

ROUND 4 PRESS CONFERENCE
April 7, 2024



AKSHAY BHATIA (-20, won playoff)

DOUG MILNE: We would like to welcome the winner of the 2024 Valero Texas Open, Akshay Bhatia.

Akshay, congratulations, your second career PGA TOUR win. With the win, 500 FedExCup points, move to No. 12, obviously a big week next week now and in addition, the remaining four Signature Events on PGA TOUR.

When you came out of scoring, the dust had settled a little bit, you went to your caddie, you shook him and you said, "What just happened?"

Tell us what just happened.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, Denny played unbelievable. Coming off nine, I had a great up-and-down, six-shot lead, nine holes to play. You're like OK, let's see how big this lead can get.

He makes a 20-footer from off the green, I three-putt from off the green. Birdie the next, he pars. Now we're back to five. From there it was just unbelievable how good he hit it. The putts he made, I mean, that guy has some guts and he's going to win a lot of times out here.

But I did tell him in scoring, I was like, "Hey, man, you're in Augusta already, come on, let me go."

For real, it was awesome what Denny did. That's kind of -- it was a really good feeling kind of making that putt on 18 in regulation when he made. You know, just fortunate to hit a couple good shots on 18 in the playoff and get it done.

DOUG MILNE: You've proven that you can win before this week with the Barracuda win, you've got this victory under your belt now, you met your fiancée here in San Antonio. Are you able to get your arms around a little bit of that the significance of the win here this week?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Probably not yet, it's so fresh. This place is very special to me. I know it's special to Presleigh. And they've always been very, very gracious towards me, giving me a couple spots, sponsor exemptions.

Yeah, I just can't wait to be back here. This golf course is awesome. It's hard, stressful and you just feel like you're never safe, so it was awesome.

DOUG MILNE: One last question from me, then we'll turn it over to Alec if he has one.



All week you've been good enough to talk to us after your rounds. You talked a lot about the mental part of the game, the quote on the wrist. With that said, can I ask you about today's?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah. I wrote "W-T-W," so wire-to-wire was kind of the motto of the day. It was more so just visualizing that string from the first hole to the 72nd hole and just seeing that string and know I'm on the right path. I did a great job this week, I played some phenomenal golf. I learned a lot about myself last week and I think it carried over to this week.

Q. Can you kind of tell me how beneficial having adversity like you just faced out there and how good it is to have that under your belt and how it's going to benefit you going forward?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I've learned a lot being in contention a couple times. Barracuda was a weird one. I felt like I don't know if I was ready to win. My caddie had a ton of belief in me.

Then Sentry, you know, I remember getting on that first tee and just not having a clear picture on that first tee shot, make double, kind of throw myself out of the tournament.

And then last week I held the lead with 10 holes to go and I learned a lot about myself, shots I wish I would have backed off of and I would have probably had a better chance of winning the golf tournament.

So I took that into consideration this week. I've had two different caddies the last two weeks. It's pretty crazy, you just have a little more belief, like Jaymo (sp?) did a great job this week, Cook did a great job last week, but at the end of the day you know how good you are, the belief you have in yourself.

And I think the adversity, that's kind of what we sign up for. It was awesome to kind of get that win.

Q. I wanted to ask you, Barracuda, you were kind of in Denny's shoes chasing, seemed like you shot up the board on Sunday. I was just wondering if that entered your mind at all today and knowing how you kind of kept that at bay knowing you had to hang onto it instead of being the chaser?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I played so good all week. I played great today, I didn't make many mistakes. I had one three-putt.

But Denny just played unbelievable. It was like this guy was just not human. When you see that, you're like, crap, like I'm not doing anything that bad and yet my lead is going from five to four to three to two to one.



Just making some of those putts when I needed to, I made a lot of three- to four-footers today. The putt on 17, I hit a good putt, just not enough speed and I kind of know why.

It's just crazy. Like 18 you kind of knew he was going to make it so I knew I had to do the same thing. Yeah, it was pretty crazy, that kind of battle.

Q. And you mentioned you haven't really had a chance to let it set in yet, but obviously some personal history at Augusta. What are the emotions about getting the chance to go back there and have your first Masters experience?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I don't even know. I played Augusta in 2020 maybe, I had a member take me out. I remember how amazing that place is. But to realize that I'm playing in the Masters next week, it's absolutely crazy.

It was on my mind all week, but I tried to stick to my game plan. And I have bigger goals than just playing the Masters, I have more goals that I want to achieve and this kind of helps me for that.

Q. I'm just wondering, because we watched you today on the green and you seemed extremely calm and collected even with this massive crowd following you all day. How do you maintain that mentality?

AKSHAY BHATIA: It was really hard. I never felt comfortable last night -- the last three nights honestly. I've slept good, but not deep. It's been all these thoughts, all these shots, everything that could happen.

I called my psychologist three, four times. I called him this morning, I called him last night and we just talked about what the outcome goal was not just today but in the future.

Yeah, I just, I felt calm, but also like this is the feeling that is really uncomfortable, and it kind of sucks but you also enjoy it.

Q. I was thinking about two moments today. You've talked all week pretty openly about your emotions and the rollercoaster. One was when McCarthy started running in those birdies on the back nine, you had to feel helpless at that point, and also to make the shots that you had to make on 18 in regulation, how did you -- how were you able to do that? How were you able to keep your emotions in check?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I played great today, I shot 5 under on a tough golf course. Denny just played -- it was one of those rounds that happens.

I didn't feel helpless. I was hitting the right shots, I was leaving myself in good spots. I had a goal to shoot 4 under today. I thought if I could shoot 4, it's going to be really tough to kind of catch me. And I was doing great. I started off great.



The shots in regulation, 18, I don't love the tee shot. There's trouble right for me. If I overcut it, it's in the rough or it could go way left into the trees. With the wind direction changing, that ball stayed in the first cut.

I hit a pretty nice, good second shot. That second shot's not easy at all. The wedge shot was great. It's tough, you can't really feel your arms, your hands, your mind's racing and trying to hit a soft 54 from 106 yards is pretty tough, but I've done it before. At Barracuda I had the same feelings.

Kind of going into the playoff I felt like myself, like calm. I was just happy to have the opportunity to win the golf tournament.

I just never thought that Denny would let go and I thought I had to do something pretty spectacular to kind of close it off.

Q. I wonder as a followup on the cart ride back up to the 18th tee for the playoff if you had some sort of talk with yourself about accepting whatever was about to happen?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Not really. I was worried a little bit about my shoulder. My caddie did a great job kind of reminding me why are we here today. He was awesome. He said some great quotes to me, he kept me in the moment. And just icing on the cake just being in the playoff, making that putt. It just kind of shows to myself that I can do that on a pretty significant stage.

Q. Can I ask one more? One last thing, I promise. What was the last thing you thought or told yourself before you made the stroke to win?

AKSHAY BHATIA: I told myself out loud, "C'mon, Akshay, let's frickin' go."

Q. Akshay, I'm curious at what point in the day did you take a gander at a leaderboard? I'm sure you were playing with Denny, aware of what he was doing. Was there a specific time that you looked at a leaderboard? Were you aware of the situation on 17, like if you didn't make that putt you would have been tied going to the 18th?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I knew it was a two-man race. I saw Rory was playing great, he was 10 under, but I think I was 16, 17 under.

Yeah, I mean, I looked. I kind of knew where I stood, but I tried to stay true to myself, stick to my game plan. I was 4 under, like I said, that was my goal today, but I guess I needed 5 and I got that on the last putt. Yeah, it was pretty crazy. Denny played awesome again and his win's coming soon.

Q. Speaking of that last putt, coming off of 17, like I said, missing a five-footer there,



what were the thoughts over that putt? Were you fully confident in yourself, like just letting adrenaline kick in? Kind of take me through your mind on the 18th green.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, similar putt to what I had at Barracuda, downhill left to right. You know, him making it, you know what you need to do.

But like I said, I kind of just told myself, let's frickin' go, like this is kind of your moment and you miss it, OK, you finish second. But I just had that feeling that I can do it. It's a good feeling to have because some people can kind of shy away from the moment and I feel like I'm starting to get better at embracing it.

Q. Just really quickly, just wanted to get a little clarity on what happened to the shoulder and do you have any concerns moving forward about it still bothering you?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, so when I made the putt in regulation, I raised my arm and I put it in kind of an uncomfortable spot, kind of dislocated, it came back in. It's happened before. I had this happen from pickleball and then had it happen in Bermuda, but it's just going to feel a little loose. My physio, he'll take care of me. I'm not too, too concerned, but it's definitely a little uncomfortable right now.

DOUG MILNE: And then finally, I know I asked you outside, I'd love to get it on camera if we could. You're headed back to Augusta where you first competed in the Drive, Chip & Putt as a contestant. Going back now, can you look back and see how that kind of helped your development as a player?

AKSHAY BHATIA: Yeah, I mean, Augusta National's obviously very special. I think it's one week of the year that everyone wants to be there, checks it off. As a kid going there for the first time in the inaugural Drive, Chip & Putt is pretty special, something I'll always remember, wearing those baggy pants, making that putt on 18, just looking like a goofball.

I can't wait to go back. I was watching a little bit today. Seeing these kids hit on the range, how people watch, it's unbelievable. Just even seeing some players, you feel kind of like a pinch-me moment.

DOUG MILNE: Well, Akshay, congratulations. We appreciate your time and it was a thrill to watch you get it done.

AKSHAY BHATIA: Thank you.

