

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW
February 19, 2019

TIM O'NEAL
J.J. SPAUN



MARK WILLIAMS: Welcome, everybody. Thank you for being here at the 2019 Genesis Open.

Before we get under way, I would just like to acknowledge a special guest we have in the audience here, Mr. Charles Sifford, Junior. And he is here given that this is the press conference for Tim O'Neal, who is this year's recipient of the Charles Sifford Memorial exemption.

(Applause.)

MARK WILLIAMS: We also have J.J. Spaun with us. And J.J. Spaun was the recipient of the award in 2016. So we would like to welcome you gentlemen. And Mr. Sifford, thank you for being here.

We'll just start perhaps with Tim. You're here as the recipient of this award obviously. Thank you for joining us. Just talk about what this means to you and perhaps if you could share with us the moment that you found out that you were the recipient for this year and how that came about.

TIM O'NEAL: Well, when I found out that I received the exemption, I was extremely happy. I applied for this exemption in 2009 actually, so to finally get it was better late than never, right? I was really happy to finally get the exemption.

I had the opportunity to play with Charlie in '99 with some guys out of Kentucky, and played 18 holes with Charlie and had a chance to talk to Charlie a little bit. Very nice guy. He still hit the ball really good. For me to receive this honor, I'm very honored and humbled to be able to receive this exemption. Very excited to be here.

MARK WILLIAMS: Terrific. We'll just remind folks that this is the 50th anniversary since Charlie Sifford won the L.A. Open. Kind of a significant moment. Also the 10th anniversary of the award being handed out.

J.J., if you could just comment, you were the recipient three years ago, just what that meant to you at the time and looking back on it now how it's influenced your career on the PGA TOUR.

J.J. SPAUN: Yeah, when I got the exemption in 2016, I was kind of coming off a really good stretch of golf. I played the Canadian Tour, PGA TOUR Canada the year before and I was

just kind of molding myself to be kind of a touring pro. You've got to start somewhere and it was nice to kind of get a spot here and kind of solidify what I was working on and being able to kind of compare my game versus the world's best, just to have that opportunity especially as a hometown kid. I grew up an hour from here and used to come here as a kid to watch this tournament growing up. It was definitely a dream come true. Looking back it was such a great experience. I'm sure Tim's going to take a lot from it this week, no matter what happens. Definitely helped elevate my game and it was just a huge crucial point in my career to come out here and play against the world's best and learn what I needed to work on. I had not a very good week but I kind of learned what I had to do and what I needed to work on to improve. Eventually I played well and now I'm here again. I owe a lot to Charlie Sifford and the award that I got.

Q. So first, Tim, I'm going to ask you, you've been around the block a little bit.

TIM O'NEAL: Yes.

Q. So how do you make sure that you don't put too much pressure on yourself this week and still are able to enjoy the moment while competing?

TIM O'NEAL: Well, I qualified for the U.S. Open at Chambers, so that was kind of the same thing. Try to make it as normal as possible, which it's very hard. I just go out and try to have fun. I want to play well, I want to make the cut, I want to do all those things, but at the end of the day I just want to have fun. If I play the way I know I can play, I think everything will be fine, but I'm trying not to put too much pressure on myself because a lot of people are pulling for me, and I'm pulling for myself, too. Just try to go out there and have fun.

Q. What did you learn from your, valuable things you learned?

J.J. SPAUN: A lot of it was mental. It wasn't really so much like physical or, you know, technique-wise in my game. It was just learning how to deal with the bigger picture of the big crowds and hitting balls next to Tiger, just trying to make everything kind of -- kind of downplay it, I guess, because it can really hype you up and get you really out of your comfort zone. I knew I had the game and the tools to kind of compete out here, and when I got out here during -- with the exemption, it was kind of a rude awakening, but it was just helping me to learn to be comfortable in my own shoes. And that was the biggest thing I took from it, was to go out there and not really care so much what other people thought, or people thinking of my game or what I'm shooting. It was more to go out there and try to have fun and play the best I can.

Q. Tim, this is for you. You went through Qualifying School twice and you weren't able to make it. So what will Thursday when you step on The First Tee, what will that mean to you?

TIM O'NEAL: Qualifying twice?

Q. Qualifying School.

TIM O'NEAL: Well, I've been more than twice.

MARK WILLIAMS: Missed by one twice.

TIM O'NEAL: Missed by one twice, okay.

I want to play out here. I feel I still have the game to play out here, so yeah, missing Q-School twice by one shot, that was a tough pill to swallow, but I'm still grinding, I'm just going to go out there and just play golf like I know I can.

MARK WILLIAMS: Perhaps on the other end of the coin, you've won three times on PGA TOUR Latinoamerica. What sort of things have you learned from winning in those experiences?

TIM O'NEAL: Winning never gets old, but playing down in South America and playing some really good courses, learning how to win and putting yourself in position to win, that's the key and that's what you're always trying to do.

Q. You said this is the first time that you've been here.

TIM O'NEAL: Yes.

Q. Have you been out on the course yet?

TIM O'NEAL: Yeah, I played yesterday in the pro-am.

Q. So what's your biggest takeaway from this golf course as you see it now for the first time?

TIM O'NEAL: I see why the scores aren't very low. The course is really -- it's all about position. The greens are not -- they only can put the pins in certain spots but you just can't short-side yourself, you have to be in the right spots. I have a friend who caddies out here and he was walking me through some of the holes. So you have to understand that middle of the green is always good.

Q. Who is caddying for you this week?

TIM O'NEAL: I have a friend of mine from home. My buddy that walked with me, he caddied for Strelman and K.J. Choi. He caddies for Choi right now and he used to caddie for Y.E. Yang.

Q. Sometimes they say we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors. What from the past, ancestors of African-American golfers, what would you take from some of

those? Like what would you take from Charlie Sifford? What would you take from Lee Elder? What characteristics of your game that you saw in them that you would use?

TIM O'NEAL: Perseverance. Those guys, they stuck with it. There's things they had to go through on and off the golf course to play and they stuck with it and they grinded it out and some of those guys made it and they played well.

Q. J.J., what's the biggest piece of advice that you would give to Tim now that he's in the shoes that you were in in 2016?

J.J. SPAUN: Just soak it all up. Soak it all in. No matter the outcome, like this is going to be a really great experience and I hope you play the best that you can. You've just got to like, no matter what happens, just learn from something, whether it's a certain shot or a certain thought or something. There's just always something that you can take from this week and that's really the way you can make the most out of this. Turn everything into a positive no matter what happens, but I think you're going to have a great week, man.

Q. Tim, along the way you mentioned the perseverance, did you ever think about giving it up or packing it in? And why or why not, and what got you through that, I guess?

TIM O'NEAL: A few times things didn't go my way, didn't have any financial backing, all those sort of things. I knew I still could play, so that's kind of what kept me going. And my mom was the one that kind of inspired me not to really stop playing.

Q. What was the closest you came?

TIM O'NEAL: 2011, that was the closest. And I stopped for almost a year.

Q. What did she tell you?

TIM O'NEAL: Oh, she said you're stupid for not trying to play, pretty much. I was like, okay. And some things worked out and I was able to start playing again and then played Latin America and got back on the Web and stuff like that.

Q. I wonder if you two have a relationship close to Tiger? And what did you learn from him and if you have some advice from him?

TIM O'NEAL: No. I've only met Tiger a couple times in college, but no to answer your question, I don't have a close relationship with Tiger.

J.J. SPAUN: The only relationship I have with Tiger is when we talk about the Dodgers, that's about it. We don't even talk about anything else.

I mean, it's hard to kind of get in his inner circle, but he's cool. I haven't played with him yet, but I'm sure one of these days when I get paired with him, it will kind of be a little more in depth.

MARK WILLIAMS: All right, gentlemen. Thank you for joining us. We wish you all the best this week and we appreciate your time in here, being gracious and sharing some of your thoughts. We also appreciate Mr. Sifford being here and thank you for being here on this special occasion.