

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
August 1, 2018

JUSTIN THOMAS



MICHAEL BALIKER: I would like to welcome Justin Thomas to the interview room here at the World Golf Championships Bridgestone Invitational.

JT, just start us out on being back here at Firestone, this is your third appearance here, and just overall thoughts on the golf course and the overall test.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, this is a place that I really love. I haven't had very much success here. I actually -- I haven't had really any success in two years I played, as much as I like the course and just enjoy this area. It's grass that I'm familiar with. I grew up on bent greens, and this kind of rye rough and bent fairways, so I have a lot of comfortability in this kind of -- I guess in this region of the country and this golf course. I just haven't played it very well, so hopefully we'll get a little better game plan for it this year.

Q. As the defending FedExCup champion over this busy stretch coming up, is it a pretty cool opportunity to become the first to go back-to-back? Just talk about the challenge ahead a little bit.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I'm excited for that, but the good news for me is I'm the only one that has the opportunity to do that, so I'm looking forward to embracing that challenge. I can't believe that we're already almost at the Playoffs. I probably say that every year around this time, but it's two events left, and I was looking at it and I feel like I'm in a pretty similar position I was last year. I don't know if I was leading, or first or second or third or what I was, but it definitely is a big boost, a big advantage going into the Playoffs, at least around that top-5 or around the lead, so you don't have to make up as much ground in the Playoffs. But I definitely -- I feel like I played better golf than the results have shown the last three events I played in. I obviously played well, had a good finish in France, but just keep trying to build and make progress to move toward the Playoffs.

Q. To your point about where your game is at right now, are you more on the 69 that you shot at the Open Championship or the 77 or somewhere in between? It's been a little bit of a funny summer.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it hasn't -- wouldn't necessarily -- hasn't been too crazy. I had a lot of really good finishes other than two weeks. I double bogeyed the last hole at the U.S. Open or it would have been a top-15 finish, I think, and played poorly at the Travelers, and then just had one bad day, or actually one bad stretch of three holes at the open. Otherwise, I probably would be top-15 in every event I played this year. So I definitely wouldn't look at that as a negative.

I would much rather have -- throw a couple missed cuts in there and a couple more wins, but that's just the way it is. And I wanted to be more consistent this year, when I have. But the last couple months, we were talking about it yesterday. My dad and Jimmy and I went out and played nine by ourselves. We've been playing fine the last couple months. Just the things that were going our way maybe aren't going our way, the putts aren't dropping, the ball isn't staying in the fairways, kicking in the rough, or whatever it may be.

My game is definitely a lot closer to that 69 than it is a 77, although the numbers didn't show. I definitely wasn't in the right draw at the Open. It was definitely more difficult playing in the rain and the wind than it was that afternoon. That's just the way it is. That's The Open Championship and you have to deal with that.

Q. You mentioned that you like the course, but you haven't had success on it. What has, in your mind, been the problem that you haven't had the success that you've wanted?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Well, my first year here I actually played pretty well. I think I was in the third to last group, or something like that. I was definitely in the top-10, maybe even the top-5 going into Sunday and just didn't -- I had a poor Sunday. I think I shot 64 or 65, so that jumped me pretty far back. Then last year I played well, I just could not make a putt. I had a hard time -- this was -- actually, as funny as it is, this was the last week that I used the grip that I had. I switched grips the next week, at the PGA last year, so as funny as it is. So that tells you the state of my putting last year.

But yeah, like I said, it was kind of like Riviera for me. I absolutely love Riviera, one of my favorite places. And until this year, I had had no success. I just hadn't played it well. Whether it was one day that hurt me or wasn't making the putts, or getting frustrated, whatever it was, but that didn't take away from the fact that I enjoy the course and I felt that I could play it well. So, it's down there somewhere. I just have to hope that it's this week.

Q. Justin, as the defending champ next week and the son of a PGA professional, you may not agree with this assessment, but PGA Championships often have a stigma of being the fourth of four and not just chronologically. Do you think the move next year can help elevate the status and kind of eliminate that stigma of the PGA?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah. I mean, I don't really care. If people want to say that, I'll take the fourth of four majors every year, if they don't really want to win it that bad. It may help. I mean, I don't think it's -- it's whatever people want to make of it. People can look at the different majors. Everyone's going to be biased toward one or the other. Just because it may not have the tradition of this, or it may not have the home of golf feel that the Open has, or just the brutal test that the U.S. Open gives. Every major has their own identity, and the PGA has a great identity. It's just different than the others. That's why it's a different major. So, like I said, I'm perfectly content with grabbing my fourth of four major, if you will, every year. But I'm extremely excited. I think the Champions dinner next Tuesday is going to be very, very special, and I know it's going to be a really cool night for my family and I.

Q. Two things for you. What's your kind of scouting report on Bellerive from when you were there, and how different -- or in what ways will it be a different test than Quail Hollow?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah. Well, the thing about Quail is it's -- I feel like it's a kind of course, it obviously doesn't have that look or that vibe of a U.S. Open, but it is difficult enough to hold a U.S. Open to where it's challenging. If they've got the greens firmer, faster, and they kept the rough how it was, par would have won that tournament. We just had a lot of rain last year, so it was softer.

But Bellerive, I'm really not sure what the scores are going to be like. I played it, I think, in May, so it was soft. They're going to -- any course that's hosting a major in the following months are going to make sure it stays in the condition it needs to be. So it's going to be softer, slower, easier.

But it's a great driving course, kind of long doglegs that you have to kind of drive it, fit it in here. It's not like everyone's playing to the same spot. You can take some bunkers on. But for the most part, it's going to be a good challenge. The rough was up in May. I'm sure it's going to be healthy. It's going to be very hot and humid. I don't know what the weather's been like there. I'm sure they've gotten quite a bit of rain.

But in terms of the scores, I really don't know what it's going to be like. But in terms of a golf course, it's going to be a lot different than Quail, because I think Quail is very unique on its own and very difficult.

Q. Secondly, this is, I'm going to guess here, about five times now that you've gone back to a tournament to defend. What have you learned in terms of, I don't want to call it a distraction but stuff you do as the defending champion and how might that be different at a bigger event like the PGA, like the fourth one, you know.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I've never had the opportunity to defend in a major, so I don't know what it's going to be like. You know, it's great. I'm sure everybody else at the tournament would trade positions with me, if it's going to be so difficult to handle. But at the same time, I feel like I've gotten in a good routine and a good habit this year of managing my time. You know, I know I have my media obligations this day, and I know I have something I have to do this time, so I schedule around that.

You know, the PGA knows, and other people know, that I'm there to play golf, I'm there to play in a golf tournament, and they know that I'm not going to be able to say yes and do everything. Obviously, I would love to be able to help out as much as I can, but at the end of the day, I'm still there to defend my title, and I'm going to take care of everything when I need to take care of it. But it's fun defending.

Q. What was your busiest defending title week, Malaysia?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, probably Malaysia. That was a lot, but for good reason. To have the opportunity to grow the game in Malaysia and the amount of people that are surrounding that tournament and how into it CIMB and just everybody in Kuala Lumpur gets, it's pretty cool. That's what I tell everybody. It's the place that made me feel the most like a superstar of everywhere I've been. People wanted to get autographs and pictures with me more than anyplace I've ever been. I don't know if they just didn't know anybody else, or it was just the reason that I won the last year, but it made me feel pretty cool.

Q. Justin, looking at the big picture, has anything in your life changed on or off the course since you became a major champion?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I have more obligations, more things I need to do. Definitely have more expectations. The spotlight's on me a little bit more.

I mean, I would like to think I didn't live an extravagant life, or anything, that I needed to change, to worry about anything, if you know what I mean. So I'm still 25 years old and I'm still going to enjoy it. I've kind of enjoyed that process.

But at the same time, you know, like I kind of said, I'm still out here to win tournaments. And, yeah, I may have more things I need to do off the course, or maybe more things I need to do during a tournament week, but I've just probably gotten better at managing my time and understanding that there are certain things that are going to be better for me. There are certain things I need to do, some things I would like to do that I can't do. It's just what it is. It's a part of the process for all of us, and it's also part of the learning experience that I'm still going through.

Q. Justin, last year after your great year, a couple times you mentioned how you might have to sort of try to manage expectations this year. It's always hard to do that again, as great as it was. I'm just wondering how you feel you have done with that. Have there been times of frustration, or has it gone the way you wanted it to and you've been able to keep that perspective?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's been hard, too. I mean, it feels like I haven't won in forever. And it was the Honda, obviously, in terms of events, and, yeah, it maybe has been a while, but it's only been a couple months. It's not like it's been anything crazy.

I just want to have more chances to win tournaments. I've had a lot of really solid finishes, a lot of top-10s, or a lot of top-15s, but a lot of those have been because of a pretty good last day, not 6, 7, 8 back going into the last day and kind of staying there as opposed to having a chance to win. That's what I'm out here for.

These last, what, six events, I really want to try to have an opportunity to win as many of these events as I can going into Sunday and on the back nine, because that's where I feel like I'm comfortable, it's where I feel like I thrive, it's what I enjoy, it's why I play.

But in terms of the last year, I can't compare anything. I know that it was an unbelievable year. I definitely feel like I'm capable of doing it many times in my career, but at the end of the day, I can't -- I'm sure it's same with -- like Tiger, he couldn't put years like 2000 against every year that he played, although someone like him kind of did. But you can't just kind of go down the list and say, last year I did this and this year I did this. It's just all about looking at the big picture and realizing, yeah, the last two, three months maybe has not gone exactly how I like, but I'm second in the FedExCup. I have an unbelievable chance to do something that nobody else in the history of golf has done, and that's pretty cool.

Q. Wasn't it similar going into last year's PGA? It had been a little while since you had won, you were coming off a missed cut at the Open? Kind of the same, and then look at what happened.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah.

Q. I guess, in other words, there's no reason to, you know, to look --

JUSTIN THOMAS: Exactly. It's golf, it's part of it.

Q. Justin, can you walk us through your shot selection on the 16th hole, and do you do anything specific with your practice rounds to get ready for the Monster?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No, you pretty much just swing as hard as you possibly can on the drive and hope it somehow goes down that slope. I think, as soft as it is this week, I don't know if many guys are going to be able to get there in two. You don't know what the tour's going to do in terms of setting it up, move the tees up. But everybody's going into that thinking it's a three-shot hole. If we get it down a decent bit wind-wise, then you can get it there, but it's just you're basically looking at it as a position hole. You're just trying to get it in the fairway and then lay it up to a good number, and from there it's an easy hole, because you have a wedge in your hand. So, you're not, like, looking at it strategically, at least like, when I played it yesterday, I'm not like out there trying to do a lot of things. You're just trying to get it in the fairway off the tee and then go from there.

Q. Justin, among the top young players, as Tiger Woods' game continues to proceed, is there more of a recognition of his presence when he's in the field? And also, whatever attention you do pay, is it from a competitive standpoint, or a curiosity standpoint, or somebody you followed as a kid, or what?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I'm always pulling for Tiger if I'm not playing, or if he has a chance to win and I don't. I mean, it's same as any of my friends. But it just would be -- I said this at the beginning of the year, I think he's going to win if he stays healthy. And it will, and would be really cool for the game, if and when he does. So, but at the same time, I'm trying to make sure that he doesn't do that, for many reasons. But, yeah, it's different, just because -- like a lot of the guys that played with him said, we don't know what it's like, you

know, what it was like playing against him at that time, and we don't. So, that's definitely to our advantage, I would say. From the looks of it, from when I was growing up watching him play, nobody could really hang with him. But it's not a knock or anything to the people that were playing then and now, it's just we didn't know any better. We don't know any better now than what it was, so we're just out there playing, and we have no fear, and we're just out there giving it all we've got. And I know he wants to show us a little bit of what he has.

Q. One quick follow-up on that. Considering he's won here eight times, does that play into your curiosity factor or anything?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah. You know, he's going to play well this week. This place is like Augusta for him. He could probably take two, three weeks off and he's going to get it around here fine, because he knows how to. Yeah, he's won here as many times as I've won everywhere in my career. I am surprised he hasn't mentioned that yet, which is nice.

I grew up watching him win a lot of tournaments here, hitting the shots in the dark. And yeah, it's pretty unbelievable the career he has at this golf course alone, let alone his entire career.

So he's going to be very, very comfortable here and he knows his way around here because -- I've obviously -- this is only my third year, but from the sounds and looks of it, this place hasn't changed very much over the years, so it's a place he's going to be very comfortable at.

Q. I don't know if you're best suited for this question or not, but if you look at equipment and fitness and longevity in this game and how long guys can compete and contend, you don't see many guys past the age of 40 winning the majors outside of the British, outside of links golf. Why do you think that is? And is there any part that it becomes harder the more that the pipeline of the 22 through 32, 33-year-olds gets deeper and deeper?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I think a lot of it, honestly, is length. A 20- to 30-year-old is going to be stronger than a 45-year-old, and their body's going to be less achy, at least that's what Duff tells me. He always tells me to wait until I'm 40 and then talk to him. I'm just going by what he says.

Q. He was achy at 20.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Exactly, that's what I say. So you look at guys like Phil, he's in his 40s but he still has the length. You look at Tiger, he still has the length. You look at those guys that are still competing in their 40s, they all still have that length. When you get the guys of older age, if you will, that just don't get it as far, it's just hard to contend at Augusta. It's hard to contend at Shinnecock Hills when you're hitting 4 irons into those greens that we're hitting 9 irons in. It's just the way it is. Obviously, the equipment and everything is what it is, but that has nothing to do with the fact that we're athletes now. I take my training very seriously,

and everybody takes their training very seriously. It's just as much off the golf course as it is on the golf course, so that I'm hoping that when I do get 40, 45, 50, I have chances to win majors, so I don't get a late start like some people may have.

Q. Do you think or has anyone ever told you, whether it's Duff or whoever, that the older you get, you don't make as much just because there's just so much experience of missing over the years?

JUSTIN THOMAS: The older you get, you don't make as much?

Q. I'm talking about putts. Not money, putts.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Oh, well, I actually haven't heard that. I've maybe watched it on TV, but I haven't necessarily heard it from anybody in terms of making putts. Yeah, I don't know. They obviously have their experiences and have some things that have happened, but over the course of a long career, anybody's going to have it.

Q. Even as a 25-year-old, are you more, I don't know if nervous is the right word, but are you more cautious or less freewheeling than you were when you first came out of college after dropping out?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No, just because I'm more experienced and better and I'm more comfortable. I just -- I think I would hope that -- I mean, my goal in my career is just to get better every year. If I get -- even if it's just a little bit better. I feel like this year I'm a little bit better than I was last year, and that year I was a little bit better than I was the second year. So it's like if I continue to just improve each year -- obviously, there's going to be a year when that stops. But then I feel like then in my eighth year, I'm going to be better than I was my fourth year. And obviously I'll have that confidence and I'll have that kind of swagger walking around the course like someone like DJ or Rory or --

Q. Duff?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, Duff, that's a real swagger right there.

MICHAEL BALIKER: With that, Justin, thanks for the time, and go get 'em this week.