

U.S. Senior Open

Press Conference

Tuesday June 27, 2017

Gene Sauers



THE MODERATOR: Thanks for joining us here in the Media Center for the 38th U.S. Senior Open championship.

Now it's my pleasure to introduce the defending champion, Gene Sauers, playing in his fifth U.S. Senior Open. The runner-up in 2014 and, of course, the winner last year at Scioto.

Gene, my first question is what's the coolest thing you did with the Senior Open trophy this past year?

GENE SAUERS: Well, I guess the coolest thing would be to take it down there to Mr. Trump, down to Palm Beach, Trump's place down there. So he got to hold it a few times, and he loved it. I got some pictures with him and stuff like that. But that's probably one of the coolest things, you know.

Of course, I did drink a bottle of wine out of it too. I don't know if I need to say that or not.

But it's been all around. Savannah, all the different clubs in Savannah and Palm Beach and Florida and Jupiter and all that. So it's been around. It sure was a nice decorative piece in the middle of my foyer right there. When everybody came in, that's what they saw.

THE MODERATOR: Absolutely. You mentioned your time from Savannah, being in Georgia, but you do have a connection to this area. Can you talk a little bit about your first professional win and then your journey being a Celtics fan.

GENE SAUERS: Like I say, it's 1986, the Bank of Boston Classic down here in Sutton, Mass. You were there, right? Yeah, Dave. I beat Blaine McCallister in a playoff. That was my first win. I was 23, 24 years old, I think. It was awesome, you know.

Then the next year, of course, you know, the Boston Celtics were in Game 4, and I got tickets to Game 4 and flew my dad up. He's been a Boston Celtic fan since I was a little boy. That's how I got into it. You know the socks I got there, media day, Larry Bird socks.

And flying my dad up and taking him to the Garden was really special. And that's part of that win in '86.

THE MODERATOR: Then when you were up here for preview day, you played a practice round with a couple of Boston legends, Stephen Gostkowski, Patriots kicker, and Ray Bourque, longtime Bruins defenseman.

Talk about that experience, playing with those guys. You had a Red Sox hat on as well when you were playing.

GENE SAUERS: That's right. I still got it. I guess I'm going to have to wear it Thursday. But, no, playing with those two guys, those two legends was awesome. Steve's still kicking. Both of them have got great swings. Of course, Ray has that hockey swing, but he hits it, pounds it out there pretty good. It was a pleasure meeting those two guys and playing golf with those guys.

We had a good time that day. Of course, it was 50 degrees and raining and cool. But other than that, it was a blast. Plus I got to see the golf course a little bit.

Like I say, it's a demanding golf course from around the greens, you know. Hitting the ball, it's not as severe and not as tough maybe. I haven't seen it since five or six weeks. I'm sure the rough has grown up a little bit.

But tee to green is not that really difficult. Just getting around those greens is going to be the true test. It's going to be a good putting and chipping contest this week.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Gene, just through everything that you've been through over the last few years, what did that win mean for you last year? Start off with that, I guess.

GENE SAUERS: You know, I never thought I'd be playing golf again, much less be sitting up here talking to you. I had a 25% survival rate with the Stevens-Johnson Syndrome.

I didn't touch a golf club for seven years. And to come back and to play with the caliber of players that I grew up playing with, it's pretty amazing, knowing that -- I guess some people say that, you know, it's like riding a bike, but the course is a lot tougher than that.

Hitting the golf ball, when I came back from those

seven years, wasn't so bad, but just the chipping and putting, the bunker game and the long bunker shots, that part of the game, the short game is the most difficult. I'm still learning.

Like I said, those last two weeks in the hospital, all I did was just picture the golf swing in my mind, and I think that mentally prepared me for when I first played the first round three months after the hospital and shot 71. That's pretty amazing with a new set of clubs and drivers and balls, all that kind of stuff.

So it's pretty amazing for me to be here and to be a major championship.

Q. How do you picture shots in your mind when you're sitting in the hospital like that? Can you walk us through that a little bit?

GENE SAUERS: You know, just from years past. I played the regular tour for 20 years, and all I did was kind of just picture myself on the driving range and just turning -- of course, you know, I'm reading a lot in my hospital bed.

I didn't get out of bed for five weeks so I couldn't do too much, watched a lot of videos and all that kind of stuff with the golf swing, and that's where I kind of tweaked a few things in my mind. When I used to take the club back, I used to raise up a lot, and I kind of eliminate -- I might raise up a little more, but I eliminated three-quarters of that.

That was probably one of the downfalls of my swing because when you come back up, you've got to get back down in the same spot. If you're not in the same spot when you hit the ball, it's going to go either direction. So I kind of mentally just maybe thought about that, of turning and trying to stay level.

But it worked. I shot 71 the first time I came back. Birdied three of the last three holes, and it was pretty amazing in 100 degree heat, and I was still kind of weak.

When I first got out of the hospital, I couldn't hit a pitching wedge. Here today, I mean, you know, everything -- my skin was all tight, and I had to -- everything morning, my right arm was just stuck like this. I had to push it out in order to stretch the skin, you know, in order to get moving up and coming back down to the ball.

It's pretty amazing. I saw my body deteriorate, and I saw it come back to life. I know the good Lord is looking at me.

Q. Gene, given the description of your comeback, do you have a feeling of, when you go to a certain

part of country, that maybe internally you gear in a little bit, and you've got a good feeling about New England. Does that bring back good feelings again?

GENE SAUERS: It does. You know, I remember winning in '86, it was cold that day and a little breezy. This is kind of the weather. I don't know what it was like the last week here, but I'm usually not a cold weather player. I love the heat because I'm from the south. The heat doesn't bother me. My wife always tells me, oh, don't throw Gene Sauers in the briar patch, just kind of kidding around, because I love the heat.

In '84 in Oklahoma City, where I lost in Oak Tree, it was hot that day, 100 degrees. It was like a blow dryer right in your face. I tend to play better in the heat. But coming back here brings back memories. I don't know what it is. I just feel comfortable in this part of the world.

Q. Gene, you talked about short game maybe lagging behind full swing and so forth, but you made a great up-and-down last year at Scioto to win. I wonder if that was maybe the biggest par save of your career.

GENE SAUERS: I think so. I worked with a buddy of mine, Jack Hall, back home, and he's been helping me out these last few years, and we worked a little bit on chipping.

And that's when I said, going into that chip, just pretend like you're back home at Savannah Golf Club and just go ahead and chip like he taught you.

I hit a pretty good chip, left it a little bit short, about four or five feet, so I had to struggle on that last putt.

But that last putt, I had the same putt two years prior to that at Oak Tree. I hit a little bit longer. I hit a great putt and lipped out for regulation to win there. I told myself, I said, well, it's like my buddies always tell me, you're going to make it or miss it. That was my last thought going into that putt. You know, just line it up, I'm going to make it or miss it. Just go ahead and put the best stroke on it you can, and it went dead center. It was a relief.

Q. I'm curious how much you enjoyed Erin Hills, even though it was long and hard. But you got the chance to play in another U.S. Open. What was that like?

GENE SAUERS: It was fine. I thought the course was fair. It was long. I don't think it was as firm and hard as they wanted it to be. We got a lot of rain that week.

I hit the ball decent. I only missed two fairways, but the

putting was bad for me. I had six three-putts in two days. I just couldn't get the speed down, I don't know why. Maybe nerves or confidence or what. But just wish I had putted better.

But the golf course was great, you know. Just a little long for me. I hit a lot of 3 irons and 4 irons and hybrids in the par 4s. Number 10, I couldn't get to the second day. Of course, I hit it in the first cut. If I'd have hit the fairway, I'd have probably had to hit 3 wood, and I don't know if I could -- it's like 245 to the pin, I think. It was a long way for me. Long golf course for me.

If it was a little harder and firmer, I might have done better. The putting is what killed me. But it was a great golf course.

Q. I know you were working on replacing your driver at Erin Hills. Did you ever do that? Did you ever get comfortable with something? And is that a factor here? Is that something you're still trying to figure out?

GENE SAUERS: That's one of my stronger points, I think, in my game is I hit a lot of fairways and a lot of greens. And no, I have not found another driver. I used a Callaway driver that week, used a TaylorMade the last couple weeks.

On the back of the range, there's three or four reps out there. I'm trying all kind of different drivers this week. I'm going to go out and play with a new one today in the practice round, that vertical groove one. Maybe that's the answer. I don't know.

My driver cracked in Birmingham. It was an M2 TaylorMade. And I have not found a replacement. I put the same shaft, and the TaylorMade guy gave me the same head, but they all just feel different to me. It's hard to find one right now.

Q. How long had you played with that particular driver?

GENE SAUERS: Two years. So it was kind of just -- it was like my baby. All I had to do was line it up and swing at it. It was going pretty much where I wanted to go most of the time. Now I'm struggling to try to -- I'm fighting right and left.

Last week I was playing pretty good, and I made a triple bogey on the shortest hole on the golf course. And I tried to hit a hard driver, and I blocked it way right, sliced it 20, 30 yards into stuff. You know, that's usually not me.

It could be a little bit mental too. Yeah, it is, because I'm just not comfortable with it.

Q. You said you were struggling with your putter. What are the things you do when you go through that? I mean, how do you get out of that? In the past, how have you gotten out?

GENE SAUERS: Practiced more at it. Sometimes you don't practice a lot putting. You're bending over there for 15, 20 minutes, your lower back starts hurting you, and you kind of quit.

But there's a few drills that I do. Put two tees in between the putter, just barely enough for the putter to fit through. Of course, not doing this, trying to get it straight back and straight through.

That and a chalk line just to get my eyes going in the right direction, I think. That's two of the main things that I practice on.

Q. Do you fool around with different putters?

GENE SAUERS: Different putters and stuff? I do a little bit, but I know it's not the putter. I've putted great with the Two Ball Odyssey putter, and I putted great with it. I won with it last year. It's not the putter. Sometimes I hate changing the grips. Sometimes you don't get it on just right, and then sometimes it feels open or closed. You got to get that thing going just right.

Jeff's been a good -- he's the Odyssey rep out here. He's the only one I like to put the grip on for me. If I go home and change the grip, my buddy puts it on hooked all the time, and I never can do it. But he does a good job. I know it's not the putter.

Q. Gene, you got three practice days. Do you usually play three 18-hole rounds, or do you just kind of play it by ear and then tinker with what you need to tinker with, based on all the comments you just made?

GENE SAUERS: I got in last night. I had to play in a pro-am in Virginia yesterday. So I'm going to play today. I've got a tee time tomorrow. We'll see what happens today with that rain. Hopefully, I get all 18 in.

I think, if I could find me a driver and feel comfortable with it, I'm going to probably have to work on my putting and chipping because I think that's where the winner's going come out this week.

Q. Gene, you've spoken before about, since we're in Boston, that Larry Bird is your favorite athlete. What about him that you admired? And then did you take anything from his career and apply it to your golfing career?

GENE SAUERS: I played basketball when I was a kid. I played football, basketball, and golf growing up. Can you imagine me playing? I was a halfback in high

school. Imagine all 125, 130 pounds of me. But I was fast.

Just watching him come down the court and shooting up them three-pointers and all of the talent that he had, I kind of took that in when I was playing in high school. You know, it's just -- and my dad. That was one of his favorite players so he just kind of took me under his wing, and I watched that.

I guess he kind of worked pretty hard at it, and that's something that I did. My dad put up basketball goals in my yard, and I'd go to practice every day and work hard on my shooting and technique and everything.

It was just a thrill to be there in that Game 4. I think they lost by two points, I think. Magic Johnson did like right there in the last few seconds to beat them by one or two.

THE MODERATOR: Gene Sauers, 7:52 off the tee on Thursday. Best of luck this week.