

RBC Heritage

Tuesday, April 11, 2017

Sam Saunders

Press Conference



NICK PARKER: Here in the RBC Heritage media room, with Sam Saunders, making his fourth appearance at the RBC Heritage. You were part of the cannon shooting ceremony yesterday, honoring your granddad. What was that like yesterday?

SAM SAUNDERS: It was very special. And pretty neat. I had never shot a cannon before, so that was something fun to experience. Shot a few guns, but that one was a little bit louder. I had some good people out there showing me how not to hurt myself. It was a very nice tribute. And wonderful respect for my grandfather. Always good to see so many people showing up for that.

Q. You're coming in playing some pretty good golf, as well. T-5 in Puerto Rico, T-20th in Houston. How is your game right now?

SAM SAUNDERS: Game feels great. It's actually always enjoyable to watch, but I was itching to get back to the golf course and get back to competition. So very excited for Thursday morning. And getting that feeling of being out on the course when it really matters.

Game is good, and hoping to carry on that momentum I've had the last couple of weeks.

Q. In addition to Bay Hill and the Masters, this has been one of the favorite stops on Tour for the players. Can you talk about the uniqueness of the golf course and also the tournament as a whole?

SAM SAUNDERS: Absolutely. It was truly one of the favorite stops on Tour. Guys from young to old love this place. Guys that have been out here for 20 years and rookies always enjoy this golf course. It is a true test of golf. You have to drive the ball extremely well off the tee. You have to hit good, controlled iron shots into the right sections of the greens. And this year, particularly, it's always in great shape, but I've never seen it better than this. And I've heard this from guys that have been coming here for 20 years, that the golf course is as good as it's ever been.

And it's going to be a wonderful test this week, because the weather is supposed to be great and they'll be able to get the conditions as difficult as they would like to, so it's going to be a great test of golf.

Q. What about the vibe for the week?

SAM SAUNDERS: The island, the entire surrounding

area is just great. This is such a popular place for golf. It's a good, unique feel, here. You've got these beautiful woods up against the ocean. And so many good golf courses around. But to be out, hitting that 18th tee shot, I still -- when I'm there at 18 I take a picture every time, just because it's so pretty. You get a blue sky day like this, and people paddle boarding on the intercoastal, and some pretty ships rolling by. It has a special feel to it. It's fun to look at and the fact that you get to go out and play a world class golf course in this setting is hard to beat.

Q. Have you prepared for a course like this, with such small greens, is there anything you do in particular to prepare for Harbour Town?

SAM SAUNDERS: You know, I think this is a week where you really need to be striking the ball well. You need to be able to control it off the tee. So if you were struggling a little bit off the tee -- fortunately I've been driving the ball very straight all year. This is the kind of course where if you didn't feel comfortable with how you were hitting it off the tee, it might be a kind of week where a guy puts in a driver that he feels he doesn't hit it as far, but a lot straighter. It's a week you need to control your tee ball, and be able to hit it straight but also be able to hit a little cut off certain tee shots and some other fairways you need to turn it in there a little bit, as well.

As far as the greens are concerned, you do have to play for the fairway. There's many holes where it you miss it three yards off the fairway in the right rough, you might as well be 20 yards into the trees, because you're blocked out. The first hole that comes to mind is No. 11, it's not even maybe the most difficult hole out here, but if you hit it in the right edge of the fairway there and you are only about 260 off the tee, you're blocked out completely. So not only do you have to hit it to a certain distance you have to keep it in the left side there to have any opportunity to hit a shot on the green.

So priority on hitting fairways, obviously, and then from there you really have to control your distance, well, too. I found that to be one of the most important things out here is having good distance control.

Q. How gratifying has it been to you and your entire family to see these continued tributes for



your grandfather like at the opening ceremonies?

SAM SAUNDERS: It's been amazing. We obviously had a lot going on that week, and then last week to see what they did at Augusta. It's such an enormous event. It was so special. But then to come here and still feel that warmth and still feel the impact he had in a place like this, and how much it means to everyone here, whether it's on a local scale or a large scale, every tribute to me has been very touching and not just the towns and the media, just the facts that the other players out here are still so -- I played golf with Jason Bohn and Carl Pettersson and Rod Pampling, guys that have been out here a long time. We're up having lunch special and they're asking me questions about my granddad the entire lunch. And that's cool to me. They're not doing it because they're nice, they do it because they really loved the guy. And they loved him as much as we all do. So that's been as special as anyone to see the outpouring at all the tournaments, but also the other players. It's remarkable to see.

Q. And firing the cannon is a way to remember him?

SAM SAUNDERS: Absolutely. It was appropriate this week, after last week was very serious and it was sad. That was hard to not see him at Augusta, obviously. But I think that was a little bit more -- it was a little bit of fun. I think my grandfather would have liked that a lot.

Q. What sort of questions were they asking during lunch?

SAM SAUNDERS: They were asking a little bit about some of the stuff that -- the course design company, and things that are going to happen in the future and what my involvement will be.

And then they were asking me about what it was like growing up, when did I kind of realize who he was and what was it like playing golf with him when I was 13, 14, 15 years old. And just talking about my relationship with him.

And we all kind of were talking about the fact that I didn't really have an awareness of what a big deal he was until I was probably 16 or 17 years old. And even then I didn't quite understand it or appreciate it.

So I think he made an effort along with my parents to kind of keep that very separate. I was oblivious to it, because they wanted us to certainly not grow up expecting anything or under any sense of entitlement, so I'm very grateful for the fact that he kind of kept his career separate from his life of being a great grandfather to my sisters and myself.

Q. Can you share some of the wisdom that he may have imparted to you, whether it be about golf or

life in general, during those rounds when you were a teen?

SAM SAUNDERS: Certainly. Start with golf. He used to always say to me, you've got to have a system. You've got to have a system. I was too young to understand what he meant by that for a long time. And then eventually I realized what he was talking about. That means I needed to develop a way how I needed to approach golf. How am I going to practice. How am I going to play. How do you swing the golf club. When you figure out that system, don't listen to anybody. He was very hard on me about that. He'd get very upset if I ever were to go seek out advice from anyone other than him. And it wasn't because he thought that everything he said was right, it was because he knew I wasn't sticking to my system. He wanted me to stick to my guns through thick and thin and stick to the system that I developed.

So I use that all the time. I think about -- I'm still kind of trying to work on whatever that is for me. And you've got to make it through the hard times because you're going to struggle at times, but that doesn't mean you go out and start asking everyone how to swing the golf club and how to change equipment.

Q. How exciting was it to go out and see Sergio win a major at Augusta?

SAM SAUNDERS: It was great. I was watching every shot. I absolutely love watching the head-to-head competition come out between Justin and Sergio. They just -- they were playing a little bit different level than everyone else that day. You saw a lot of guys make some mistakes, and both of them were really just cruising along.

And I was pulling for both guys. But it was really cool to see Sergio win. Justin has his U.S. Open and I know Sergio -- he's always been, I think, a very emotional player, and that's why he's so fun to watch. His highs are high and lows are lows emotionally. And it was exciting to see him miss that putt on 18 to win in regulation, and I noticed his fiance came up to him and got in his face and said you've got this. It was really cool. Because if my wife was there, she would do the same thing. She wouldn't pat me on the back and say you're okay. She got after him and said don't get your head down, don't tuck your tail between your legs. And to see him come back and birdie that playoff hole.

Q. Have you had a chance to play with him?

SAM SAUNDERS: I haven't played with him. I've talked to him and seen him around. Always enjoyed watching him play. It's fun to see a guy play the game artistically. He hits a lot of golf shots. It's nice to see a guy like that to win. All respect to the bombers out there, but for me it's nice to see a guy shape the ball around there out there.

Q. You talked about the conditions, 20-under is the tournament record. Is it in trouble this week, if the wind stays down?

SAM SAUNDERS: It would be some fine golf if somebody shot 20-under this week. The greens I think are going to be too firm and fast for that to happen. There's just going to be some things that are going to be very tough to get to with the speed and firmness of the greens, which is good. We like that. We like the greens firm and fast. It rewards good golf. It rewards good the shot making. When the greens are really soft you can get away with a lot. This week you're not going to be able to get away with much. I would be surprised if 20-under came into play.

NICK PARKER: Thank you for coming in, Sam. Best of luck this week.