

JOHN SMOLTZ

CHRIS RICHARDS: Good morning, everyone. I'm pleased to be joined with Mr. John Smoltz here at the Mitsubishi Electric Classic.

John, you've played twice on the Champions Tour now. Is there a different anticipation this week coming back and playing in Atlanta, a city that's meant so much to you?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, this is like beyond going to Disney World, right? Playing in your home city, my whole family, my friends. I'm going to have some -- there's going to be some heckling going on, which I expect from my buddies.

No, I've been looking forward to it. When the schedule came out and I was afforded this opportunity, which I am beyond blessed to be part of, this was the one that you circle and go, okay, if I could play my best, it would be great to play my best here in the middle of baseball season, just getting cranked up. I'm pretty excited to be in my home state and to be playing golf.

CHRIS RICHARDS: How's your game right now?

JOHN SMOLTZ: The good and bad news is it's not where it needs to be, so I've got two more days for that to be good. I'm just trying to catch up, like last-minute studying for an exam, which can be okay. Been on the road previously the last two weeks and the incredible challenge for me is to balance work and fun and competitive golf. I make no bones about it, it has been a lot harder than I thought.

But when I get in an event, my competition addiction kicks back in and there's nothing that takes the place when you're no longer playing professionally in your sport, you kind of miss that competition, and golf is the only -- besides over-50 basketball, golf has been filling that void and just trying to relive the competitive juices and the adrenaline. The difference is you don't want the kind of adrenaline that I had on the mound on the golf course. It doesn't work for the golf course, it works for the mound.

CHRIS RICHARDS: I'll open it up to questions.

Q. Are you expecting, I don't know, Glavin, Chipper, any old teammates to come out here?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Glavin may be working, I don't know. I know a bunch of the guys I play golf with are already preparing something, so I have to be careful on taking glances and seeing, but I know that we've all talked about in our casual rounds what it would be like

playing out here competitively. When you see the likes of Bernhard Langer competing at the level he did at the Masters, it's like, man.

So I want to learn from my last one in Tucson and continue to improve and believe that I can make a bunch of birdies.

Q. I don't know if you had certain preconceptions when you were younger, if you were thinking I'm going to play in the PGA TOUR Champions at some point. I don't know how realty has meshed with what you thought this would be.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, no, that's a great question. I remember all the way back to my days in spring training never thinking I would be -- this is like second year in the big leagues, always kidding my teammates that if you ever let me play with a pro, I'll rise to the occasion, never thinking that would happen. We're not a very good team and not a lot of people knew who -- and all of a sudden I got a chance to do that with Ken Green, Calcavecchia and Lee Trevino. At the time I was like an 8 handicap and I shot 2 under, my career best, and it made the front page and all my teammates put earmuffs on the next day because they didn't want to hear it.

Then as my career developed around the mid 30s, I said I want to -- my plan was to retire, get in a competitive mode and try to play on the Champions Tour, and they were like, shut up, you know, same old thing, you're never going to be able to do that. It's been a goal for a long time.

So just when I think about qualifying last year for the U.S. Senior Open, I got a ton -- I probably got more texts for that than my Hall of Fame notice because in most people's eyes, that was an unbelievable accomplishment. In my eyes it was the greatest accomplishment I ever had individually.

So from that, these opportunities came and now I'm trying to figure out how to juggle both. I don't want it to obviously take away from my first job and what I'm paid to do. The reality of playing in these is no different than when I got roughed up in my first couple years in the big leagues. I learned so much as a pitcher that last year's Senior Tour -- it wasn't pretty, I learned a ton about my golf game. I'm still learning, I'm still taking notes, I'm still trying to compete at the highest level, and you know, this is kind of like another one of those dreams that I've had that I've been able to achieve and I keep reaching for more, I keep trying to see where I can take it.

Q. You talked earlier about the competition in this kind of, you know, whatnot, but where is the comparison to being on the mound or in a safe situation in the ninth trying to make a putt, is there a comparison as far as the pressure?

JOHN SMOLTZ: The pressure, believe it or not, is 10 times more for me here than it is on the mound. I'm sure the same could be said for these guys if whatever they're gifted in outside of golf that they're not comfortable with, it would probably be the same.

But these guys have been doing this for a long time. I mean, they've got their routine. I'm sure they get angst about some things, but probably not most. For me, it's about reps at this point. I would much rather -- I've said this, I would much rather have the bases loaded every single pitch and a 3-2 count than to sit and wait and think about golf shots that you're either familiar with or unfamiliar with.

So I'm learning that in this format to be more positive in my time waiting to hit a golf shot. As a pitcher, you go when you're ready. As a golfer, you go when time allows you to go. The way they manage everything is just second nature to them. It would be the same for me on the mound. In a situation where most people go, oh, my gosh, that's pressure, I was a lot more confident on what I could do on the mound than necessarily on the golf course, and I'm getting more and more familiar with that.

Q. Are you guys exchanging stories by any chance? Do you ask them, do they ask you?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, I let the conversations be on the personalities of whoever I'm playing with. I'm just thrilled to death to play with these guys. I've had nothing but tremendous welcome and kind of a sense of, you know, the fact that they are encouraging me to do more and more of these, which is cool.

My goal was not to right away jump into an exemption, it was to earn something, and I did that last year. I plan on in the future trying to go to Q-School and having some Monday and Friday qualifiers if my schedule allows. It's been a very difficult challenge to find weekends that work where I'm not either with the network or Fox. And I have to say that MLB Network and Fox have been unbelievably supportive in my quest to try and do this.

So driving over here thinking about just the last couple weeks and just been -- this morning I had to wait for some workers to come to my house and I looked at video for the game I've got to do on Tuesday in Chicago. I said I wasn't going to look at baseball all week and I lied. I've got to make sure I'm prepared come Tuesday for my game in Chicago.

Q. How familiar are you with this course?

JOHN SMOLTZ: I like this course a lot, played it a lot. I know it's changed from a turf, you know, fairways and greens, and there's a new nine that I had only played once. These two pro-ams for me are in a perfect world would just be getting used to a golf course, but I don't have to do that. So what these two pro-ams will be for me is to try to actually make it a five-day tournament, meaning I would like to approach these next two days as if it was a tournament to try to get in that mode.

I'm a historically lightning quick golfer. I don't really like taking time, so I'm learning how to play and drive here slower, brush my teeth slower. Like I literally have to do that to change the way that I play golf because that is a major difference between the way I play golf and

tournament golf, not to mention walking, which is something I don't do a lot of.

Q. Does your game suit this kind of course?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, yeah. You know, to be honest, the one thing that I am most confident in has been my biggest struggle the last two, three weeks since the last tournament has been my driver. That's like my greatest club. So I'm trying to regain the confidence in that because really that's what this golf course is going to demand is fairways. They're not going to be -- they're not going to roll out much, so you're going to have to really find the spots in distance. Distance used to be my friend, it's no longer, but I'm still adequate as far as the distance that I can hit.

Q. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe I remember you kind of found golf while you were becoming a pitcher.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah.

Q. If you had kind of become a fan of the game sooner, do you think you would have gone more towards the golf route and do you wish that you had gone sooner so you could do more events?

JOHN SMOLTZ: No, I didn't play golf until I was 20 years old. Lakeland, Florida, is the first time. I was like, shoot, what am I going to do, I've got nothing but time. I didn't understand the routine of professional baseball. So literally Lakeland, Florida, took up fishing and then took up golf, and once I took up golf, fishing has become a secondary thought. Golf has become a passion.

The only thing I wish I would have done differently in hindsight is maybe got some lessons. I've never taken a lesson, I'm self taught.

I never wanted golf to be like pitching. Pitching is so mechanical and so methodical, and really you have to maintain those things to be successful. I didn't want my hobby to go the same way. So when I literally would play golf, I didn't think one bit about a swing, I just hit. I tried to score and left it at that. Then the more I played, obviously I said I will never be the guy that gets mad when he hits it 15 feet from the stick, I'll never be that guy. Well, I turned into that guy immediately and I just became obsessed with how good could I get while playing baseball.

Still didn't get mechanical, still didn't get tips or lessons. I just watched people. That's what's awesome for me in this event, anybody I play with, I watch him. Their swing and their ability to play the game I try to emulate, even on the fly sometimes.

So if I have to go back in time, I would have started with the short game first and got some unbelievable lessons and then developed my game after that. When I retired, I got an opportunity early on to play in a Nationwide event. I knew I wasn't ready, but I couldn't pass

it up, in Valdosta, Georgia. That told me all I needed to know about how far my game really was against those young, incredibly talented guys.

But I just don't have the time to spend on the game that would take me to that next level. Some day. You know, I don't envision being a broadcaster the rest of my life, so some day maybe. I'll be 52 in May.

Q. So you've never gone to a swing coach?

JOHN SMOLTZ: No.

Q. Or done video?

JOHN SMOLTZ: I've done the video thing and it messed me up really bad. Something about my brain, the way I see things versus -- I've had tips, I've had people suggest, but I've never had something where I spent a week and two weeks transforming my game. My backyard is the Taj Mahal to golf. I built it for that reason and I would go out there and 200, 300 balls I would hit to figure out how to fade, figure out how to draw, figure out how to get a freedom swing I call it, the go-to swing.

The one issue for me is my golf swing will be the swing I have this week. It might not be in June. It might be a different swing. So there's some -- obviously some issues with that. The way that I'm wired is I've always been physically challenged with certain injuries and, you know, with my left shoulder, I've had to learn a whole new swing. Two operations and that's just the way I think.

And I also realize I can't do some of the things I really thought I would be able to do. I mean, 10 years ago I could hit it with anybody. I mean, literally anybody. Then a couple surgeries later you have to figure out how to do that differently. You have to give up on some things. The one thing that every week shows me at this level is I've got to find a way in my crazy schedule to get in the gym. I just -- it's just, it's hard. I haven't been in the gym in, being honest, like in two weeks. So that's the part I've got to find a better way to just stay -- hotel gyms are not the easiest, but they're there.

Q. Do you trade autographs much here with these guys? Do you get or give?

JOHN SMOLTZ: No, I'll give. I've never asked anybody really for their autograph.

Q. There's a lot of Hall of Famers here.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Oh, I know. I've cherished relationships, meeting people. I've gotten autographs for other people and I just -- it's amazing you ask that question. I just don't ask. I guess maybe part of my lifestyle has been filled with that, so for that I've got a lot of memories.

Q. You're not the only pitcher here playing this week. Do you keep in touch with Shigetoshi?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, I met him last night and he talked about his quest to try and get to that point as well. Look, besides living a dream, this has been like a fantasy of I kind of pinch myself at times to think where I've been, where I've come from, where I am, and how many people have doubted me. And rightfully so, because that's part of the deal. Like people sit at home, no matter in all walks of life, and they think they can do XYZ until they have to do it.

So for these guys, I say all the time I'm not trying to pretend anything. These are the greatest golfers in the world, I just get to be a part of it for a short period of time. I'm not looking to ever do this full time. This is something so cool and I've earned it and I can say that with the sponsor exemptions come -- I understand my responsibility and I understand, but I am trying to shoot the very best golf I can to get to that next level.

Q. Do these guys accept you pretty well on those terms?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah. The first thing I did this year was reach out to six or seven people that I know very well on this tour. I asked them individually what their thoughts were and everyone to a person said play in as many as you can, this is great and we think you're great for our tour and you can play. So obviously my first one in Tucson went really well and I was really pleased with it and know the progress I still have to make.

Q. Another guy I know you know well is Tiger. I'm just curious, his win kind of had everybody with an emotional reaction, but you knowing him personally, both of you guys going after your injuries. I was just curious to your reaction to all that.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Oh, his is at a whole other level. This is like transformation beyond belief. Texted him before the tournament started just wishing him luck. I had a really good feeling about this week for him personally, and no one knows what it's like until you experience some of that. I mean, no one can probably totally appreciate other than himself.

There are guys on this tour that have had to deal with the same, you know, kind of things but not all that came with Tiger. So that's what makes the story so unbelievable because it's not just a physical comeback, it's not just a mental comeback, it's an emotional, it's a whole package. Rarely do you ever see him show that kind of emotion afterwards, and that said it all. Just knowing him personally and knowing the physical talents he has, no one has ever questioned that. It's just whether he could physically get back to being able to play golf. He worked very hard at that. At his age and hopefully -- I'm sure that the injuries have shortened his career per se if there was -- you know, in a perfect world, how many years these guys can play at a particular level varies, although Bernhard Langer might play until he's 72. That's just unbelievable.

So, you know, I'm not surprised. I really am not. I think the one thing that people don't

understand, though, is how far mentally an athlete has to come when you've actually gone that far the other way. He filled that void. That is a huge -- you know, for me personally, I can only experience and talk about my experiences when I felt like how do I come back from XYZ, how do I get to the next level, and when you check that box as an athlete yourself, forget about everybody else's expectations, which are through the roof, it's pretty freeing.

When I won a Cy Young, when I was predicted to win of five others, everything I overcame to win the Cy Young pales in comparison to what he's doing, but I knew I checked in for what I thought I could do and that changed the rest of my career.

Q. John, can you put on your analyst hat and just give us real quickly, just the Braves for about a dozen games, seems like the pitching staff seems to be the topic of conversation?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, it's going to be this way for a while until they get some locked in non-changeable parts. I just don't think people understand. Now, forget the race for one second and what they're doing, but year in and year out you need some stability in your rotation. Obviously we had that for the heyday of our career. You can have a few interchangeable parts, but when you're trying to figure out which young guy as going to stick and who's staying healthy and who's not, last year you can't argue with their success they had at 32 or 33 pitchers. That's a tough formula to be successful year in and year out.

So if they can find a couple guys -- I've said this over the year of my experience and now watching baseball for 10 years, if you've got two hot guys in your lineup, two hot starters in your rotation and two hot bullpen guys, you're going to win a lot of games. That's a simple formula that not everybody gets to have.

You know, that can vary. It doesn't have to be the same two guys, but the bullpen is an issue that I think will be defined in the NL East by whose bullpen's the best. That's simply going to be the winner, whose bullpen's the best. Because baseball's played totally different, you would like to think that whose starting rotation is the most solid would get a leg up, but because guys don't pitch very much, you're having to eat too many innings.

So I don't know where the Kimbrel scenario's going to end up. Maybe it looks more like June, I don't know. The whole thing's befuddling me, but whoever lands him is going to have a leg up because whoever lands him's going to be in the mix. I don't think anybody who lands him is going to be 10 games out or 7 games out. That is going to be interesting to watch.

But from a National guy, not just a Braves, want him to be a good guy, I want to see the young guys stay in the rotation and struggle in the rotation and define themselves as a future stud instead of bouncing back and forth. And I just know -- but that's me, that's what I would do. I'm not saying it would be super successful, but that's what worked for us. What worked for us may not work in the future, you know?

Analytically, they're going to make decisions that are totally fueled on the information that they have and that's where it can get sticky at times. So I love a Kyle Wright. I want to see Kyle Wright give up some runs and learn himself. I want to see Max Fried stay in the rotation. I want to see these guys stay, I want to see them go through this.

They also don't have the luxury of what we had of being able to unlimited pitch whatever they want. That's a struggle to try to figure out. Because there's more arms than ever, there's more options, and the more options don't necessarily mean success, it just means more options.

So the Braves' offense is fine, that's going to score a lot of runs, but can they prevent the runs that win the game is there for them to win. They're going to be in the mix all year, no doubt. It's going to be whether or not by July they're able to make the necessary moves and give up on some of those -- you know, when you have a great farm system, that's great to have, but at some point you have championships to go get a guy that's going to get you to the next level.

It will be interesting to see between them, the Padres and I'm forgetting whoever else has that really, really good farm system, if they're in the mix. Like if the Padres are in the mix, like no one even thinks about the Padres right now because they know it's two years away. Padres are going to give up on some of those chips to be relevant now. The Phillies are going to give up, they were all in, so they're going to give up some of those prospects to win now.

As a baseball broadcaster, I can't wait to watch the NL East, but as a guy who lives here and can take his National hat off, I obviously would love to see Atlanta build on what they did last year because last year nobody in the world expected them to win the division. Nobody. The division came to them, but they won it. We'll see.

CHRIS RICHARDS: Thank you, John, for your time and good luck this week.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Thank you.