week.

Q. I remember your writings last year like "wire to wire." I'm curious if you have any other pre-tournament traditions that you're going to use up this week.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean, I think the only couple things I'll do is I'll hit on the same side of the range as I did last year. Then last year I did room service every night, ate the same thing every night, so could be the same thing this year.

Q. What did you eat?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Just had a burger with fries every night.

Q. Are you planning to write things on your wrist, maybe "back to back," this year?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Not sure yet. I haven't done it in a while. I feel like I -- obviously every week changes, every year changes. This year I might need it, I might not, but I have a better understanding of how I need to feel mentally going into this week.

Q. Your distance control is like impeccable. Like how do you manage this?

AKSHAY BHATIA: A lot of us players obviously use launch monitors every week and I would say I'm one -- I'm one of the guys who uses it the most. I use it on the golf course, out of bunkers, out of the rough, every shot pretty much. So I have a good idea of gauging it.

And then also, too, this is what we do for a living. We practice all the time on hitting numbers and we have such good data now to where we can practice the numbers, we can practice to certain pins just by using a launch monitor. It makes practicing a little more fun than just hitting golf balls all the time. I'm such a feel player so I always go back to that when I'm hitting balls alone, it gives me something to try and achieve for the day. That's kind of how I do it.

Q. Any advice for younger players who are still trying to do what you did last year?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Elaborate maybe a little bit.

Q. To be invited to the Masters and get to the 35th world golf ranking and play in majors all of that, so much came true for you last year as a young golfer on the Tour. What is your advice to younger golfers who aren't at that point yet where you're at?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I feel I've been playing professional golf for a lot longer than some of the younger guys. Obviously not going to college, so really just a matter of time.

Obviously you have to have the belief that you can win, and then once you get into the majors and continue to play well, not get complacent.

So it's such a matter of time. I mean, I've been doing this for almost seven years now, so I just feel like it's just, you know, your time will come essentially. So many of these college players and younger guys coming up obviously have the game as we've seen with a lot of the PGA TOUR U guys and a couple of the guys with the accelerated points through PGA

TOUR U. It's just getting in that position more and more and getting more comfortable. Then it's one week that can really change your life. Once you have that confidence, it kind of can continue to build each week.

MODERATOR: Thank you for the time, Akshay, and best of luck this week.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Thank you.