

2026 SANFORD INTERNATIONAL CHAMPION

ZACH JOHNSON PRESS CONFERENCE

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Zach, did it feel almost like match play the last 3 or 4 holes?

I didn't do a lot of leaderboard watching. I kind of noticed it – I made birdie on 12 – I think that got me to 10 (under), which I think at that point I had the lead, if I'm not mistaken. Granted, Ben (Crane) made birdie there too. But then once I made bogey on 13, I'm like 'hey, I kind of got to know where I'm at.' And so, my caddie and I were talking about it and, at that point, I mean, I hit some really good shots – I executed nicely. I hit an errant drive on 16, but other than that, I was really quite solid; a couple of misjudgments maybe and some misreads, but I was still executing quality shots, so golf-wise, what's most gratifying for me is that I had it, quite frankly I lost it, and then I was able to execute under, I don't know if you want to call it duress situations, but just execute when I had to – specifically on 17 and 18. I actually hit a good putt on 16, misread that too. But when you have to execute in this game, that's why you practice. I told Smitty after I made the putt on 17, I'm like 'I'm going to hit two of the best quality shots I've hit all week now' and I did on 18 and obviously, I made the putt. So, you know, I kind of blacked out there.

But I love competition. And that was competition at its purest form, purest for a number of reasons – like I said, having to execute and then you're playing against one of your best friends. It's hard, but at the same time, it's awesome because I'm his biggest fan and he's mine, so pretty cool.

That birdie on 17 was pretty big, so you knew when you were over that putt, you were down one?

Oh, 100%. I mean, at that point, you've got to know. I knew going into 15 where I stood. Ben made a heck of an up and down on 15, amazing up and down on 16, and took it and earned it. And so, I had to go and at least give myself a chance. I can't control what he's going to do, but at least give myself an opportunity. I think I missed technically two greens today, I putted one on the fringe. One was an easy chip, the other one was a hard one. I mean, I hit it for the most part good. I only hit four drivers today or maybe five. That's my best club in my bag and I didn't hit my driver very good. It's hard to hit quality tee shots when there's just no rhythm with it. I think I hit one on the front nine and my second one was on the 12th hole. It's not an excuse, it's just a fact.

So, when Ben hit that ball in close on 18, did you just kind of smile and go ‘alright?’

I was prepared for it. I mean, I knew enough at that point to know it was essentially match play. I’ve learned enough in my time that, you know, even on 17, I’m like ‘he’s going to hit a good shot, you have to hit a good shot.’ I can’t control what he’s going to do, I know he made bogey, but it was a very difficult two-putt. On 18, I’m like ‘I have to hit two quality shots to give myself a chance because he’s going to make a birdie.’ That’s what you’ve got to tell yourself and even when he was standing over the putt, I mean, I bent down – and he’s my buddy – I said a little prayer, I’m like ‘I want him to hit a quality putt.’ And in my mind, a quality putt means it’s got a really good chance of going in. And it went in and I’m like ‘okay, I know what I’ve got to do.’

So, that’s how you prepare. You don’t want to be given anything, especially in that situation. Ben Crane did not lose this golf tournament, I’ll just say that.

Which is pretty rewarding for you.

100%, yeah. I would have been the first one to hug him had he won it.

Andy North said before the tournament started and you were asked this that you might be the next Steve Stricker with how much you like playing these types of courses and the fact that you’re a Midwest guy and a fan favorite too.

Strick’s one of my dear buddies too, one of my closest men out here and someone I’ve looked up to for years, whether you’re talking about team championships or just individual golf the way he’s always plotted his way around. How he plays – fundamentally, how he plays the game, I’ve always admired.

We’ve done a lot of life together, Steve and I. I don’t know all of what he’s done out here, I was pretty focused on the other tour for, I don’t know, the last 6-8 years when he’s been out here. At the same time, I’m not an idiot either – well, maybe I am? *laughs* I know some of what he’s done, we’ll just say that. There’s been a couple of years out here where he’s won a lot. So, to have that notion, Andy or whomever say that, I don’t want to get caught up in it because you’re putting me in a company that, like I said, I greatly admire.

Stricker told me you’re better than he was when you came on to this tour.

That’s not a question, that’s a comment. *laughs* I’m not answering, I don’t know what to say to that other than Strick’s my man, he’s my buddy, his whole family is for that matter.

Being a Midwest guy, how cool was it to have the crowd cheering for you?

Spectacular. I said it, one of the first comments I said on the green, it felt like a regular tour event. There was a lot of people out here. The weather was great – obviously, when the rain separated. And the whole week, I mean the pro-am, there's guys and gals out here. So, it was awesome. I mean, there's a lot of lowans that are playing here now, but this is Midwest at its purest form right here. I love these kind of towns, I'm just comfortable – the topography, the smell, the grass, the people, it's just special.

Did the course make you feel like you were playing back home at Elmcrest (in Cedar Rapids) or maybe back in your Drake days out at Waveland?

It's probably more so my college years, you know. I kind of worked at a golf course maybe similar to this, it was probably a little hillier at Cedar Rapids. But yeah, this feels like Des Moines in a lot of respects – the golf does, the community does; maybe a little smaller than Des Moines, but yeah, a lot of resemblance. Like I said, just comfortability and when you can be comfortable, especially on grass like this, specifically the greens – I don't want to say it's instant confidence, but it certainly is welcome.

The wind on that first day, you were probably able to battle through that knowing what that's like.

Holy moly, that was trying. I didn't play in the pro-am Thursday, I was in the Wednesday pro-am, I played Tuesday. And guys were saying, 'we're hitting 5 iron on this tee, 4 iron off that tee, we're driving that green.' And I'm like 'what?' I just didn't see it because it wasn't like that on Tuesday or Wednesday. And then the winds came in kind of midday Thursday, Thursday afternoon was decent, and then Friday was blowing and this place dried out fast. I mean, hitting 4 irons 310 yards, like what? That's not what you expect - drivers that are going so far. So, I understand it, there wasn't much rain at that point, the wind picked up and the ball was moving. So, it was hard, but it was a good hard, it was a lot of fun to have to compete in it.

I also know the other big victory was watching the Iowa Hawkeyes win on Saturday night (over Iowa State). Was part of you thinking when you were picking up that trophy that you didn't want to be dropping it like the Cy-Hawk trophy a couple of the linemen did last night?

Well hey, they won. Everybody knows I was born there in Iowa City, raised 20 miles north. You know, it's in my blood. My parents went there, a lot of family and friends obviously went there. I'm a bullhawk at heart, but I'm also removed from the state. And this may go against what most people like to hear, but if they're not playing Iowa State, I'm pulling for them too.

I mean, I love Ames. I got so many close friends, roommates and confidants of mine that went to Iowa State. So, hard-fought win there. Iowa State – they know what they're doing, they've had a couple of good football coaches lately. But I'm a Coach Ferentz admirer to say the least and his team and his staff and how they do it. The state of Iowa has got some good football.

How much do you enjoy this tour?

A lot, it's my favorite tour I've ever played on. Period.

Why?

A long litany of reasons: it's still competition, it's less stress on my body, I'm playing with all my buddies again, I don't have to play every week, there's off weeks, and I feel like I've graduated. I feel like I've made it – greener pastures.