

ERNIE ELS

Q. We'll get started here with Ernie Els. Can you start by just talking about where your game's at right now and how you feel heading into this week?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I've been working on a couple of things. I didn't have a great one the last time we were out in Florida, but I had a week at home. Working through some changes in my swing, a little bit of equipment changes. You know, my first time at The Woodlands. I've never, ever been here. It's unbelievable. I mean, they hosted this event here on the tour for so long, and on the Champions Tour, so I'm excited to be here and to play.

Q. Is there a reason why you, on the PGA TOUR, that you never made it here?

ERNIE ELS: Absolute just schedule-wise. I can only imagine that, because this golf course is just really, really right up my alley. Room off the tee, really penalizes you on second shots. I'm normally a pretty good iron player, so I like the setup of the course, I like the look of the course. The whole feel of the place is just very nice.

All I can imagine was just scheduling. I remember watching the Houston Open on television and for some reason I didn't play it. Maybe I had to be in South Africa or something. I played the Houston Open when it was just before the Masters when it was up at Redstone, but they've moved it to this venue.

Q. So you didn't have like any friends or family or business associates that lived in Houston that you would come and visit that you could play here or anything like that?

ERNIE ELS: No, no. My Texas connection is in Dallas, unfortunately. I played a lot of social golf. Actually lived in Dallas for a little bit back in the early '90s. So my affiliation to Texas is more through Dallas than Houston, unfortunately.

But as I say, I played the Redstone Club, I played Champions, TOUR Championship. I finished second there in a playoff. Mike Weir beat me in a playoff there years ago. I played a lot of golf in Texas, not too much here or The Woodlands obviously.

Q. So are you going to try to play pretty much a complete schedule in 2021 this year? Are you going to play quite a bit?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I've been playing quite a bit, and a lot of these events I want to get under my belt are the ones I haven't played. Like last week at the Chubb, I've never played that. Because of the pandemic, I missed out early last year, I guess. I'm getting confused by the years, but I missed out on a lot of events that were canceled last year. So I want to see

what these venues are like, like Woodlands, like Chubb, like next week at Birmingham, the week after in Atlanta. I haven't played these events, so I want to see what they're like. If I like them, I'm going to come back to them. So I'll be playing quite a few events.

Q. It's kind of something fresh. You're playing something new, kind of keeps you going. Do you kind of thrive on that?

ERNIE ELS: Absolutely. I played a practice round here on Tuesday, and I don't normally come that early in the week, because I thought maybe today was going to be rained out. I checked the weather reports. So I needed to play a practice round so I came Tuesday. So I'm doing a bit of more homework, which keeps me focused a bit more and really relies on my golf course management skills again, which you get into automatic mode a lot of times. Now, playing courses you haven't seen, you've got to really kind of concentrate on what you want to do on the course.

Q. Davis was here earlier. He's got all this experience being a captain in Ryder Cups and Presidents Cups. You did it one time. That was enough for you? That's all you wanted to do?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, there was a lot -- I knew that I wanted to play Champions Tour and I just wanted to kind of have more freedom in my schedule. Being a captain, especially on an international team, I love the guys, but so many of the guys, there's really a lot of work that goes into each player, more so than on the American side I would say because the cultures that we have -- we have to deal with. Certain players -- I want the players to be as comfortable as they can be and it takes a lot of work from a captain to make a player comfortable, especially when the cultures are a little different. I thought I did as much as I could on that point. We came up short, which is really disappointing because we had a two-point lead. We didn't quite finish it.

But to me, me and my wife, myself, the two of us, and even my daughter played a big part in that Cup, we did as much as we could and we just -- it didn't go our way, but I felt I could leave on that note.

Q. So you appreciate all the time that Davis puts into this then?

ERNIE ELS: Oh, yeah. Davis, I mean, as I say, there's probably a little bit more to do on our side, but on this side there's as much because you're preparing a team to win and you want every single player to be going the same direction as you're leading them. That's a lot of work. You've got to do a lot of persuasion in many cases to players. Players' views might be different, but you need the whole team to move in the same direction as leaders. Then you have some really great team spirit and the guys can see the goal better. So he's got a lot of work to do.

Q. Ernie, sorry if this was asked before. You're kind of new to some of these courses. What about this course interests you when you're kind of learning about it during

your practice rounds?

ERNIE ELS: Well, The Woodlands is a very mature golf course. It's been here for many years now, I guess. It's really tree lined, it's wonderfully -- the vegetation is great on the course. There's water hazards that come into play on the golf course, so you have to really manage your ball around The Woodlands very carefully in some places. The par 5s are scoring holes, I feel, but for the most part you've got to read the winds. I played one practice round on Tuesday, I'm going to play another one today, but the winds swirl almost like they did at Augusta with these tall pines they have here. It's tricky on second shots, especially approach shots into the greens with the irons. You've got to just manage yourself accordingly.