

KitchenAid Senior PGA Championship

Thursday, May 24, 2018

Stuart Smith

Press Conference



BOB DENNEY: We would like to welcome Stuart Smith to the interview room here at the 79th KitchenAid Senior PGA Championship.

STUART SMITH: Thank you.

BOB DENNEY: Our leader in the clubhouse, Stuart is the Director Golf at Somerset Golf And Country Club in Reno. He's making his fourth trip to the Senior PGA Championship and he is already finished with a 66 today, which betters his previous three trips by four shots.

STUART SMITH: That's about right.

BOB DENNEY: He's played in 2013, 2014, and 2016, so if you could just give us an impression of what, today what you accomplished and your role as a PGA professional and member and this is your third trip here, quite a charming tour.

STUART SMITH: It is. I didn't think I was going to be here this afternoon, although during my round I thought of a thousand things I could say if I was here. But I'm happy to be here representing the PGA of America, still growing the game of golf, teaching, merchandising, doing all those things at home and it's just, it's a treat to play with these guys and it's a treat to be competitive and Benton Harbor is a beautiful place, my third visit here and I love the golf course. To me it's just a great golf course maybe for me. I made the cut the prior two times I played here, so I was confident and you never know what happens in this game as evidenced by a lot of the first holes and the last hole. So it was a good day.

BOB DENNEY: Take us through a little bit about that streak of five birdies in a row.

STUART SMITH: Five birdies in a row. Yeah, I don't remember the last time I did that, I know I've done it. Starting on 7, which you wouldn't think that's a birdie hole, I hit a drive to the left rough, 5-iron just trying to get it over that bunker and it fed back it that hole position, which is a tough, tough hole position and made a nice putt.

Number 8, good drive and a wedge in close for a short

birdie putt.

No. 9, good drive, poor second, but I was trying to keep it up that left side to attack that pin and I missed it a little bit left but left myself with a nice wedge, hit it close. Made the putt.

Long drive to number 10. I told my -- I have a lot of members following me here today -- actually I have eight that made the trip, so it's exciting that they're out. I said, wow, that was a special nine. And proceeded to birdie 10, hit a great drive, good second, got away with a mishit on the third but I got it up on that back tier when it was in the air I thought I was in trouble, but again another short putt.

11, pitching wedge, a little bit long left, tough putt up that tier, but handled that okay. Made that one.

And that was five birdies in a row. It just kept going. So it was good.

BOB DENNEY: Open it up for questions.

Q. How do you sort of pass off from what happened on 18 carrying that into tomorrow, just not letting that, not worrying about that too much?

STUART SMITH: Well, it happens. I think it's not if, it's just when, maybe even for players of -- I'm not going to say our caliber and belittle my ability, but I think it's going to happen and it happens and I shot 5-under and if you would have said that this morning I probably would have said, I'm sleeping in, I'll take 66. So I hit a bad second shot there, we got delayed, the group ahead of us had a little ruling and I misclubbed, the wind seemed like it changed, I can give you all the excuses that you a lot of the guys that I see up here usually talk about, and I hit a bad shot and I tried to get cute with the next one and paid the penalty and mishit a putt. So yeah, six is six, it's still a pair of sixes on the board and I'm pretty thrilled to have shot 66.

Q. In terms of just the overall course today how did you feel that you were playing out there?

STUART SMITH: I've always liked to play early because the greens are perfect and usually the conditions are pretty benign in the morning, especially if you miss fog here. So with the benign conditions, I mean I didn't, I was hitting it in the right spots, so I

guess that's the key to this golf course is if you have 30 footers putting over three hills and they break four times, you're not going to do very well. But I just seemed to be hitting it in the right spot today. Maybe that was lucky, maybe it was just I'm starting to learn the course after a few times out. I guess that's it. It was nice to play early and it will be nice to play in the first part of the draw in the afternoon tomorrow.

Q. What was your goal when you teed off this morning?

STUART SMITH: Boy, I tried this life for a long time and I guess my goal now is to enjoy it. I felt good, I've been playing well, I played well the last few years, and I really just tried the cliché of stay in the moment and hit a shot at a time. You just don't know what's going to happen. I think back to John Delacarabo a couple years ago who had a great finish and I mean I play practice rounds with these guys and I hit it the same, I don't hit it as consistent maybe, but I hit it identical to these guys so maybe I'm finally starting to believe that, hey, I'm over the mental part of it, now I can just go out and play my game. I hope that doesn't bite me tomorrow, but no, I'm just going to go play tomorrow and we'll see what happens. That's all I can do. Stay in the moment.

Q. There's another round of guys to go off, but there's a very good chance you're sleeping with the lead tonight and in the biggest tournament you play. What do you think that will be like?

STUART SMITH: I don't know, necessarily. I can't say that, oh, it won't bother me, but it, to me it's fun. To see my name on the board out there, it's not like I'm blind to the leaderboard, that was cool. All my members are taking pictures and I know at home all my members are pulling up that screen and I tell them, go to the middle and then look down, so it probably took them awhile to find my name today. So it's up at the top, so it's cool. I'm really proud -- I'm proud of that. I'm proud of my town, I'm proud of my section, I'm proud of my family. I mean it's a good day today. I would say ice cream tastes better on Saturday, because that means you made the cut, but ice cream is going to taste good today.

Q. As we just were talking about, you're leading the KitchenAid Senior PGA Championship right now. Arguably one of the strongest fields in golf. If this moment doesn't top anything else that you've done competitively, what's another moment that compares to this moment right now that you've accomplished?

STUART SMITH: Oh, this is certainly fantastic. I've had some -- I'm very lucky in the game of golf being a PGA professional, but I've had some great moments. They stem from, there's -- I'll give you three great

moments, since there's no one else here. My dad caddied for me in my first PGA TOUR event when I played in the AT&T and my dad caddied for me at Pebble Beach. And that was really, really special. Especially now that he's gone. So that memory just is very cool. I thought about my dad really vividly one time out there today and it brought a tear to my eye.

My other moment is I qualified for the 2013 PGA Championship and my whole family attended. I had my wife and my son, my two sons, my older son Jordan caddied for me, so that was like the greatest moment in the world. I was last off the second day, so I was the last guy to finish on 18. I made a great par to miss the cut, of course. But just having my son carry that bag out in front of me was really, really cool.

And then I played in South Africa when I was younger and I met my wife in Palabora and we'll celebrate our 25th anniversary this September so golf has been great to me, I can't even imagine life without golf and it's brought me to who I am now and it's maybe a different story than all these other guys, but I'm just thrilled to be in the game and of course I'm thrilled to be here and like you said, it's, this is a great, great moment. I thought it was going to be smaller and I know this is small maybe compared to maybe like Masters and everything, but it's cool. Thank you.

Q. What happens now before you go to bed tonight and does your plan change because of all the friends that you have with you here? Are you going to try to eliminate distractions because of where you are on the leaderboard?

STUART SMITH: No, no, that wouldn't work. I've lived that life, tried to do that. I'm going to have lunch and I'm going to practice a little bit, maybe work on a couple things, because I'm always trying to get better, and I won't over do it though and I'm going to go to Silver Harbor Brewery and with all my members and I'm going to have a beer and I'm going to have dinner and I'm going to go home to the house that we rented and chill out and that's it. It's not going to change my plans whatsoever, that's for sure. There's a long way to go. I've seen a lot of guys up here after round one, there's a long way to go. Who knows what it will hold. Maybe I'll be here Sunday, maybe I won't. But I'll be at the Giants/Cubs game on Sunday night though, unless I do really good and play late.

Q. Living where you do, do you get away during the winter to try to keep your game in some kind of shape at this time of the year for this event?

STUART SMITH: That would be no. No, living in Reno we stay open year round and we cut our golf staff to three of us, just to get by in the winter, but we stay open weather depending, so we don't have a shut

down date. So really January and February we're really busy with not much rain or snow. March we shut down a little bit when we had about 18 inches of snow on the course. But, no, I ski and took my younger son to nationals in snowboarding and just did a lot of things. Do I practice? I'm very diligent about working out every day, very diligent about swinging a golf club every day, and one of my fellow golf pros, Don Berry, who is no stranger to this event, I remember him saying, at one speech that he gave he said just every day do one thing to get better and that's what I really try and do. Mentally, I accept that and it may be a push up, it may be eating better, it may be just something different. But I just try and get better every day and that's my goal and I still try and, I still try and do that. I'm out here yesterday, still trying to get better, working on some putting things and it's fun.

Q. Is there a special story as to how many friends and family you have coming with you this week?

STUART SMITH: I have of course my older son's on the bag, he's 21, Jordan. And that's exciting. It's his second or third time. Funny, he's not really even a golfer and this is his third major that he's caddied in. So that's exciting for him.

I have two really great friends that are members Curtis Chan and Murina Kitamura and they have been with me to every one of my majors, so this is their sixth trip. And then I have just some good friends that are members that came out. I have the Fishers and the Zaronis, they missed my three birdies in a row, they couldn't walk that hard loop. But Beghams and then I have five people coming tomorrow who I stayed at their house in Arizona when we had the qualifying for us to even get here. So it's a nice contingent and it's fun and I got everyone rooting at home I'm sure.

Q. What was your attempt to play on TOUR, like your journey and what was the determining factor in ending up where you are?

STUART SMITH: Well, you know, coming out of college I played at UCLA, so it's nice to see all my teammates here like Duffy and Tom and Corey I saw today for the first time. I'm missing a couple, I know. Steve Pate. Steve Pate and I were freshmen together. So when I got out of college of course golf's been my life, so I really pursued, I really tried to pursue the TOUR through the mini tours. I went to the finals of the Q-School four times but never got my PGA TOUR card. I played all kinds of tours trying to monitor my own money and do it with really no sponsorship. I played in South Africa nine years. I had a couple good seasons there. Eventually I think I just tried -- it became -- there was, it was just too much. I tried to get too good too fast. I didn't have the patience, I guess, or as I see. So players -- I just didn't have the patience and I wanted to get better, of course, but I just never had the patience

to keep driving, I wanted it too fast, I guess. I wanted to hit it longer, farther, higher, straighter, make every putt and I didn't have the best attitude maybe at that time so I wasn't mentally strong and eventually I just combusted probably about 1992. I didn't even play club professional golf again probably until about 2000, 2001, because I missed it. So that's why I would never -- I had an exemption into the finals at Champions Q-School last year and I didn't go. I just, it's not me anymore. So that's why maybe I do have an advantage this week because it's fun to me. I'm going to play hard and learn from my experiences and just like my wife said, just enjoy the ride. Well that's a pretty good start of the ride so far.

Q. You played for the little pro.

STUART SMITH: I played for the little pro. Eddie Merrins.

Q. Do you want to talk about him a little bit and what kind of a leader he was or how inspirational he was in your career?

STUART SMITH: We called him the little pro, that's for sure. I know he was -- you looked at him, he was just so, he was God-like. I mean he really, he wasn't that necessarily that hard to talk to or that easy to talk to, but he was very thoughtful and he was very encouraging and of course a great teacher and a great mentor and I was always the guy on the bubble playing five, six, seven, eight on the team, so I don't know, I mean I wasn't, I didn't have a close relationship with him. Of course I wish I would have now because of all the knowledge he could have instilled in me, it would have been awesome. But he's a great man to be at Bel-Air for so long and now head pro emeritus at Bel-Air, just, I mean just a wonderful man, he pretty much would do anything for you. He liked Duffy a lot because he liked guys that could hit it far. Steve Pate, Jay Delsing, Duffy Waldorf, they all hit it far so he loved those guys. But quite an honor to play for Coach Merrins.

Q. And do you snowboard and when you watch your son snowboard do you get worried because of how potentially dangerous it can be?

STUART SMITH: Well not so much, I'm a skier, so I grew up skiing and racing, so I try and throttled my skiing back here every year. But my son, that's another one, it's like my double bogey, it's not if he gets hurt, it's when. And he's had a broken elbow and a broken wrist and even at nationals we were two hours into the emergency room before one of his competitions and that's a dangerous sport. I would rather be out making double bogeys than breaking elbows. But I still enjoy skiing, I try and be careful, but I can handle most everything from my up bringing.

Q. I know you a couple years ago you were your section professional of the year in northern California. Which is an award for all those roles you talked about when you first sat down. Compare that honor, that achievement, with the achievement you have right now for your playing skills, sitting in this room.

STUART SMITH: Yeah, being awarded your Section Professional of the Year, not Player of the Year is quite a, that was quite an honor. You're recognized really there amongst your peers for service to the golf business, for just what I do on a daily business, because golf certainly, I mean playing golf certainly with me isn't the No. 1 thing I do. That's by far -- I love to be competitive and I love to try and get better, but we have a great junior program and as evidenced by the member support that I have even coming all the way to Michigan to watch me play, I have a good rapport with all my members. Men's club, ladies club, I mean Professional of the Year was just a great honor, just a great, great honor. A lot of great pros in northern California. I'm sure my playing, my playing ability certainly had a little bit to do with it, you look at Darrell Kestner, who is here, who is our Professional of the Year throughout the country, so playing ability certainly has a part role in it, but I think a small role. It's just more service, my junior program, my willingness to always help out those in need that wanted to play at my place or, again, I just love the game, I just really love the game.

BOB DENNEY: Today you played with the two-time national champion Tim Thelen and can you speak about your friendship with him and how he was able to help you today, possibly.

STUART SMITH: Tim's a great player. Unfortunately I can't really say that I -- I haven't played with him before, I know I've been at the bottom of the leaderboard and looked at his name at the top of the leaderboard and as evidenced by his ball striking today. He's a great player, I inquired about his journey on the European seniors TOUR now, he's played there eight years he told me and there's only 54 guys on the European senior Tour. I said, wow, that's pretty good odds. That's better. But a great guy and nice to play with him and Mark Moulard, both class acts and I don't think I've ever had a pairing that I haven't enjoyed here at Benton Harbor. They have all, all the guys out here are class acts.

BOB DENNEY: He's one of 41 PGA club professionals in this championship and we're glad to have you, Stuart Smith.

STUART SMITH: Thank you, everyone.