

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
March 28, 2018



RICKIE FOWLER

JOHN BUSH: We would like to welcome Rickie Fowler into the interview room. He's making his seventh start at the Houston Open and coming off of a tie for third place last year.

Rickie, welcome become, if we can get some comments on being here this week?

RICKIE FOWLER: Yeah, definitely excited to be back. Pretty amazing to see how good the course looks after everything that's happened here in the last year, so excited to be back. Obviously have had some good weeks here and I've always looked at it as a good way to kind of prep for Augusta. So that's kind of the main thing on the radar. Obviously want to play well here this week and go through the checklist and make that checklist smaller for next week.

So like I said, we've had a lot of success here and I think it's been very beneficial to play into a major, especially the way they set this golf course up and mowing the fairways and getting the greens up to speed with the first cut and getting conditions similar to what we'll see next week. Obviously you can't really simulate the contours of the greens or the sidehill lies you'll get, but at least kind of the, like I said, the grass and the way it's mowed and they do a good job of that.

JOHN BUSH: Took last week off, your last start was at Arnold Palmer Invitational. Talk a little bit about the state of your game coming into the week.

RICKIE FOWLER: Bay Hill is a great step forward. Didn't really have the first couple months of the year that I wanted, I was a bit off and putter went cold on me, so it's been nice to kind of see improvements across the board.

I feel like ball striking was in a good spot at Bay Hill. Had a couple that cost me a few shots, especially on the weekend on 17 and 18, but other than that, good solid week and, like I said, a step forward.

It was nice to have some time off last week. I rarely if not ever play four in a row, so being able to be one of the hosts at Bay Hill was a special place that I've played well at and having the relationship I've had with Arnie over the years. With that and then, like I said liking to play here into Augusta, so it's the reason for taking last week off. But got some great work in the last two days with Butch over at Lochinvar, a place that he used to be the head pro at. Got a few days here in the Houston area from painting a house to practicing and it's been good. So definitely looking forward to this week and like where we're at heading into Augusta.

JOHN BUSH: We'll open it up to questions.

Q. What's topping your checklist right now, what's the biggest thing that you're trying to focus on heading into next week?

RICKIE FOWLER: I would say ball striking, for me it's mainly working it both directions. I would say mainly mid irons. I feel like that's a pretty big area that you need to be on at Augusta. It gives you room off the tee and there's a couple holes that are fairly narrow, but being on with flights and how the ball's moving and hitting your number. I feel like putting's been coming around, I feel like I can putt those greens well, and I putt better on greens that have more movement. The main focus is still on the ball striking and making sure I'm doing it properly; not necessarily having to manipulate it and make something happen, but swinging properly and getting the result out of it.

Q. Rickie, years that you've played here and then Augusta and the years that you had really good finishes at Augusta, can you see a common thread of what you did the week before that set it off?

RICKIE FOWLER: Yeah, you look at -- I mean last year I actually didn't remember I finished tied for third, but that was a good way to go into Augusta knowing that you kind of go through the checklist. We did the same thing last year, went to Lochinvar Monday, Tuesday, and then to go in and put myself in contention. Obviously I didn't have a great Sunday last year, but I've seen it make Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday at Augusta a lot simpler, a lot easier.

Now, if I go and have a bad week here, at least whether maybe I've missed the cut weeks before majors but at least you kind of know what you need to work on instead of being at home and kind of working on the same stuff. I think that's what's been the most beneficial is simplifying that checklist to know maybe two, three things that you want to go dial in and be ready to go for that following week, and also whether you make the cut, in contention, whether you stop Friday or Sunday, there's a small gap between teeing it up in competition to that Thursday.

So I feel like there's less first tee jitters. If anyone tells you they don't get jitters on the first tee, that's a lie. So you just feel more comfortable when it comes to that Thursday tee time.

Q. You've been obviously loyal to this tournament but part because of when it's played, before Augusta. So wherever you were last August and you hear what's happening to Houston, you hear about the storm and the floods. And the second part of that, you're aware of the struggles here to get a new sponsor to replace Shell. Just your thoughts on that because you have some history here in Houston. You're here to support the tournament, and if maybe the tournament's not this week, maybe you're not here, but you know these folks and is it a special place, especially in the backdrop of what's happening recently?

RICKIE FOWLER: Yeah, I'll go to the tournament first. It's been great with what they've been able to do. Talk about course setup and leading into Augusta, I felt like it's been great for a lot of guys using it as kind of a prep week in a way, but it's also a place, a golf course that I enjoy playing. I've had good weeks here, so it would be one whether it was before Augusta or not that I would like to try and still work in the schedule depending on where it falls.

It is great, from talking about being at Lochinvar Monday, Tuesday, that could still be -- depending on where it is in the schedule, it could be a good time to do some work since it is -- if Butch isn't able to come to Florida, this is kind of a middle meeting point. So it's been a week that we've enjoyed being able to do some stuff with Farmers and St. Bernard Project on Monday morning, going and getting the hands dirty and doing some priming on the walls.

It's been fun to kind of have a connection with the city and to help out just that little bit, and hopefully maybe bring in some more volunteers. With what Farmers and SBP have done, they bring volunteers in from not just around the country but around the world. Some of them come in for week shifts. Yeah, we only did -- we were there for about four hours doing some stuff. It was nice to be able to do that, but maybe that's something that maybe helps them bring more volunteers in to help out the city.

I know Farmers and St. Bernard, their plan is to rebuild over 100 homes this year, which is cool to be a part of. So it's nice to have partners like that.

Q. I was going to ask that question, you fancy yourself as a bit of a house painter, do you? Something you'll take up full time or no?

RICKIE FOWLER: I'm not great, but I'm not bad. I'm above average. I'm going to try and keep making birdies.

Q. My serious question was you've been banging on that major door for so long, you've had some great results, especially the '14 season. But you go to Augusta and are you impatient for that first major, or are you still patient, if it happens that week, it happens?

RICKIE FOWLER: Especially at Augusta, it's not a place that you can try and push or try and make things happen. I guess it changes when you put yourself in position come the back nine on Sunday, then you might have to make something happen, but it's a course that you have to -- kind have to take what it gives you.

There's times where you have to kind of take your medicine and play away. I think I've done a good job of that there. I can do better, I think anyone can always do better. It's not a course that you have to necessarily be long or do anything special by any means. It helps if you make putts, but you see guys like Freddie and Bernhard, they end up on that board

quite often. Not saying that they couldn't contend on the Tour on a regular basis, I'm sure they could get in contention. But it just seems like that week and at that place it's just a different golf course and it allows a lot of different players to find their way to be on that leaderboard without necessarily doing anything crazy. It's all about kind of feeling comfortable there and having knowledge of it.

Q. This looks like this could be the most open Masters in years with Tiger coming back, Phil having won, a lot of the top guys in form. Does it feel like that to the players as well, that this one is more of a crapshoot?

RICKIE FOWLER: Yeah, there's obviously a lot of guys that can win and guys that are playing that have won there. Obviously we're seeing Tiger back playing some good golf. No surprise to me in a way with the rounds that I had with him in the fall seeing what he had, speed and how he was hitting it, what the potential was.

So I told some people close to me or on my team last fall when I first played with him that as long as he stays healthy and doesn't try and push his body too much, that he could be back and win. I think it's a fairly small field at Augusta, but there's, yeah, maybe more guys than normal that have that a legit shot.

Like I said, there's still those guys that aren't necessarily always on your radar at tournaments but guys like Bernhard and Freddie, don't be surprised if you see them up there on Saturday. One of them's due to have a really good finish, I feel like. I know Freddie's had some time off so maybe he's rested up and ready to go 72 holes since they're used to the 54-hole thing. No, that's a special thing about there. And yeah, there's quite a few guys that do have a legit chance.

Q. It looked to us again from the outside last year like you and Jordan were going to be the guys to beat going into Sunday but it didn't pan out. If you look back on that and thought there was one thing that you would change or you would try and do different next time?

RICKIE FOWLER: Maybe I got I would say maybe a little too conservative out of the gate. Not that I played bad early and really didn't make anything early on, which made it kind of tough. Fell back a bit and was not in the position really to come into the back nine or final holes.

So to see what Sergio did there and the shot he hit on 15, we were just across on 17 fairway, which is right next to it. Yeah, it's never going to be given to you, that tournament. You've seen a lot of things happen over the last five, 10 years. You were just talking about being patient. Until that back nine come Sunday, you end up in a position where you may need to make something happen and that's something where Sergio hitting that shot on 15, it's not necessarily a pin you take on. He happened to pull off the perfect shot and it paid off in the end.

Say that pin's on Thursday, does he hit that club? Maybe not. Maybe takes the long ride or something just to make 4, but kind of I'm not sure what the number he had and what he was necessarily trying to do, but it paid off, he pulled off the shot. Sometimes that's what needs to happen to win a golf tournament.

Q. Rickie, when the first couple months of the year haven't gone maybe as you envisioned them going in December and January, do you have to --

RICKIE FOWLER: Well, December was all right.

Q. December was all right. When you get to this juncture, do you have to resist any sort of temptation to try and press to really find what you're looking for, maybe that missing ingredient as the Masters gets closer?

RICKIE FOWLER: Well, luckily, I mean, having played well through the fall into December, I think knowing that I was close to playing some really good golf through kind of January, February, just being a little bit off, like I said, having the putter go cold. I know I can putt well, I know I can putt with the best out here, and I've shown that at times where it's been on. Last year was a great putting year for me and statistically across the board.

So knowing that we're not far off from playing some really good golf, I have had to be patient because just little things from just whether it's just working on a little bit of different things through impact to maybe trying to get into a little bit different position at the top, making sure the grip's in the right spot. Those minor changes, they can feel odd and it's hard to trust them sometimes, but to see the progression over the last few weeks, it's definitely close to being really good. Like I said, it's nice that I wasn't far from playing some really good golf or coming from that being that we played well through last year into the fall, having the win at Tiger's event.

No, it's really small and little things, so it's, like I said, nice to see it go in the right direction.

Q. You talked about the City of Houston a little bit before and everything. Because you've had the opportunity to come here so many times and spend the early days of the week here, do you feel any different about the city itself or have a connection to the city over the years and into this year?

RICKIE FOWLER: Yeah, we've been here and played this tournament a handful of times. Like I said, it's been a great lead-in to the Masters week. To be able to help out on Monday for a few hours, I felt like I put some good work in. And having the connection from Butch being the head pro at Lochinvar back in the day, being good friends with Jim Crane, who's been here in the Houston area for a long time and owner of the Astros. I know JJ Watt a little bit and seeing what he's done and all the awareness and the money that he's raised for the city. Actually, the house that we were working on, I know through his foundation a lot of the money was donated through there.

So yeah, there's plenty of connections. My agent's from Houston originally. It's definitely nice to come back and spend time here with everything that happened last year. It was nice to be able to give back some of our time and try and help out as much as we could.

Q. Who is your agent?

RICKIE FOWLER: Sam MacNaughton.

Q. So he's a Houston native?

RICKIE FOWLER: He doesn't live here know, he lives in Edmund, Oklahoma.

Q. You have a good relationship with Jim Crane. Your thoughts on winning the World Series? It's not normal here, you have to understand.

RICKIE FOWLER: Yeah, played in the pro-member with Butch at the Floridian back in December and they just opened the nine-hole par-3 course that day. We went out -- Butch and Jim and his partner -- and Jim happened to make a hole-in-one on the fourth hole, which that was the first hole-in-one on the course so it's kind of fitting that he makes the first one.

Q. The par-3 course?

RICKIE FOWLER: The par-3 course. He kind of joked as he was getting the ball out, "I'm having a pretty good year."

No, it was pretty cool to see having spent some time around Jim knowing his background and where he came from and basically coming from nothing in a way, so it's a pretty inspiring story. If not many people know about Jim, but from him being a college baseball player and, like I said, borrowing money and starting his company and it being very successful worldwide to now, owning the Astros and getting that win last year.

Q. Did you throw out the first pitch at a game last year?

RICKIE FOWLER: I believe it was on Thursday last year, yeah. They were playing -- the Cubs were in town. I think it was either last or second-to-last exhibition game.

Q. Is that the only time you've ever done that here in Houston?

RICKIE FOWLER: That's the only time I'm done the pitch here, yeah. I've done a couple others. Yeah, it was fun to do that. I make sure him and Giles know, like I've got your season started.

Q. Every time you've thrown out a first pitch they've won the World Series, right? I mean that is a correct statement?

RICKIE FOWLER: Yeah. I'm not saying I had much or anything to do with it.

Q. And how long have you been with Butch?

RICKIE FOWLER: Butch and I, I think officially it's four years roughly. But he was working with Phil a lot and I play a lot of practice rounds with him and some of the other guys. Same with Dustin and a few of the other guys that he was working with. So I've been around Butch for 10 years. But yeah, officially working four or five years now.

JOHN BUSH: All right, Rickie, thank you.