

U.S. Senior Open

Press Conference

Thursday June 29, 2017

Jerry Smith



THE MODERATOR: Welcome back to the Media Center here at the 38th U.S. Senior Open Championship. I'm here with Jerry Smith. Round of 65 today, 5 under par, 34, 31. Jerry playing in his fourth U.S. Senior Open.

Jerry, just one top 20 finish this year, but, boy, you had it going today. What clicked for you?

JERRY SMITH: Well, I drove the ball really good today. If I did miss a fairway, it was just in the first cut. And I just hit a lot of solid drives. They actually got out there too. So it made the golf course feel a little bit shorter than in the practice round.

I was just in position all day, and I putted at times very well also. There was a couple times out there that I made a putt probably to sort of keep things going.

But I've been playing solid most of the year. I've been fairly consistent. I just haven't been putting three days together out on the Champions Tour, which you just have to do. The guys are just so good out here. So I've just been working on that, just trying to not stumble, but it's easier said than done.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go through your card a little bit today. You started off on the 1st hole with a birdie. If you could take us through the clubs you hit in, if you remember, and the length of the birdie putt.

JERRY SMITH: I hit driver off 1. It's early in the morning. I hit a good drive down the left side right, just right on the very edge of the fairway. It got over the hill, and I hit a gap wedge. I think I had maybe 107, 108 yards. Hit a good shot in there, probably 10, 15 feet behind the hole. So, yeah, great way to start.

And then from there, 2, I actually hit two good shots as well, kind of landed into the front of the green and rolled back off. And I three-putted there so it wasn't hard to do because the pin was back in the very back of the green.

Then I made a careless bogey on 3 with, really, a simple 9 iron. So after a good start, I mean, really, to bogey 2 and 3 put me back kind of on the defense again. But I was able to turn it around, thank goodness.

THE MODERATOR: You rebounded with a birdie on 6, the par 5, to get it back to even par.

JERRY SMITH: Yeah, 6 I hit a good drive down the left side and was able to get it just short of the green. Pitched it really to a couple of feet. So made a pretty easy birdie there.

7, I hit a good drive with a 7 iron about -- I didn't make that putt, but I had a good look on 7 as well.

8, I hit a good drive down the left side there and had -- I think I hit a pitching wedge in there, maybe from 128 or 129 yards to maybe six feet or so and made that.

Felt good at the turn. Hit a good drive on 9 as well. I think that's kind of a difficult hole, but I got it down to the bottom and had just an 8 iron in there.

So at the turn, I felt really good with where things were and not knowing what was going to happen on the back nine.

THE MODERATOR: You really got it going on the back nine with another birdie on 11.

JERRY SMITH: Yeah, I made a good par on 10. So 10, we got asked to speed up. We were a little bit behind. So I hit it in the right rough, probably one of my worst drives of the day, apparently. And I hit it short of the green and made a poor chip, and it rolled off to the right side of the green. So I had a difficult, I felt, two-putt to make 5, and I actually made that for 4.

That did help a lot. I hit two good shots on 11. That pin was in a difficult spot back there in the back center. I was kind of just shy of hole high underneath the slope there and made a good 20-footer up over that slope. So that was good. Making the par on 10 and then making the birdie on 11 kind of calmed me back down, and I felt like I played really solid there into the house.

THE MODERATOR: Birdies on 14 and 15.

JERRY SMITH: Yeah, 14 I hit a good drive. I think I had roughly 220, 218 to that par 5 there. I hit a 2 hybrid that just on the front edge and two-putted there.

And then par 3 on the next hole, I hit a 4 iron. That

was playing right at 200 yards. I hit it maybe 20 feet, made a great putt there.

And then I actually hit it pretty close on 16, didn't make it.

But then 17, hit a good drive and a 6 iron from about -- I think the yardage was 197, but we were just trying to clear the front edge, which was maybe roughly 180. Probably another 20, 25-footer there, made that.

18, I hit two great shots. It was just really a simple putt underneath the hole, probably 10, 12 feet. Left it short, which isn't hard to do out here.

So just hit a lot of good shots. You know, the drives set up obviously the whole day because I had good numbers out there. Like I said, hitting from the fairway is a must on this course, any U.S. Open, Senior Open course.

THE MODERATOR: Let's open it up to some questions.

Q. Does the back nine play easier than the front nine?

JERRY SMITH: I don't think it's supposed to. I mean, the closing holes, I think 15, 16, 17, 18 are all good holes. They were slightly downwind today so I think that made them play easier.

But no, I wouldn't say that. I think they're both good nines. I really think it's a good test and a good golf course. The conditions are in great shape.

Q. After the first bogeys early in the round, the first two bogeys, what was your mindset?

JERRY SMITH: Well, it did throw me off a little bit. There's no question. I made a good two-putt on 4 for par.

I just had to settle down. I think I've been getting a little bit too emotional at times when things aren't going my way in tournaments, you know, in the last several weeks.

My caddie actually told me before we started this tournament to not let things get to you. You know, it's going to happen. You're going to make bogeys out here. And he was right. So I just kept myself really, I guess, more calm on that piece. It did help.

I mean, once I made the birdie at 6 and got it back to even par, then I just knew that I was driving the ball well, and I drove it that way all day. That's the biggest thing, I think, out here is to at least get it in play and take that pressure off yourself. It helped.

Sometimes making bogeys earlier, honestly, can be a good thing. I know when I won the Encompass in '15, I was in the leading going into the final round and bogeyed the opening two holes. It's good to, I guess, get those bogeys out of the way, and I didn't make another one.

Q. How about the fact, that 65, you've struggled in this event in previous years, just the way you smashed your personal best round by, what, four.

JERRY SMITH: I have. I'm in my third year out here, and I haven't played that great in the Majors. It's always a goal of mine each year when I started out, you kind of write things down. That's one of them, to play better in the Majors.

So USGA events, I played in four Opens before, the last four Senior Opens, and didn't make any of those cuts. I've missed two of the three cuts with the Senior Open.

It's one of those things. I liked the golf course when I got here. I'm not going to say it fit my eye, but I just liked the conditions. And I feel like I've been playing pretty good here of late, even though the results aren't really showing.

But I'm very happy with it, for sure. Friends and things like that always have said they thought that I could play well in Opens, and maybe it's just getting in a mindset, and hopefully we can continue the rest of this week.

Q. Jerry, having put up a great number today, what's your mindset going forward? Can you get too far ahead of yourself, or what do you do to prepare for tomorrow?

JERRY SMITH: Well, I don't think I will. I just obviously have to do the same things that I did today. It's going to get tougher each day, there's no question. I felt very -- like I said, I felt calm out there. I knew that I was swinging well, and just every drive was hitting my target.

So that's what I have to do. I have to keep doing the same thing. Like I said, it's going to get harder. The pressure and the conditions will probably, I would say, get tougher if there's wind or anything like that.

So I'm not going to try to change anything. Just sort of keep doing what I'm doing. I feel good with where things are with my game, and it's just a matter of staying in the moment and enjoying it.

For me, it's going to be a first -- like I said, my results haven't been very good in the Open. I like getting here. I like getting in the position and experiencing it. Whether it goes good or bad is something you just

have to accept and learn from.

But I'm very happy to be where I am, and I look forward to whatever challenges that I'm sure I'm going to face in the next several days.

Q. Jerry, for those that don't know your background, could you just give us kind of a brief history of how you grew up as a superintendent's son and the whole family working in the golf world.

JERRY SMITH: Yeah. It would be hard to be brief. Yeah, I mean, I had a father who was a superintendent. So I grew up on a small -- Edmundson Golf Course was the golf club I grew up, and my mom worked in the shop. So, I mean, we lived literally right on the golf course. The clubhouse was attached to it.

But I had a grandfather, great-grandfather who also were superintendents, all in the state of Iowa. So there's a big history. I've got an older brother who's been a club pro and a course owner. And the whole family, I had two other brothers and a sister, we all played. We had a good golf environment, I felt like, where we were living.

My history, I've been sort of a journeyman guy. I know there's been a lot of those out here. I played Asia when I came out of college, played at Baylor and McLennan Community College in Waco, Texas.

When I graduated, I went to Asia. There wasn't really much out there to do. I mean, the Hogan Tour hadn't started yet. So spent time there. I spent time working for my brother for a period of years and then played the Tour on and off for five years in about a ten-year period.

Then when I was in my late 40s, wasn't -- you know, you always hoped that you could come out here and qualify and get on the Tour, but I really hadn't had a good enough career to just automatically come out here.

So first time through the school, I didn't get through, and I actually went over to Europe and played their Senior Tour for a year, which I thought was a great kind of lead-in to get back into playing competitive golf because I was out for three or four years.

Then to get my card the second time through and win the first year I was out here, you know, I just have -- I've really had one of those storybook sort of last three years. I know a lot of guys -- you know, I get a lot of congratulations. I'm sure a lot of guys like myself are encouraged and so forth. So it's nice, and I don't want it to end. It's one of those things where I have to earn my card each and every year out here to stay exempt.

I always tell guys, it's kind of like Willie Wonka and getting one of those five golden tickets. I mean, that's what it feels like when you go through the school and get one of the cards. It is sort of, again, a life changer, or it can be. I mean, it's difficult. The competitive level out here is so high. It's just been a lot of fun for me to be out here and playing and competing at a high level.

You know, I feel like I'm back to learning again, learning how to try to get better. So getting in these kinds of situations, I look at it as only a helpful thing rather than, you know, kind of scared or whatever. I want to learn. I want to be in these situations and embrace it.

Like I said, whatever happens, good or bad, just go on to the next week, I guess.

Q. Jerry, any previous experience or memories, either playing at Salem or around New England in your career?

JERRY SMITH: Well, we were here a few years ago for the PLAYERS in the Boston area. I did play an Open out here. Would have been at the country club, I guess, in Brookline. But that's really about the only experience I've had. I haven't played it, I would say, on the east coast. A couple of Opens and a couple of our events.

I like it out here. I mean, I like this tree-lined type fairway, you know, the style of golf course. I think the state of Iowa has similar courses. Not very many even lies. You get kind of a lot of rolly hills, and the ball bounces different directions.

I would say the course fits my eye. These old Donald Ross courses are just -- I think they're just spectacular courses. They were designed back in the '20s and '30s, and they're still relevant today, as far as championship golf. I played Pinehurst in an Open and loved that as well. That's about the only real history I've had out here.

THE MODERATOR: Jerry Smith, 5 under, 65. Best of luck tomorrow.