

GREAT EXUMA CLASSIC

ROUND 1 INTERVIEW

January 16, 2023

AKSHAY BHATIA (-8)



Q. Akshay, good solid two-day start in the Bahamas where you won last year. One, how does it feel to be back and to be in contention once again?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, it's obviously very nice to be back, very comfortable. It's hard not to be happy starting the year in the Bahamas, and to have two weeks of it, you know, it's super cool and we're very fortunate that the Korn Ferry Tour can host events like this.

It was good. A little scruffy today. Just kind of clean up some stuff and get a little more comfortable. Obviously we haven't played at all in the last four months, so just, you know, getting back to the roots and everything.

Q. You said on the front nine you had to remind yourself you're in the Bahamas. What does that mean? Is it from your win or just the beauty of the place, or what does that mean?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Just the atmosphere, like how lucky we are. Back at home it's 35 degrees and we're in 75 degrees and right next to the ocean. Just to realize that everything's OK. And just have fun with my girlfriend, which sometimes it's very hard for me but easier for her.

Q. How does it feel to be back at the place where you won last year and like what is it about this course and the setup that you just love so much?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I think how hard the golf course is, and I guess in my brain like it seems fairly easy because I just kind of know what to do and how to navigate it. A lot of the shots I remember from last year, like I know what to do. And the golf course is actually in better shape this year. It's actually a little harder in my opinion. So I don't know, just the -- just being comfortable. I know what it takes to win out here and just good vibes honestly.

Q. You had a pretty good run at the end of last season, you came close to that Tour card, but coming into this season having won this event last year, what's your mindset starting 2023 as a whole?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I mean, I feel like, you know, I was listening to Jeremy's interview, last year like everything about his game is better and I feel the same way. Like I played two Tour events this offseason and I made both cuts, finished top-20 in Bermuda, so I just feel like my game is a lot better. I'm obviously injury free starting the year, which is a lot nicer. I just, I

know what it takes, I know I can win out here. I know I can, you know, just manage my way to get my Tour card and finish No. 1 because that's a big goal. And now 30 cards, wish that was last year, it would be a lot more inviting, I guess, because you're not really trying to secure it super early because you have the last, you know, four, five events to win there, too.

Q. Having that rookie season under your belt and coming back for this season, does that help you a little bit knowing that you've already gone through a complete full season and now you can attack it maybe a little bit more confidently?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah. I mean, I'm not going to play 14 in a row like I did last year. I'll just kind of take it week by week, really enjoy. I know what the mindset needs to be. You know, playing all the golf courses that I did last year and going to all of them makes it a lot easier, especially as a rookie, you're just kind of like trying to get as much work in but, you know, rest.

Q. There's been a track record of Presleigh on your bag if something goes right. Can you talk about what that is?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I don't know, we've made, what, eight cuts in a row I think, eight or nine cuts. We Mondayed into a Tour event. We finished, like I said, top-20 and whatever, top-40 in the other Tour event, so it's pretty wild. Like I don't know how to explain it, it's just, I don't know, just fate, I guess.

Q. She keeps you calm and kind of like -- it's not like she's talking too much golf with you, you can kind of step away in the moment if you need to as well?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah. I mean, she makes you realize like it's not a big deal. And I just need to remind myself like how lucky I am for us to be 20 years old, traveling to a bunch of different countries and a bunch of different states. It's fun and it's awesome to have her by my side every week.

Q. Last question from me is 18, talk about that being the finishing hole, what challenges that presents. Obviously you handled it very well in the fourth round last year, but kind of walk us through the 18th hole.

AKSHAY BHATIA: It's -- well, later in the day the sun like hits the water so it blinds you off the tee, so that's one challenge honestly because you're like you don't really know where the ball's going to go.

There's just not a room for error. Like hit a little left and, you know, you're in the trees and then you hit a little right and you're in the water. And the layup's not very easy either being 650 yards, so you're hitting driver, 5, 4, hybrid anywhere in the layup. And then the green's a weird angle.

It's a tough hole, like there's not a lot of birdies I don't think, but today was a little easier

being downwind.

Q. You've been known to pull out like some creative shots. I've heard caddies say about you, you have probably three shots with every look you have. Do you feel like you can kind of get creative out here a little bit?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah. I mean, especially like driver here, I've worked really hard on hitting like a draw, a low ball, like different shots with that. So like different wind conditions I know and can confidently swing it freely to what the hole presents. With irons, obviously I felt like I've always been a really good iron player and here, for me, I just change the face angle. So if the wind's off the left, I open the face, if the wind's off the right, close the face. I have a pretty good idea of like how far I need to hit it or how hard I need to hit it on certain shots.

So I feel like that's why I really like this golf course, I really like the wind and I just like hard golf courses because you have to play really good to shoot 4, 5 under and you don't have to -- you know, you're not getting lapped.