

Charles Schwab Challenge

Tuesday, June 9, 2020

Harold Varner III

Press Conference

MARK WILLIAMS: We'd like to welcome Harold Varner to this virtual interview. Thanks for joining us, Harold, and making the time. You've made one start at the Charles Schwab Challenge, a missed cut here in 2017. You've played 13 events this season in this abbreviated season, but we're back on track now. One of those events that stands out to me was the Genesis Invitational where you were one shot back heading into the final round. Can you talk about that final day and what you might have learned in that situation which might help you this week at the Charles Schwab Challenge.

HAROLD VARNER III: Just being in contention, being comfortable, being in the heat of battle. That's the closest I've gotten. I've been in some final groups, but being that late in contention, man, it was so much fun. I don't do drugs, but man, that was the coolest thing ever.

THE MODERATOR: I know you're a guy that doesn't like to sit still at any time, you're always active --

HAROLD VARNER III: Like right now?

THE MODERATOR: This is probably really uncomfortable for you.

HAROLD VARNER III: Yes.

THE MODERATOR: But just talk about how much you're anticipating this restart and maybe some things that you did during the three months of quarantine when we were shut down.

HAROLD VARNER III: I actually played a lot of golf, honestly. I played a lot of golf. I installed a septic tank. I built a shed, all kinds of stuff. Everything I've wanted to do, I kind of -- I laid some sod. My parents moved into their house, so I helped them out with that. Just everything that you usually can't do because you're working. I took full advantage of that and just got on the lake a good bit. Water was a little cold. It's just now like perfect temperature to get in there and jump in there whenever, but just tried to maximize doing things that I probably will never do in my lifetime as long as I'm playing golf; you'll probably get someone to do it. It's an eye-opening experience. I hope we don't ever have to

go through something like that again, but it was just a little bit of adversity, and I tried to make the best out of those times.

THE MODERATOR: And just comment on your anticipation of getting back to this week. You've played here once at the Colonial Country Club, just what you remember about that and what you're looking forward to the most playing this week.

HAROLD VARNER III: I remember how bad I was hitting it. I remember that really well. So we're up for a really good challenge. It's a great golf course. It's set up for ball strikers. I'm looking forward to the challenge.

Q. It's obviously an extremely volatile time in the United States at the moment, and I know you spoke with Jay about this last week, but golf is probably the major sport in the world that is underrepresented by the black community. Why do you think that is? Can more be done to create opportunities for young black kids, and have you ever felt like an outsider, for want of a better expression, making your way through the game?

HAROLD VARNER III: So the first question was what's the problem. I've talked about this a hundred times, a million times. It's access. I mean, any time that someone wants to be great at something, they have to have the opportunity to experience it, learn how to get better. It's just so expensive to play golf, and that's the problem, to be honest with you.

What was your next question?

Q. What more opportunities can be created for young black kids, which I suppose access is the answer to that.

HAROLD VARNER III: Yeah, so that's what our foundation is about. I think that as long as it's more aware that that's the problem. Like growing up, no one was talking about access to golf because I had access. I got to play a little muni all the time. It doesn't become a problem until it's not there. It's like anything in life. No one understands how much someone cares about something until it's taken away, and I think COVID has taught us a lot of that, so we're going to make it better in our community and hopefully grow that. There's some great programs out there that I've been able to talk to that just care about the access to golf. Man, it's

an important sport. It teaches a lot of stuff, not only how to be better at golf but how to be a better human in this society.

Q. And the third part of the question was have there ever been times making your way through the game where you have felt like an outsider in a sport that is majority white?

HAROLD VARNER III: This may come out super like not nice, but do you think I would never fit in? I've never had any trouble fitting in with anyone. If you have trouble being around me, it's not my problem; you have a problem. So I just think it's very -- I think there's people that have had that problem that you're talking about, like where they don't want to do something because they're the only ones. I'm sure that's been a problem. But I think we're aware of that. I don't think I was never aware of that.

But no, I have not. No, sir.

Q. When you look back over the last two weeks, everything getting ready to come here, being here for the last day or two, what's been the most surreal part about playing golf in this new era?

HAROLD VARNER III: The needle up my nose is the craziest thing. Yeah, that was nuts. As laid back as I am, and you know just always carefree, how I have to care to put on a great image of hey, we're going to do the right thing, we're going to return to golf the right way, and hugging people and loving on people, it probably isn't the best time right now.

Q. Along those same lines, did you feel any kind of responsibility that when golf does come back that you have to get this right?

HAROLD VARNER III: Yeah, we all should. Every player out here, every person a part of this organization should. I'm not saying I'm the best at it, but yeah, it's just how -- do you have to have on that mask as you talk to me? I didn't know that. But no, it's a responsibility for all of us to just come together and do it right, because everyone is going to try to find the worst in everything, and the best we handle ourselves in this situation, the least we'll hear about that.

Q. I'm just kind of curious, we were talking to Jon Rahm a little while ago about kind of the weird vibe out there and what it's going to be like with the no fans. You could have guys dropping eagle putts and it's going to be crickets out there or maybe even somebody hits an amazing shot to win the golf tournament on Sunday and it's going to be quiet. What's your anticipation about what the atmosphere will be like out there?

HAROLD VARNER III: I literally just got to the golf course, and it's a little weird. For the amount of money

they're playing for and kind of what we stand for, it's kind of easy to get up for. If I make a putt to win, I don't really care if anyone is there, to be honest with you. That's just my opinion. It's going to be weird, but we don't have the option if it's weird or not weird. It's our job to make the best of the situation, because we could all be sitting at home right now talking about who knows what.

Q. And just as a follow-up, golf doesn't really have an opening day, so to speak; you go year-round. But with this layoff and kind of this week, is there almost an anticipation like it's an opening day, like we're kind of restarting here?

HAROLD VARNER III: Not really, no. I've played golf like every day. No, man, I'm going to play golf whether you guys watch me or not or ask me questions.

Q. I mean for the TOUR, competition-wise.

HAROLD VARNER III: Yeah, I want to play against the best, but yeah, I mean -- yeah, I guess so. I don't know what opening day would feel like, as you were saying earlier, there's no anticipating day. That feeling, I've never been to an anticipating day of baseball or anything like that, so I don't know what that excitement really is in another sport, but for golf, I'm excited just to be able to just talk smack to some of the best players in the world, like heckle them a little bit, like I would do if there was 30 people out there watching or 3,000.

Q. A couple years ago I talked to you about if you'd ever felt much discrimination at all when you were a kid or growing up coming to the TOUR, and you had said your dad had been -- you worked with him so much that you never felt any of those things. I'm just wondering if you can completely understand because you haven't experienced a lot of the stuff that a lot of people are talking about now, can you relate to it in some way or can you understand it or can you understand it differently because you're black versus being white?

HAROLD VARNER III: I understand because I'm black, but I don't understand it because of the discrimination that's happening or the racism that people see. But my job and the coolest thing about the letter I got to say that I've been helped by every type of race possible, and then it was all of a sudden Harold should say something because he's black. I don't like when people are like, just because you're black you know the answers to racism, so that letter was super good for me because it let me expose that even like you were telling white people they need to listen right now, black people need to listen right now, too, and we need to come together and figure out what it is. So no, I have not had much discrimination in my journey. I've just had so many different types of people help me. I hope that answered your question.

Q. I guess the other aspect of that is that you talked about your dad; can you kind of explain your upbringing because obviously I think your dad was a car salesman; is that right?

HAROLD VARNER III: Yeah, for sure. He's still selling, actually. He'll sell you one.

Q. I already bought one, but thank you. If you could talk about what your dad's upbringing brought to you and how your life was maybe different than some other people's lives in the same neighborhoods.

HAROLD VARNER III: Yeah, so he did exactly what every father I hope should do. He loved on me, he corrected me when I was wrong, and when I was down, he picked me up. Not really sure -- I mean, I think that's what a father should do. He put me in position to be the best Harold I could be. So yeah, it probably helped out a lot.

I mean, I read an article the other day about that where a father is supposed to -- that's their job is to give their child, almost protect them from what's out there and what they're seeing so they have a better chance to do something that they don't think they can do, and my dad did that for sure. So did my mom, though. Actually my mom was pretty strict.

Q. Obviously you got the Dunk Man on and I know you've got a relationship with Michael (Jordan). Have you talked to Michael at all about this, because for the first time in a long time he's said something about these issues, which he normally wouldn't do.

HAROLD VARNER III: I have not spoken to him. I'm sure we'll talk soon. But it's really cool to see. The funniest part to me, though, is when you see that he's offering his -- he's saying something and he's donating a lot of money, and people are like, oh, that's nothing, just because he's a billionaire. I mean, he can't win. I find that eye-opening to tell someone that they're donating \$100 million and it's nothing to him. Like that really pisses me off sometimes.

Q. To go to what Alex was saying, you probably watched the Jordan documentary. What, if anything, could the PGA TOUR take from the NBA to make the game just more appealing to more people of all backgrounds?

HAROLD VARNER III: It goes back to access. You know, like people aren't getting involved in golf because they don't play it. It's almost too late when they want to be a part of golf, and that's always my answer. We've spoken about that. The reason why the NBA looks the way it looks is because there's way more black people playing it. It's way cheaper to play basketball than it is

golf. They're already on a head start because it's so hard to get into golf anyway. I mean, I can't sit here -- I don't know what the NBA does. I know a good bit of what the PGA TOUR does. I can't sit here and say that we do this better than the NBA. I think the NBA is way more vocal because they come from a different background than most golfers, so when they're speaking about it they've experienced a lot of the stuff that is going on, so like they're going to be way more vocal than most people, me included, so that's where I think that people think the NBA is doing more. I think they have more people that participate in the NBA that are exposed to those things that are happening right now.

So if I'm experiencing something, I'm going to be way more vocal, but I'm going to be way more, hey, that could happen to me. But that's what I think is really happening in that aspect.

Q. What would be your advice to people like me or me personally, I love golf, been in golf all my life. I don't really know -- I feel like I'm an open-minded person. I don't really know what I can do on a daily basis to make the game more welcoming to more people and I would like to know. I know it's unfair to ask you to have advice for me on that.

HAROLD VARNER III: The best thing that my dad used to do is when we played at a muni course, and I used to hate it. If it was just me and him, if there were two people or one person on the putting green, he would always ask them to play. So some of these people I met, I still talk to to this day, I met because my dad is like crazy and he just wants to play with people. Once again, Harold's listening, understanding what his journey is, and that's something I need to do, too, as a human to this society, but my dad did it because he's crazy, though.

Q. Just curious what you thought about the memo from Jay about the 8:46 tee time this week being vacant and the moment of silence and kind of as a follow to that, is there any concern that there will be tributes and remembrance and conversation and discussion this week but also sustaining it instead of it being forgotten basically?

HAROLD VARNER III: I think there will be discussion. I think some will forget about it. I think so many people will move on, but the conversation I had with Jay when we weren't being recorded, I think this week won't be the last week, because it's getting to the point where everyone has a voice that if the PGA TOUR was to forget it, they would get hounded every day. So it's just kind of like yes, they're pressured, but I also think that it's the right thing to do, and I think Jay knows that, so I'm super behind him on that, and we got to talking about some things where I come from, what I think

about it. I'm just super fortunate to be able to say something and it matter but also be a part of the change. Everyone in this society right now is going to be a part of that.

Q. Secondly and completely unrelated, I'm curious where you're staying this week and have you thought about what your routine is going to be like compared with what it might have been at any other tournament?

HAROLD VARNER III: Where am I staying? What's the name of the hotel? Oh, I'm staying at the Omni. I'm staying there. I'm staying there, and I have no clue. I just got to the golf course. The only thing I'm trying to do is get off this thing so I can go hit some golf balls, so I will figure that out. I'm sure -- I think player dining is a little different, but I'm still feeling it out myself. I didn't get in yesterday like to be able to give you a legit answer, so I apologize on that part. But yeah, I don't know. I tested negative for the COVID, so that's a positive. I found that out while I was sitting here.

Q. I was wondering if you could tell us, have you had any players reach out to you during this process to see what they can do to raise awareness and to help alleviate some of the issues that we've seen come to light in the last couple weeks?

HAROLD VARNER III: Yes, more than I can count on my hands. A good number. Obviously they were super like hey, I'm going to pay attention, I'm going to do this, but the one thing I tried to tell them is that like some of the guys that are -- some of the guys that texted I'm like, Dude, you're not racist, I think you're doing things to grow the game. Like your representation on the PGA TOUR. But I think it's going to show that they're going to look at black people a little differently. I just have a hard time believing there's like tons of racists on the PGA TOUR because I'm pretty friends with a lot of people out here. It's not like -- if I was racist, I probably wouldn't hang out with a black person. That's just my thoughts, and I've hung out with a good number of people out here.

THE MODERATOR: Harold, we appreciate you taking the time to join us. We'll let you go practice, and have a great week.