

U.S. Senior Open

Press Conference

Wednesday June 28, 2017

Kurt Van Hees



MODERATOR: Welcome back to the 38th U.S. Senior Open Championship. It is my pleasure to welcome in Kurt Van Hees into the Media Center here. Kurt playing in his first U.S. Senior Open Championship, shot a 69 at Green Valley Country Club in California. Born in Salem, Oregon, and here we are 51 years later in Salem Country Club in Peabody, Massachusetts.

You played golf when you were young, but it was in the water where you really kind of made your mark early on as a swimmer, water polo, and then eventually as a Speedo model. Can you take us through a little bit of how you got into golf and then when you eventually jumped into swimming?

KURT VAN HEES: Sure, yeah. I started playing golf when I was about 6 with the family. And then my father and I played a lot of golf from, say, 8 years old until about 16 or 17. So he was the one that really got me completely into the game.

I had been a competitive swimmer since I was 7 or 8 years old also and then went on and played water polo and swam at a junior college in Southern California. And so that was kind of the gist of that.

Then you wanted me to expand a little bit on how the whole Speedo thing came up?

MODERATOR: Yeah. Let's hear about it.

KURT VAN HEES: I moved to -- I was going to a junior college just outside of L.A. and then moved to San Diego, moved to La Jolla. It was a friend of my older sister's. He was the film commissioner of San Diego. So when I moved him in with him, he just started saying, you know, you should consider doing a little -- you work out all the time. Why don't you do some fitness modeling or something.

I said, yeah, I could see what's up and ended up getting the cover of Men's Fitness in December of '94, which was a good thing. It got me some other jobs. Then Speedo hired me and took me to Florida for a month to do their shoots for the '95 catalogs and then for the '96 Olympics in Atlanta to do some -- they used a lot of those shots for the posters for the '96 Atlanta games.

MODERATOR: Did you play any golf while you were

doing your modeling work or anything like that?

KURT VAN HEES: I didn't swing a golf club from 20 until I was 35. I completely got out of the game. I played a little bit -- up until 16, I was playing a lot. And then from basically -- I might have played a few times between 17 and 20. And then I got so into the other stuff, the fitness and the water polo and all that other stuff, that I just completely left the game until I was 35.

I then went back up to Salem, Oregon, at a country club that my family had been a member of for years, Illahe Hills Country Club. I played when I was 35 with my father and just got the bug again to start playing.

MODERATOR: Now, humor me here. When you're up there as a model, is it more nerve-racking to be doing that in front of hundreds of people in just a Speedo or if you had a five-footer to win the U.S. Senior Open?

KURT VAN HEES: Oh, by far, the Senior Open. When I was doing the print work, there wasn't that many people around. Like we would go -- we went for a month to Florida with Speedo back in December of '94. In the shoot, there would just be a handful of people -- hair and makeup, the wardrobe girl, a couple of assistants to the photographer, and that was pretty much it.

So the golf is way more -- and it's also, too, so much bigger in my opinion. Especially when you said the U.S. Senior Open, a five-footer? Yeah, night and day. That's going to be way more stressful.

MODERATOR: Let's open it up to questions.

Q. This is going to sound like a question that's leading, but it's not. I just wonder, when you're considered for a fit model -- and my daughter did a little bit of that. When you're considered for a fit model for a Speedo swimsuit, what are they gauging how much they want to use you or not use you? I mean, are they looking at six-pack abs or your eyes? Is it just the whole physique?

KURT VAN HEES: I think at that point in time, it also seemed the different jobs I did, because I did various different jobs, depended on the art director, what they were looking for.

I remember the girl at the time who was the art director for Speedo was Michelle Muller, and she had been at International Mill for a long time. So she was really physique oriented. It's funny, you say six-pack abs. That's all she talked about. She was hugely into that. And symmetry.

A little bit, too, you had to have kind of the standard fit because you wanted to fit their stuff off the rack because they'd bring racks to the photo shoots. So you had to be similar to what their fit model was, who was John in house at Speedo. It was kind of a two-fold thing. You had to have a similar size to him, and also she definitely was into the six-pack at that time.

Q. Do you ever wear a Speedo when you play golf?

KURT VAN HEES: No, I haven't worn a Speedo in a long time (laughter).

Q. How long?

KURT VAN HEES: How long?

Q. Yeah.

KURT VAN HEES: Oh, jeez, a long, long time. How old am I, 51? Probably 30 years. Or, no, less time than that, but probably 25 years. It's been a while.

Q. Athletically, what was the peak of your career, water polo, what was the best you ever did?

KURT VAN HEES: Junior college. That was it. After that, I was living down outside of L.A. and started getting into the entertainment industry. So when I, a couple years later, went back and got my four-year degree, I wasn't even playing anymore.

Q. Before now, that was the peak of your athletic career, is that fair to say?

KURT VAN HEES: Yes.

Q. This would surpass that?

KURT VAN HEES: As a real young kid, I was a nationally ranked swimmer, but real young, like 8, 9 years old, a lot of newspaper articles and stuff. I was good up until I was like 12 or 13, and then I kind of started burning out on the swimming, to be quite honest.

But I had some pretty good times and some pretty good stuff when I was real young.

Q. So you talked about burning out on the swimming, and golf, you gave up for a while. What caused you to burn out, and how are you enjoying golf now? Are you able to play it without kind of having that same pressure and fear of burnout?

KURT VAN HEES: Yeah. I'm enjoying golf more now than ever for whatever reason. I got into -- I got back

into golf because of a really -- kind of a bizarre situation.

I had a severe head trauma, where the right side of my head got shattered. So I got 4 plates and 12 screws holding up this side of my head. It was December 30, 2010. I was in the gym, actually, in Moraga, California. To this day, I really don't know what the whole story is. I didn't see anything coming, but I got hit with a steel pipe from behind, one of the handles, actually, and it took out the right side of my -- the right side of my head. So like this side is being held up by an implant.

They put me in -- I went to the ER that night. The paramedics and stuff came, but I had my buddy take me to the hospital. They admitted me to the hospital and did 6 1/2 hours of reconstructive surgery at John Muir in Walnut Creek. I lived in that area, so John Muir in Walnut Creek.

The interesting thing was, when I was in the ER that night -- I was just telling Brian -- I was -- they came in, they did a CT scan and they said, your face is egg shelled. It's shattered. My jaw was broke. My nose was comminuted fracture of the nose, kicked over to here. My eye was down in my sinuses, and then my heart started to go. My heart rate, the bells were going off, it's at 19, and they're starting to hook me up to the defibrillator, and they're putting the leads on.

It was like clear as day, and I wasn't playing hardly any golf at that point. It was another phase where I'd taken some time out, although I was living on a golf course. I was living at Moraga Country Club. When the thing went to 19, I just got this clear as day thought in my head that, if I get out of this alive, all I'm going to do is play golf. It was bizarre.

And so that's really how, when I -- it was about -- I ended up doing four surgeries. I did the one in John Muir Walnut Creek, and there was an oral and a plastic surgeon doing -- they did not have an ocular plastic in there at that time, and they probably should have because they put my eye in the wrong spot because the zygomatic arch and everything is broken and pushed back. So when they put the eye in the wrong part, then I had to go to Stanford.

Initially went in through the top of my mouth to put the plates and the screws in. Then when I went to Stanford, they went in behind the eye and took out one of the implants and caught the eye in a little better position. It's still a little bit off now. It's like 3 millimeters inferior, they say, something like that.

So I had those two pretty invasive surgeries, and then I had two minor surgeries when the implants kind of failed and the eye started to come down a little bit. I

had two minor surgeries after that. So I had a total of four.

So that's a been a bit of a drag, but it was really what got me back into golf. That was really what did it to where I'm just like, okay I'm just going to see -- I always kind of wanted to see if I could get good in the game.

Q. To follow up on that, because that was interesting, you were in the gym, and you -- someone bumped into you? You have no idea what happened?

KURT VAN HEES: I have no idea what happened. They had a guy on video leaving, and eventually there was criminal charges.

Q. Oh, okay.

KURT VAN HEES: But I didn't know him. I saw him in the video. It was a really, truly bizarre situation, to be quite honest.

Q. The other question I have is is there any lingering effect from this accident that you can't see out of your right eye or that it affects your golf game or anything like that?

KURT VAN HEES: Vision in my right eye is not quite as good. Flying is a bit of a -- because it destroyed the sinus cavity also. So flying is a bit of an issue. I get through it, but you get some pretty severe migraines. The ear, nose and throat guy said, you're going to have some issues with that. I get a little bit of jaw stuff because the jaw was severely broken. They had it wired shut for seven weeks.

There's some aches and pains I definitely get, but golf's almost like therapy for it, which is great.

Q. When was your first round of golf after all those surgeries? Do you remember clearly anything about that as far as getting back on the course?

KURT VAN HEES: I don't remember specifically. I was living on the 4th hole at the time at Moraga Country Club. So I would start going out playing three, four holes at a time. Took me a little while to where I was going out and playing a full round. But I can't really remember the first full 18, to be honest.

Q. Did you have anybody help you when you were younger or after you started picking up now as far as a swing coach or anybody that's gotten you to this point?

KURT VAN HEES: Yeah. When I was younger, at the club that I grew up at in Salem, Oregon, Al Cross was the head pro, and he was really good with the junior program there. He had three kids that were around my age. So he was really good with the junior program.

And then after all those years off, I really didn't -- I went to a couple people for a session or two, but just kind of felt better when I was doing my own stuff, you know, working on my swing.

Q. Are you at all surprised by making it here now, or are you -- did you always feel like you had it in you and you just needed to work at it?

KURT VAN HEES: I always felt like -- yeah, I always felt like I could be good enough. I don't know if that sounds arrogant or not, but I felt like I had it in me because I was pretty good in high school. I was right around scratch in high school.

I didn't work that hard at it. I mean, I worked at it, you know what I'm saying, but it was a seasonal thing in Oregon and this and that and the other thing. But, yeah, I always felt like, if I put my head to it, I might be able -- I mean, might be able to get out here and do something.

But it's huge for me to get here. I mean, it's been unbelievable. It was like a dream come true, to be quite honest. I mean, when I heard I was coming here, I was like -- you know, I was extremely happy. Put it that way.

Q. So what expectations would you have for this week? What do you expect of yourself now?

KURT VAN HEES: You know, it's funny, because the only other competitive golf that I've played in the last 34 years, 35 years, the only competitive golf I've played is I did the PGA -- the Champions Tour Q School in '15, 2015, and the Regionals, and I missed it by two.

Then I went back in '16, and I qualified to play in the finals last year, 2016. I played terrible the first round. It was four rounds. I played terrible the first round, but the final 36 -- I played the final 36 at 1 under and didn't feel like I putted terribly. So I thought, you know, if I really work on my short game and work on my putting, I felt like there was maybe an opportunity to get decent.

As far as the expectations, I'm just really happy I got here, and I'm not really thinking a whole lot beyond that. You know, hit every shot. It's the old cliché of I'm just going to hit one shot at a time and do the best I can absolutely do. It's amazing, the guys that I'm seeing that I'm playing with and stuff just blows my mind. So it's been a pretty cool thing.

Q. Kurt, that moment that you got the phone call on Sunday and you were told you were in the field and you accepted, what was that moment like? And then maybe help the folks understand what logistically and taking the red eye that night and everything, what happened then.

KURT VAN HEES: Yeah, I was extremely happy when I got the call. I couldn't wait to tell my wife. She had just left with my mother-in-law. They were there -- the two of them had gone shopping.

I was just ecstatic because I had called to check what my position was in the lineup, and I think the last time I'd spoken to them, they told me I was like No. 6. And we had both -- my wife and I talked about it. She's pretty smart. She's usually right.

She was like, she goes, I don't -- she's an equities analyst so she's pretty good with numbers. So she's like, I just don't think, you know, you're going to get it this time. She goes, next year you'll do it, but I don't think you're going to get it this time. So when I got the call, it was a great moment, that's for sure.

And then as far as getting here, it was Sunday afternoon, right? And we had made reservations, set up hotel reservations and everything, because I wasn't aware of the whole card thing and what the USGA does. I wasn't even aware of that at the earlier point. So we set up reservations. I was going to come in Saturday. But we had cancelled those when they said we were at No. 6.

So at that point on Sunday, we talked about it. I said, I'm so excited, I'm probably not go to sleep tonight anyway. So I said, I'll just take a red eye out of Oakland -- there was an 11:00 Jet Blue flight out. So I said, I'll just take the red eye out of Oakland tonight, get back there, let the head kind of get acclimated for the long flight.

I did the red eye on Sunday night, and starting to just feel like I'm getting somewhat back to normal with the sleep. But it hit me a little bit.

Q. If I could take you in one more direction, can you tell the folks here about your encounter with a 12-year-old Tiger Woods?

KURT VAN HEES: Yeah, this was -- I was working at the time at -- my family owned a concrete pipe factory in Upland, California, and my dad was a partner in it. He had called me and said -- I was out working for him at this time. And he called me in the afternoon and said, hey, your cousin, who is eight years older than me, and I played some golf with him over the years.

He said your cousin is up -- he was in the Navy, and he was stationed in Long Beach. He goes, your cousin is up from Long Beach. We're going to go play nine. Why don't you meet us at the course? And that was at Upland Hills Country Club in Southern Cal.

So I went over there, and we were standing, the three of us -- my father, my cousin and I -- were standing at

the tee, and this older gentleman and younger kid, looked like 10 to 12 years old, walks up to the tee. Kid was quiet, had glasses on, real thin. The older guy says, hey, they said that it's going to get dark in an hour and a half, hour 45, there's a foursome in front of you. They said we can play five if you guys don't mind. He needs to do a practice round. We're like, no, no, let's play. So we play.

At the end of the nine, I was like, I think, 19 or 20 at the time. It was one of my only rounds of golf I played in that period of time. My cousin looks at me, and he said, that kid's going to be an amazing golfer. I was kind of like, yeah, he was a good junior player. I didn't really know what to say to it.

Then he calls me later that week -- my cousin went back to Long Beach where he was stationed. He calls me, and he says, hey, that kid we played with, he's down here on the military range all the time hitting balls. They call him Tiger. So then he followed his career, all the U.S. Ams and all that stuff after that. So I always think it's funny that we did that.

The ironic thing to me is my cousin said, that kid's going to be an amazing golfer because that was like the understatement of it all. So it was pretty good.

Q. Just obviously, there's so much you've overcome to get here, just the perseverance that we've heard, just from, obviously, the surgeries you've talked about, getting all the way here to a national Open. Where have you found inspiration, whether from other people, from yourself? What has been a driving inspiration for you, really, in this journey?

KURT VAN HEES: I just have always -- I love to practice, and I think that's what's really helpful. I love to hit balls. I can sit out on a range for hours, especially if I throw some headphones or no headphones or whatever. I love to hit balls. I love to practice.

I've always been -- even when I was a young swimmer and started swimming competitively at 6 or 7. And I would go to sports camps in the summer -- there was a place called Sports Acres on the Oregon Coast. We'd do daily triples and stuff. So we'd get up in the morning and swim, swim in the middle of the day -- so I always had that ability to practice in whatever I was into at the time. I did a lot. I'd really get into it a lot.

So I think the fact that I love to practice has probably been the biggest asset.

The inspiration, I just always felt like if I tried hard enough, I might be able to get to somewhere like this

tournament, you know. And so that's probably -- I can't really say that I have any other true inspiration that I could think of. It wasn't somebody or something like that.

Q. What your cousin's name is and what your father's name is?

KURT VAN HEES: My cousin's name is Mike McReal. He was a golf coach somewhere here in Maryland later on in his life. 20 years in the Navy and then became a golf coach somewhere in Maryland for one of the junior colleges, I think. My father's name is Donald Van Hees.

MODERATOR: Kurt Van Hees, 9:06 at the 10th tee on Thursday. Best of luck.

KURT VAN HEES: Appreciate it.