

Travelers Championship

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Justin Thomas

Press Conference



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CHAMPIONSHIP



THE MODERATOR: Justin, thanks for joining us here at the Travelers Championship. You're a 12-time winner on the PGA TOUR including two this season, No. 2 in the FedExCup right now. When you came on-site at the Travelers Championship this week, how different was it for you? Obviously you've played the first two events already since the pandemic; how different has it been arriving on-site at each of these tournaments?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's very different. For me this is the event that I've played the most, of the three events that I've come back to. For me, it's so weird seeing everything. When we first get here and you just look out and you can see 1, you can see 15, 16, 17, 18. I didn't even know what that was in the middle of 1 and 18. So all that stuff is bizarre. When you're on 15 tee -- I played the back nine yesterday morning, and you can literally just see straight up 18 fairway, you can see 17 green, you can see 16. That stuff for me is different because I heard that at Colonial but I never played Colonial so I didn't know, and then Hilton Head I had only played a couple times.

So I've always loved coming here, but it is definitely different.

THE MODERATOR: This is your seventh start here at Travelers. You're coming in here off a 63 at RBC Heritage in the final round. I know you shot 62 here one year, I believe the year you finished third. Can we expect more of the same here from you this week?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I hope so. If I could predict how I was going to play, I'd probably be doing something different than playing golf. But yeah, I mean, I feel very good about my game. I've been working really hard. I've been trending the right direction I feel that and continuing to just get a little bit better and better each and every week. Yeah, I'm excited to come here. I absolutely love this golf course. I have not played it very well for how much I enjoy it other than one year I feel like, but it's usually the week after the U.S. Open, so maybe I'll blame a little bit on fatigue from that, but for the most part I just haven't performed very well. Yeah, I'm excited to give it a shot this year, and hopefully we can have a chance.

Q. I wanted to talk about the appeal of this golf course. Obviously you were saying there you've shot some low rounds. What is it about the field

being so strong this week that really is the big appeal factor for the tournament and for the course?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, well, I think the thing about this tournament is that some guys that have come to play that usually don't play, especially in the past couple years, is they understand how great of a tournament it is. The entire staff and Travelers, they do an unbelievable job -- obviously this year is thrown aside because it's so different, but just taking care of the players, taking care of the caddies, the wives and girlfriends, the family members, just the experience and everything with the tournament is just -- it's truly remarkable because they kind of take in the role of just wanting to make the tournament that happens to be after the U.S. Open as unbelievable as possible. They've done a great job with it, and I've always enjoyed coming here, like I said.

But it's obviously different with the aspect of what's going on right now, but it's still the same tremendous golf course and fun little town, and I'm excited to tee it up.

Q. What about the 15-and-a-half hole? As you said there, it looks different out there right now, and that hole has always generated so much interest and excitement, but you'll still take the shot I'm guessing; have you had any success there before?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I actually did it yesterday, and I hit it in the water I think for maybe the seventh time. I don't play the 15-and-a-half hole very well. I'm glad that I -- hopefully that's my dosage of water on that body of water for the week, but no, it's always good fun, and it's obviously for a great cause, so that's cool.

Q. I have a question about Webb Simpson. Obviously coming off the win last week, most casual golf fans probably don't realize where he is in the World Rankings, and I'm just kind of curious in your eyes why a guy like that flies so far under the radar versus some of the other guys like yourself that are as high in the rankings if not around that area, but you've got a little bit more high profile?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's an interesting question, and it's an interesting point. But I think the fact of the matter is, and this is -- and no offense to Webb, because obviously he's playing better than everybody

else this year. He's No. 1 in the FedExCup and he's winning a lot of tournaments and playing well every week, but it's not -- he doesn't hit 330-yard drives. He doesn't hit irons to the moon. He doesn't have -- I'm trying to think, like have a crazy weird part to him like Bryson is with his putting or his science or someone, know what I'm saying, so he doesn't have something that's --

Q. That stands out kind of thing?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, yeah. But when you play with him, he has a lot that stands out. He's kind of like a Patrick Cantlay, where he just does everything really good. He might not have one part of his game that's like unbelievably great, but he doesn't have any part of his game that's struggling or poor. And that's the person that's going to be most consistent and very difficult to beat, and I think he's proven that.

But how well he's putting the ball and how consistently well he's putting the ball with his ball-striking, it's no coincidence how well he's played, but yeah, I think for him, too, obviously he has five kids and his family, being a dad is extremely important to him, so he's not going to be the person to be as involved in whether it's sponsor stuff during a tournament or maybe going out of his way to do something that might grow his brand because for him, the most important thing to him is his family and spending time with his wife and his kids. That's what's important to him, whereas another person who's a little bit younger like myself or Brooks, to where we have that opportunity because we don't have five kids running around the house to where we can do stuff like that. That's where we can get a little bit different notoriety and exposure than he does. But he's obviously doing something pretty well.

Q. Would it bother you ranked as high as you are if you were that under the radar, even though your personalities are different and you don't have five kids? Would there be a part of you that would say, hey, what about me, I'm ranked third in the world or whatever?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Absolutely. It personally would bother me. I often say I think Xander is the most underrated kind of under-the-radar guy out here. I feel like he doesn't get near enough publicity and press as he should for as good as his track record is and also just from playing with him how impressive his game is, and Webb is very, very similar. They both get their work done. They win tournaments. They consistently play well and at a very high level in the best tournaments.

But Webb also doesn't strike me as a guy that that would bother him too much. He's so happy and positive and I love playing with him because I feel like I'm going to play good with him every time I play with him and

Paulie. It brings such positive energy, and that's just a quality that you can't just kind of learn overnight; you just are born with it.

Q. How well do you know, if at all, Chase Koepka? I know you don't live down in the same area as those guys, but have you played some off-tournament golf with him and Brooks at all or anything like that?

JUSTIN THOMAS: No, I live in the same area as them. Chase lives probably 30 minutes from me or something like that. But I don't play with Chase very often now, and Brooks kind of does his own thing. But I've played a bunch with Chase or been around Chase a pretty good bit. I think he's maybe one year younger or two years -- I think one year younger than me, so we played some college and some amateur junior golf together. But no, he has that fire power to where he can shoot low and play really well. I think for him once he kind of gets the consistency part down and kind of minimizing making those bad rounds a little bit better, then I think he's going to -- that's what's going to take him to the next level kind of thing.

Q. Obviously he Mondayed in the other day; how cool is that element of that story for you and the guys that know both guys well, to have that taking place?

JUSTIN THOMAS: It's really cool. I'm sure it's been inspiring and motivating for him to watch his brother, who I'm sure he's beat hundreds of times out here playing so well and winning majors and tournaments and being No. 1 in the world, and he's probably sitting at home watching him and like, why am I not doing this or why can't I do this. I'm sure Brooks has been a great -- kind of a great sound board for questions or whatever it may be from Chase and also been a great motivating factor, so I'm glad to see him playing well, and I'm excited to see him this week. I haven't seen him yet.

Q. With a second player testing positive for coronavirus yesterday, that's back-to-back weeks now, does that at all change your comfort level or maybe make you rethink the way you interact with people out here or maybe over-think certain things you do because it's been back-to-back weeks now?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, that's a good question. I'm not worried. I mean, for me I just need to do what I'm told to do or what I'm supposed to do and follow all the correct protocols. I hate to say I'm guilty of taking like the fist bump thing for granted. I think some of us were doing it last week, and it's already different than what we're used to, and it's such a habit that we're trying to get better at. But we have to get better at that. That's something that's unacceptable, and I'm guilty just as much, and once I kind of figured out I was doing it at

Colonial tried to stop and got better at it last week and will continue to do so.

The thing that's most important is just everybody needs to do their part. You can't -- there's times, especially with guys in different statures or being on the TOUR, it's like you hate to say it, but it's true, you're just sometimes able to get away with some things because of maybe who you are or it's like, hey, I know that I recognize you, you're good to go. But at the end of the day, just you can't be selfish. It's a big-picture thing, and you need to do not only what's best for you but most importantly what's best for the TOUR, because one mistake that someone makes could end up ruining other guys or potentially suspend the TOUR again. So I think that's what the TOUR has done an unbelievable job of and really just making sure that everyone does the correct measures to where we can continue to have such positive results -- I didn't mean positive, negative positive results from the test and continue to play at the highest level and give everyone some sports to watch.

Q. Has it been difficult at all mentally preparing for these tournaments week in, week out, but also having to consider, like you said, no more fist bumps, little things like that that you also have to now actively think of that you never would have had to think of before?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, but I will gladly swallow my pride and get over that if that means playing competitive golf and having a chance to win tournaments. I think that was kind of my main message to some people when we were trying to figure out when we were going to start back up is like, hey, I think we all are well aware that 2020 has been a bizarre year and it's very far from normal, and for us to be able to play golf on the PGA TOUR, we need to get over the fact it's not going to be normal, it's going to be different, and if we want to wait until everything is totally normal, we have no worries of anything, we could be waiting another year and a half at least.

Me personally, like I said, I'm fine with that. I'm fine with -- it's so many little things, like taking my own club out of my bag, trying to minimize my touch with my caddie. Obviously we're going to have times just because of how it works to where I touch my towel and he has touched it at some point, but having myself getting my clubs out of my bag, me getting my own range balls. It's just so many little things that it's really not that big of a deal to make an adjustment and do on your own, and like I said earlier, for the betterness of the TOUR and everybody else involved, we've just got to do it.

Q. Along those lines, what concerns not necessarily for yourself and what you have but for

maybe golf as a whole or the TOUR as a whole with three positive tests now in the last five days, and secondly what changes do you expect along the protocols? I know Jordan hinted at it yesterday off the PAC call that we'd probably see some further changes to the protocols.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I personally don't have any concerns. I mean, just again, kind of repeating, just everyone needs to do their job. I think as weeks go on, it's easier to get a little bit lazier and maybe get a little bit more lenient on what you know you should and shouldn't do and maybe taking advantage of maybe a certain security guard or this or that that might not be as strict or maybe have a -- it's holding everybody accountable. If you see somebody doing something wrong, don't just let it go and tell everybody about like, oh, this person was doing something wrong, because you're in the same boat. I mean, if I'm not going to allow someone on the Titleist truck to come give me a club on the range if no one is looking, that's not allowed. That's where everyone just needs to hold themselves and everybody else accountable. If that involves getting a little bit stricter, then so be it.

I mean, I would say that we're doing unbelievably and we're doing a fantastic job and making sure that everyone is staying safe and doing a great job. I mean, especially after going to a very hot spot in South Carolina last week. I've been pleased so far, and I don't have any concerns as long as everyone keeps doing what they should.

Q. Do you think we'll see some more changes along with what Jordan hinted at yesterday in terms of some of the protocols and maybe some further testing, increased testing, more tracking, things like that?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, I think that you could have the -- just making it a little stricter, maybe not necessarily adding or changing guidelines but more so making sure that they're enforced and making sure that each player is enforcing them on themselves. But I know that the TOUR and WHOOP actually have done an unbelievable thing and partnered up to provide WHOOPS to all the caddies and the players to have the luxury of looking at their data because that's pretty unbelievable. Nick Watney was able to figure out that his body and his immune system was getting a little bit weaker and his respiratory rate spiked one night, and he never would have been able to know to get tested until potentially later in the week after he'd already played, after he'd already seen somebody, after he'd maybe touched this or done that, and because of that -- and it's crazy to say, but because of his whoop device we could have been screwed right now because he could have played the rest of the week and ended up contaminating or infecting many other people and

we could have been behind the 8-ball severely, and that's an unbelievable thing that WHOOP and the PGA TOUR have done to make sure everybody is able to use that data like I do. They can use it for other things, but during a time like this, knowing if something crazy changes, it's very important because then it could end up detecting something before it really gets bad and end up potentially saving the TOUR like Nick did.

Q. Yesterday Paul Casey came in and was talking a little bit about one of the challenges for him this week being his first week back on the PGA TOUR is trying to get tournament tough, the difference between playing even money games at home and things like that with your friends, even if they're really accomplished players, and playing competing on the PGA TOUR. You've had two top 10s so far, so it would seem that you've been able to get to that point. How challenging has it been for you to get to the level of tournament toughness, if you will, that you want to be in, and what specific things maybe did you do leading up to Colonial to try and mentally get yourself ready for competitive golf rather than recreational golf?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's tough. It's not something that you can just do, if that makes sense. It's hard. I find it hard even after taking two or three weeks off, let alone three months, so I honestly went into Colonial with not really any expectations because I knew that I was playing well and I knew that I was ready. Everything that I could control I was ready, but in all reality I just didn't know how I was going to feel once I got back out there in competition.

But I honestly think without having the fans made it an easier adjustment, if that makes sense. It's almost like we have the rustiness of taking the time off and then starting back up, and then once we have fans again, it's almost like that will be like another restart, if that makes sense, that'll almost be like getting back into another game, whatever, mind frame.

For me, I just was trying to play and kind of get focused and kind of get in my own little world. It was honestly kind of hard the first week playing with two of my best friends in Rick and Jordan because it's easy to feel like it is very laid-back and fun, which it was, but like a round at home as opposed to I'm trying to win a PGA TOUR event. So I kind of said that to Jimmy, like hey, dude, we need to get in our little focus here, and if that means we're not talking to them at all, we just need to. We just need to go handle our business. The hardest part for me of getting in that mind frame is come Sundays mostly. If you have a chance to win, it's just not having that crowd there is so hard because you're usually able to feed off of them and sometimes use them to your advantage, and also if you're able to

control your emotions better than other people, that's an advantage that you have.

That's the hardest part to me is when you have a chance to win the golf tournament, not having them there. But everybody has to deal with it, so I obviously just need to get over that part and just play a little bit better.

Q. Are there any mental tricks or exercises you try and do, either think of a score that you want to shoot that day, keep your card clean for a certain number of holes, just different things that you and your caddie can do to try and get that focus a little more honed if there aren't crowds?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it just depends where you're playing. Every course is different. The first two weeks just so happened to be birdie-fests, so the only thing you're really focused on is just trying to make as many birdies as you possibly can and eliminate the mistakes, so that was what we focused on those first two weeks.

Q. Your third-ever start was here at Travelers as an amateur. It's near 80 percent of their sponsor's invites over the last 25 years have gone to guys with less than 15 starts. It's obviously a theme that they've got going and have got going for a long time. Can you just speak to the importance of that for up-and-coming stars and how it was for you and what you learnt in those early starts?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, it's something that's really, really cool that the Travelers has done, and that's where my relationship started with them. I think I was -- it was in 2012, so I mean, that's crazy, eight years ago I played in this tournament. Just finished my freshman year of college. They're so good at giving people or giving young kids a chance or a start. It's not like they're -- I hate to say the phrase no-name kids, but these are the top juniors, amateurs, college players in the world. The tournament staff and with Travelers is just giving them a chance to show the world, the rest of the golfing world how good they are, but also just give them a chance of competitive professional golf, and that's what I was so fortunate to get when I was -- in 2012 I guess when I was 19. And because of tournaments like that and the John Deere, I became more comfortable, and it's because of playing in these tournaments is when I turned pro when I did. If I wouldn't have had those I wouldn't have known how comfortable I felt in the professional setting and then I probably wouldn't have turned pro as early as I did.

It means a lot that this has worked well in my schedule to come back to play because of what they did for me when I was in college, but yeah, it's really cool to see how they've continued to give back or give exemptions to kids that have very much deserved it and have a

great pedigree to prove that they can play with the professionals.

Q. I think it's something like 29 different players in that 25-year span for 90 different TOUR wins, as well, so they've obviously taken a gamble on some decent players including yourself, and in itself, while you don't have to come back, does it help you want to?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, there's so many events, and the John Deere is one especially that I love Clair, I love the tournament. Moline is a fun town. It gets great support. But just the week before the Open Championship, it's just not feasible, not doable for me. I'm trying to get ready to win a major, and I'm usually leaving on Friday or Saturday, which would be in the middle of the tournament anyway.

It's things like that to where there's so many tournaments that I would love to play but a lot of us would love to play that we just can't make work because of scheduling. I'm just very fortunate that this has been one that's worked out schedule-wise to where I'm able to come back and show support but also play a place that I really love.

Q. Do you have a swing thought that you've found yourself continuing to go back to over the years, maybe from high school to college, now something that has kind of endured the test of time and you find yourself thinking about whenever things maybe get a bit off?

JUSTIN THOMAS: Yeah, covering the ball is something that I will often go back to. I try to feel like my chest is pointed ahead of the ball at impact. I'll sometimes get a little bit underneath it. I did a lot more so as a junior or in college than I have as a pro. I've just changed that part of my swing quite a bit over time. But that's just something that's -- especially when I've played my best golf and to where I kind of get in that unconscious state of every iron is doing exactly what I want to, that's kind of my thought is where I get that timing right. I just feel like I'm covering the ball well, and it starts a little bit left with just a little bit of a fade.

Q. Just wondering if you had a chance to see "The Last Dance," and if you did, what you learned about Michael Jordan? You had a relationship with him going back many years, what you learned about him and if you also see any similarities between him and Tiger and if you have a good story about the two of them.

JUSTIN THOMAS: I see scary differences between him and Tiger. I've never been more motivated watching anything in my life than I was watching "The Last Dance." For me, I loved it so much because I've been very fortunate to get to know him just from living

in the same area and playing a lot of golf with him, so like I see the golf side of him when we go out and mess around, I've seen the fishing side when we go fishing or just the fun side. But that's the only side to him that I've never seen. I haven't seen -- I've seen highlights, but like I've never heard -- I don't ask him about basketball. I don't want to be that person when I'm around him. But to just hear and see how that team went about and to understand the trades that happened and why they happened and why his decisions were doing what he was doing. But just his will to win, and he was going to do anything and everything possible, it's something that you can't -- you're not just -- you don't just learn it. It's not something that just happens overnight. I think you're really just born with it.

He wants to be better than everybody else. He wanted to be better than everybody else, and he was going to work hard and do everything he could to get there.

I have a buddy who's going through the fundamental tours, and he's a really close friend of mine, and I'm very hard on him, but because he's a good friend of mine, I'm very honest with him. After him watching that, I think I was able to like say, you know all that crap I give you, this is the same exact thing. The way Jordan was giving his teammates, the way he was giving them jabs, the way he was poking fun at them, the way that it seemed like he was talking down to them, it was to get them better, it's to toughen them up, it's to see how they were going to rise to the occasion. It was kind of little things like that to where -- man, it was unbelievable.

I told him -- I saw him after I had finished up, and I said that you're going to wish I never saw that because I'm going to ask you so many questions now, it's going to be out of control. But it's very crazy how similar him and Tiger are and just their warrior mentality, if you will, and they're just going to go above and beyond anyway they can to beat you, and they don't really care what happens along the way and how many feelings they hurt.

Q. Have you ever played with the two of them together?

JUSTIN THOMAS: I have not, no.

Q. I wanted to take it back to the back nine and get your opinion on how that either enhances your game or challenges you and what your mentality is going into that.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Just in any like back nine of a round?

Q. Specifically here.

JUSTIN THOMAS: Okay, here. Yeah, it's an interesting -- it's just fun because obviously the tournament over the years has shown that it can be won or lost on that back nine, but it's just there's so many holes that provide birdie opportunity, yet you can make bogey so quickly. This whole course is like that. If you put the ball in play off the tee, it's very, very gettable and you have a lot of short clubs, and if you're able to control your spin, control your distance, you're going to make a lot of birdies.

But you look at a hole like 12, it's a 3-wood, wedge, but you just pull a 3-wood it could hit the cart path and go out-of-bounds or you hit it right in the bunker and you're trying to make par. 13, a par-5, a scoring hole, you hit it in the bunker, it's a tough lay-up; you hit it in the water, now you're trying to make par. It's just so many holes.

And then even 15, it's a short, very, very drivable par-4 that guys are expecting to make birdie, but it's hard to chip around the green. You can hit it just left and it goes in the water. You can hit it in that bunker, then again, you're just trying to make par.

There's so many holes that can flip-flop really quick. You might have a round even par through 10 or 11, you can get hot and shoot 5- or 6-under. But then again, you could also have a round where you're 3- or 4-under and then you start thinking about what could happen; I could shoot 8- or 9-under, and that's maybe when you shoot 2- or 3-under. It really is just still about execution and not taking the holes for granted, just like this whole entire course, but it is a tremendous back nine. It's a lot of fun to play.

THE MODERATOR: Justin, thanks for spending the time with us. We really appreciate it.