

U.S. Senior Open

Press Conference

Tuesday June 26, 2018

John Smoltz



PETE KOWALSKI: Good afternoon. Welcome to the interview room here at the 39th U.S. Senior Open at The Broadmoor. This is the second Senior Open and 8th USGA championship at the resorts courses. We are pleased at this point to welcome Major league Baseball's Hall of Fame pitcher John Smoltz, who qualified for this year's championship on May 31st at Planterra Ridge Golf Club in Georgia with a 69 and advanced in a playoff to earn the third and final qualifying berth at this spot. This is John's first U.S. Senior Open. To start, tell us what the Senior Open means in your athletic life and how does it compare to any of your extraordinary experiences in baseball.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Well this is where I probably lose people because they don't understand it's probably the No. 1 thing that I've ever accomplished. Everything I've been part of before's been a team thing and I'm proud of all my accomplishments from a team aspect, but an individual role or accomplishment, I haven't had anything anywhere close to this. This is been a dream of mine since I was probably 35 to 40 years old and I know a lot of my teammates were tired of hearing it, that I was going to do this one day, but it is the most excited I've ever been. Winning my first Major league baseball game was something cool and unforgettable and shared with my family, but part of a team. And this accomplishment was the longest golf day of my life and one that came with just the busiest schedule you can imagine and I don't feel like I have slept normal since it happened.

PETE KOWALSKI: So, as a television guy, how about a little play by play from that playoff. That had some pretty dramatic moments in it.

JOHN SMOLTZ: It did. I got up at 5:15 to drive to Planterra Ridge, about an hour and 45 minutes from my house. First -- it wasn't the first tee time, but the two guys in front didn't show up, so they pushed me up to the first group. So we were the first group, a twosome. And the front nine I played a 34 into a 37 and then birdied the, what was the front nine, but my back nine, 15, 16 and 17 and had an about a 12-footer on 18 and I knew that putt meant probably less anxiousness if I made it, because I don't have to wait around. So you missed the putt and I waited around eight hours. I prepared for my game that I had to leave the next day to do for MLB Network or actually for Fox, and that only could last so long, I got really frustrated

trying to think about baseball when I was only thinking about golf. So then when about seven hour mark I went to hit golf balls on the range, finding out if I get a chance it would be definitely a playoff. And if you would have seen me hit the balls at 7 o'clock you would have said, just get in the car and go home, it's not going to work. But it was literally, I went back -- the only thing I could draw from is that when I was tired in a game is mentally just going one pitch at a time. So in the playoff I wanted to it end obviously as early as possible because I was tired. And I birdied the first hole, felt great about that, and one other guy birdied it and so it then became two people for one spot. And what happened the next two holes is an array of emotions that I've learned so many lessons from that. Hit two great shots on the next hole, got a bad result, and probably got lucky to go on to the third hole. And the third hole was a, I was afforded a two-shot advantage when he hit the ball in the water off the tee. And I made a mistake, I walked up to that bunker shot and I thought about playing in the U.S. Open instead of hitting the bunker shot. And it was similar to my days of a young pitcher thinking about answering questions to the media in the 8th inning before the game was over. And I'm just honest with my feelings because that's the one way I learn. I'm not going to sugar coat it. I just, next time I'm in that situation I promise you I will step out and play a different strategy. So I hit the shot and didn't get result, hit the lip and went back in the water. So now I had to rally and hit a decent shot to about 10 feet, ultimately I got in because I 2-putted and he didn't. But the day filled with all those emotions just that's why it's the greatest feeling I've ever had because of all that led up to -- I had been through this twice and had bad results. I waited seven and a half hours in a previous U.S. Open qualifier only to find out I got beat in the last hole. I've had seven hour waits before and all that led to helping me at least deal with the eight hours of time off.

PETE KOWALSKI: Great story. We're now going to open it up to questions.

Q. I'm curious about the dynamic of pitching and the preparation for the individual pursuit of golf. The psychology, the crossover, I know that's kind of a broad question, but could you give us a sense for how that psychology works, the advantage of having been a professional athlete at the level that

you were in baseball and now in golf and similarities and things of that nature. That's what I'm after.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, I think they're real similar from a pitcher's standpoint. Sight oriented. You pick a target and you're trying to execute. I would say where I am nowhere close as a golfer as I was as a pitcher, I had all the confidence in the world in my pitches. Now that came with time and rep, and I never was afraid of the pressure and pressure never caused me to fail or be the reason I failed. I failed because I didn't execute. As a golfer I don't have all the pitches, so to speak. I don't have, you'll get exposed quickly and I have what I have. I've never taken a lesson, I don't practice, I just play. And it's been a passion of mine ever since I realized that being a pitcher starting in A-ball, I've got four days that I better find a way to occupy time because I pitch every five days. And I picked up golf at about 20, 21 years old. The bug never has left. I have such admiration for a game that I had no appreciation for. And from a mental standpoint, what I love about golf is it really is about you. The mental pressures do add up and they do, they do get you in a different way than if I'm on the mound and nothing starts until I start it. But then I can get picked up by my teammates. You can get hidden results as a baseball player, especially a pitcher. You cannot get hidden results as a golfer. It's all about you, Mother Nature and a couple breaks here and there. So I don't have a routine, I just, I play golf, I love it. My path? I never thought I would be a broadcaster when I retired, I really thought I would just dedicate my time to playing golf competitively as much as I could, and I never thought I would have three shoulder surgeries afterwards. So this has been a, this has been like the wildest ride in the world but I can promise you the pressure is not going to get to me, it will be my inability to hit a shot or an inability to hit an in between bunker shot that just is not -- these guys are the best in the world and I have such admiration getting a chance to play with them, I learned from watching. And I'm self taught. So when I see the guys I'm going to get to play with, I watch their swings, I watch what they're doing and try to learn that way. It's the way I learned as a baseball pitcher, I just watched and went out and tried to emulate what I watched. And to say I'm having the time of my life is an understatement right now.

Q. You've had almost a month now since you qualified so I'm sure have heard from just all kinds of people. What are, what have been some of your favorite conversations that you've had with folks or messages or whatever it might be, about this event?

JOHN SMOLTZ: It's been the general excitement that they have had. I can't believe that the amount of texts and the amount of interviews, nothing compares to this.

I'm not -- the Hall of Fame was the greatest achievement that I could be part of, but I didn't get as many texts for the Hall of Fame as I've gotten for this. And just people who generally whether they're casual golfers or they just can't comprehend that this happened, so everybody I work with, everybody I've been around, generally says they will be watching, they will be rooting. Despite whatever kind of long shot it is to do this, but that's been the most rewarding thing to realize that -- shoot, my teammates have sent those texts going, I can't believe you said you were going to do it and you did it. But I hope, for nothing else, my whole life has been a life of perseverance and overcoming failures. And I've just think that maybe, if nothing else, it gives people hope to do things that maybe are so stacked against you that if you don't have the right attitude -- I tell my kids things that I'm sure today they are tired of hearing, but I, if you don't dream it, you'll never achieve it. If you don't believe it -- I'll get it mixed up now because of this. If you don't believe it, you'll never dream it. If you don't dream it, you'll never achieve it. And I am a big believer in that. I'm certainly not going to do something like tell you guys I'm going to grow hair by next year, that's just unrealistic, but I've always told my kids and people around me that, why not? Why not pursue your dreams. This is a secondary dream that I'm going to get a chance to be a part of.

Q. I believe you appeared in 14 games at Coors Field as a pitcher, how much are you looking forward to hitting something in altitude?

JOHN SMOLTZ: I cannot tell you how much I did not like pitching in Coors Field. I love watching the game there. I think it's one of the prettiest venues I loved taking batting practice there. Pitching was just a lot of work. Hitting golf balls, playing golf at Castle Pines, Cherry Hills, all the places around Denver was always a treat. That's one of my favorite places to come because the golf ball does go. And as I've gotten older and lost my distance this will be a nice equalizer to think that maybe it's coming back, only to come back to reality when you get to sea level. But somebody told me the last time I was here I pitched and won a game in April of 2007. So that's how long ago it's been since I've been back. I was in back in 2009 with the Cardinals but I didn't play. And Colorado's always been a fun place for me to come and now experience The Broadmoor, which I've never seen before. So I'm hoping that never seeing Planter Ridge was good luck, maybe never seeing here might be good luck, who knows.

Q. Given the circumstances I think it is possible you may grow hair by next year. I was in St. Louis when you were with the Cardinals and know Adam Wainwright and he's told me stories about you

guys playing at Augusta. And he told me a story one time about, I think you played with Tiger and he was actually beating him or maybe it was you. But the background is, I know you've got some other good golf raves, so previous to this what was your best golf experience or story?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, there's a million of them. I felt like the time that the Maddox and Glavine and I spent together, three of us for 10 years, two of us for 15 years, we played golf all over the country. I never dreamt, growing up out of Lansing, Michigan, starting playing the accordion when I was four years old, until seven, that I would be in the Major leagues, that I would have a chance to meet presidents, that I would have a chance to play with the greatest golfers in the world, it's just doesn't seem possible. And to play with Tiger and Annika at the same time, for the first time they ever played together, ranks way up there. Seeing the two No. 1s in the world and playing with them, and getting lucky enough that day to beat Annika and getting more publicity for that than anything I did in baseball -- by the way the next year she shot 66 and smoked me and talked trash, so I thought that was awesome. But honestly, if I had to name one, it's just the experience of in spring training with the greatest manager in the world and Tiger asking me if I could go to Augusta about three weeks before the Masters and I said, all I can do is ask my manager, I'm in spring training I got something to do every single day. And I said, let me get back to you. And I hovered around his office for about 15 minutes hoping that nobody went in there and made him mad. But I just went in and asked, I said, I completely understand you if say no, I got kind of a calm day on Sunday, he'd have me back by three. Is that okay? And he looked at me and he said, I'll see you Monday. And I just couldn't believe that he said that. And I got a chance to go play Sunday pins at the Masters, with Tiger, I was late, I couldn't find the FBO, I was getting nervous I was on the phone saying, please don't leave. We got there, we couldn't hit balls, we went to the first tee and our first swings were on the first tee and just walking that course, watching him play like it was his backyard on Sunday pins was amazing. And I'll never forget hitting my first tee shot right down the middle and he hit it in the bunker. And we're walking down first fairway he goes, this might be your day. And I said, you're darn right this might be my day. I made six, he made four. He shot 66, I shot like 78. And I got a chance to see -- TV doesn't quite do it justice. If you never got a chance to see up close some of the greatest golfers in the world -- and I've been blessed to play with them -- and that's got to be up there under the circumstances. Nobody found out, believe it or not. In spring training normally when a guy's missing they ask questions, and that's how great my manager was, he knew I wouldn't take advantage of it, and I could tell the story years later.

Q. For perspective what year was that?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Oh, gosh, that would have been 2006 or 2007, I think. It was the same year that he always wanted to hit off me and he wanted to see all the stuff that I had and I said you really don't really want to see that I'm more worried about your thumbs getting jammed and affecting golf. He says, nope, I want to see it. And so we did a simulation game that's what it's called, a sim game, nobody there's at the stadium. And I throw and Brian McCann catches and we just pretend like we're doing a game. And he proclaimed he went 1-4 with a walk, but that's up for serious debate.

(Laughter.)

Q. This is kind of a follow-up to the previous question, but I heard a story about your days in spring training in Orlando meeting Tiger, you and a few other guys playing for meal money. What did you learn from that experience and can you just expand on that story?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, besides everyone knowing he's the most competitive guy I've ever been around, we got a chance to play a lot of golf. You can't talk trash to him. I tried to warn everybody I brought, like don't feel like you're macho by talking trash, it just doesn't work. Just play golf. And the one particular -- back in the day meal money wasn't a lot, but it was meal money for spring training. We would get an envelope. And we played golf and, you know, I lost the meal money. So I gave him the envelope and then a week later we played again and I won the same amount back. And I used to -- it grinded me that he never opened up the envelope and gave it back. To see if there was actually what meal money. It's like, what, do you have a whole drawer of envelopes? How could you not open that? He thought that was one of the funniest things in the world. But the thing about those matches and playing with him is the most popular person in the world's getting a chance to play golf and do something for fun that he enjoys. And it was a blast. I mean, whether it was ping pong, shooting hoops, it was an absolute blast. And I would only take guys that I knew would respect that that was a big deal, you know. And so we played a ton of rounds. Interestingly enough, I met him at an All Star Cafe grand opening. And it just so happens that we moved from West Palm Beach to Orlando and said, I'll be there all the time. If you want to play golf it would be awesome. And we played a lot of golf. My favorite story with him is there was five of us, buddy of mine, two buddies of mine, five guys and the scorecard read five, four, three, two, one on a par-3. So pretty amazing scorecard, every number was covered. And I picked the ball out of the hole and my buddy, who flew me down to play with him and he got the hole-in-one, Scott, and I said, what's more believable when we get

back home, the fact that you got a hole-in-one or that you beat Tiger by four on one hole. Well Tiger didn't take too kind to that and went 12-under the next 21 or so holes. So if that tells you anything about him, I probably got what I deserved after I picked the ball out of the hole.

Q. One of the reasons why you have this opportunity is on the PGA TOUR when your days are over you get a second life on this Champions Tour. Could you imagine if Major League Baseball had the same thing?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Oh, no, I couldn't. These guys, this sport is about the only sport where probably that could happen. That's what makes golf so great. You would see really, really ugly baseball.

(Laughter.)

To the point where I can't throw a ball anymore. If anyone asked me to throw out the first pitch, I'm begging, no. You exhaust all of your opportunities in a sport that is very demanding. But this sport, the reason it became such a love of mine is you could play it for so long and you could play it really good for a long, long time in your career. So again, I never ever, when I made the statement that I would want to do this one day, ever thought that it would be another job or another profession, no chance. But if given the opportunity to play in a couple events that I could qualify for or work, it works out, I am always looking to match. When you retire the hardest part about life in sports, especially in our industry, when you retire there's really nothing that can replace that competitive edge and there's nothing for a lot of these guys that will do that and that's why golf becomes such a great outlet for a lot of athletes. In other sports that want to see how far they can take their golf and for guys that have done this in their profession all their life, I mean that's, you never get to that point, ever. You never will. So I'm not kidding myself to think that if I put a year in or two years in and stopped broadcasting that this is just a, it's a great sport that I never ever appreciated. And didn't think it was athletic, there's a lot of things I was wrong about. So much so that my first real experience I told this story before, I went to San Francisco Golf Club with a teammate of mine, had no idea the history of the sport, had no idea the history of the club, I'm kind of a practical joker, and on the first tee I had put an exploding golf ball on the first tee and my teammates didn't know this. And everyone was lined up and I hit this ball and it exploded and nobody laughed. And I thought that was the funniest thing you could do on a golf course. And I was walking down the fairway and Rick Mahler, who is no longer with us, my team mate said, you have no idea what you've just done. And I said, well then this place, you know, I had some words. And he said, just pray you ever get back here. And I

started to learn about the history of golf and etiquette and how unbelievably stupid that was at that place. And I started from that point on really appreciating golf for what it is. But, yeah, second ever golf course I played on the road was San Francisco Golf Club. And the exploding golf ball. That's not what I should have done.

PETE KOWALSKI: You said that there was a lot of outreach to you. Once you qualified, but who did you reach out to for best piece of advice to approach this new situation for you?

JOHN SMOLTZ: You know, in my first call was to my wife and I was screaming, I literally got in the car -- and she never has heard me like this -- because everyone knew I was in kind of the playoff was a gap of time where they were kind of waiting, you can't use your phone and go, oh, by the way I'm on the third hole. So they thought after about an hour and change that I had lost and so to hear me scream -- the second call I made was to Joe Buck, who has got this telecast, obviously, on the weekend. And I had told him three years ago that this was a dream of mine and one day hopefully he's calling it. But I've had people tell me a lot of advice and just the fact that you get somewhere that you feel like you're over your head and you forget that you can play a little bit and that you earned it. And I think that's the biggest advice that I will take is that I kind of earned it, I earned a spot here and to play golf is a dream. Honestly, not to make light of it, the fact that I'm not thinking about baseball this week is really nice. It's like I will have the time of my life playing golf no matter how many days it is. I know I'm guaranteed four, two practice rounds and two rounds of golf, but I've had a lot of people reach out, I've been blown away by the congratulations and the reminders that you can play golf, so go get them.

Q. You said you never seen the course you never got out there yet. Have you made any phone calls or called anyone to maybe learn a little bit ahead of time before you go out there and tee it up?

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yes, some of the players here reached out right away. Lee Janzen who I played a lot of golf with, I've heard from people that have played the course, telling me to keep it out of the rough. Here's what I'm all about. I mean, I do, I love all that, but I want to -- I've learned a long time in baseball when I'm standing on the mound and somebody says don't hang a slider to Albert Pujols, I don't want to hear the don't. I just want to hear, throw the pitch down and away. I want to hear a positive command. So stuff like keep it in the fairway. Instead of, don't hit it in the rough or stuff like that. I want to make sure that I stay positive to a command. But a lot of people reached out and told me what the course is like. Honestly, I haven't had a whole lot of time to think about it. I literally have had,

since I -- I've had three, four days off since qualifying that was not job-related either with MLB Network or Fox. And if you could only know my schedule of squeezing in golf, going to a meeting, doing a game, and still not thinking about my putting stroke in the third inning of a game I'm calling I would be lying. So all that being said, I'm going to try to use the challenge of playing another golf course, one I've never seen, see how patient I can be and how I manage it.

Q. You talked about getting here has been one of your dreams. Now that you are here, what are your hopes, your expectations, your goals for this week?

JOHN SMOLTZ: You know, somebody asked me that right away and instantaneously said a pair of 75s. And somebody looked at me like, why would you say that. And I said well whenever I set a goal I try to be realistic to where I'm at at the time and then I want to exceed it. I want to obviously shoot under par. But I don't want to do something or say something that is farfetched to where I'm not being real. So my goal is to make the cut. I have had, I don't know six, seven, eight tournaments where there's been a cut and maybe I'm batting 50 percent. But that's always been the goal is to see how far you can go. I've had some horrible experiences in golf that have made me a better golfer. I got a Nationwide exemption right after I retired. I couldn't turn it down, but I knew I wasn't ready, but I wanted to see what it was like. And it was in Valdosta, Georgia and I had three goals in mind. Is my equipment right, is my shoulder going to be okay, and what about my patience. And I failed all three. My patience after about nine hours of rain delays in between my first round didn't work. I didn't have anything, any basis for that. That would be like standing on the mound waiting 10 minutes between each pitch. I'm probably not going to be a very good pitcher. Ended up scheduling two shoulder surgeries after that tournament. And then got my equipment fixed. But I shout 86, 87 and had to answer questions of the obvious. I went on Golf Channel and ESPN, had already agreed to it, and the first thing both networks said, I can't believe you're doing this interview. I said, why? They said, well if I shot those numbers I wouldn't be doing this interview. But that taught me so much. That failure taught me of next time in this kind of moment or next time I'm in a four-hour rain delay, make adjustments. So my expectations are going to be whatever I go through here is going to better me for whatever is next. And if I expect or try to play a perfect round of golf, then I'm making a mistake by not enjoying. But I'm not coming here with nothing to lose, that's the worst thing that someone could say is that I got nothing to lose. I'm coming here to play the very best golf I can under these circumstances.

Q. I know you said you don't want to talk about ball

anymore, so hopefully this is the last question but you mentioned some of the challenges that you faced pitching attitude. Saw what the Rockies have done in the off season with their pitching staff and all the money they invested in the bullpen. What do you think that it takes to be successful as a pitcher in Colorado?

JOHN SMOLTZ: That's a great question. I always -- a long time ago I said I don't like the current style of pitching today and how people are being used. But I think if there was one exception to make multiple pitching changes in a game, here would be the place. I know they tried it for a little part and it wasn't successful, but I think you have to maintain it for awhile because it is a very difficult place to pitch. Injury prevention, just the whole rundown, fatigue factor of this place is different than anywhere else. And they don't have a dome, so I don't know how much a dome would have changed the environment, it probably would have helped a little bit, but I think you have to be mentally strong and physically have to adapt to this kind of environment. So as much as I don't like five pitchers per game, as a whole, throughout baseball, I think that would survive better here and to have multiple guys throw three innings and go through the lineup once instead of trying to have a thoroughbred be the guy that, over 18 to 19 starts at home, you hope doesn't have a long-term affect down the road. So it is a very complex problem that for years they have been trying to find, do we get a sinker ball, do I get a guy that's just got nasty stuff, and the reality is you just going to have to -- back in the old days they out slugged everybody and I would implement -- if I magically had to start here, I would implement that kind of system and buy into it and make everybody buy into it and prove that that is the way to be successful and not listen to the noise that comes with it. Because, you know, for a short period of time they tried it and it had tremendous backlash or at least it had cost maybe somebody their job. But you could have one or two guys that could sustain a five, six, seven inning, but I think the majority -- having five guys is asking a lot. Especially the way the game is kind of evolved with starters having no emphasis on pitching innings anymore, which I don't like. It would be like golf going to nothing but hit as hard and as far as you can and have no short game. Golf would instantaneously become boring. And I think that's where baseball's headed. Throw it as hard as you can, hit it as far as you can, nothing in between. And I think that they're running the danger of becoming really boring to watch. So I hope they make self adjustments.

Q. I know that your faith is a big part of the main part of your life. Put that in perspective as it is to qualifying for this tournament, being a Hall of Famer, all those World Series.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Yeah, I mean it's, you know, in life there's highs and lows and accomplishments and failures. And for the early part of my life I was very connected to those. I felt worthy when I was successful and I felt like I let people down when I wasn't. And I rode a roller coaster of about three to four years of trying to please everybody, be all to everybody. And I realized I was making a foolish attempt to be in the world and of the world instead of honoring God and the talents he's given me. So I really made a cultural and philosophical shift in '95, to honor him and my faith has sustained me through some really, really tough trials in life and has been the foundation for me to have perspective and not let certain things define me. I told you I'm not afraid to fail, not afraid to make fun of myself or laugh. I think I'm also realistically honest to know I'm a moment away from something not good happening and not letting that define who I am. So my faith is essential, it's the core of my family and my athletic accomplishments. It would be silly to think that I did it all on my own. But at the same time I've wanted to honor God in everything that I've done. And I'm never going to be perfect, but it certainly helps not swaying back and forth on being successful or not being successful and that doesn't identify me as a dad or a husband. And for that I'm so grateful. That frees you up to know that who you serve is more important than what you do here on earth.

PETE KOWALSKI: John, thank you for your graciousness and your glib answers. This is a very good session. I saw a lot of smiling faces out there from the media and good luck at your first Senior Open.

JOHN SMOLTZ: Thank you. I don't know if there's a cloud higher than cloud nine, but that's where I feel like I've been. Thank you.