

U.S. Junior Amateur Championship

Saturday, July 21, 2018

Michael Thorbjornsen

Press Conference



Q. So we're here with Michael Thorbjornsen, who's now the 2018 U.S. Junior Amateur champion.

Michael, first of all congratulations.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: Thank you.

Q. First of all, tell us how it feels to be U.S. Junior Amateur champion?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: It feels amazing. Personally for myself I feel like this is probably the biggest junior event you can win and I somehow managed to win it. It just feels amazing because I haven't won a tournament in around just over a year now, so this is the perfect tournament for me to win.

Q. Your week started off differently though. You had a little illness. Tell us what happened?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: Yes, so around two days before I believe -- or I think it was three days -- I woke up in the morning, just normal morning. Went on a run and then went to practice as well in the morning.

Later in the afternoon I slowly felt myself like degrade and just lose energy. By mid to late afternoon I was collapsing and I was -- I had 104 fever. I couldn't stand up. The ambulance had to get me. I was at a golf course actually at the moment. An ambulance had to get me, and then they had to like give my IVs and everything.

And then the next few days after that wasn't easy as well. I was in bed both days and I couldn't practice at all.

Q. When did you actually travel to here?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: I traveled the next day. I think it was two days after the night at the hospital. I still wasn't feeling great. I was around 70% where my throat was still sore. I was still on antibiotics. I was still a little bit dizzy in the head and had headaches.

The first practice round, that's when it slowly felt like it was going to be okay for the tournament.

Q. And then did you surprise yourself that you played so well in stroke play and earned a No. 7 seed?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: I felt like I was playing

pretty decent golf just like the weeks before that and felt really good about my game. I didn't play a lot of golf, but I was just practicing on the range and everything and I just felt really good with my shots and everything.

So when I came here and played I knew the lower course was going to be hard. As soon as I walked on the upper course I was thinking to myself, Man, this is such a great course. I feel like I can really do well on this.

Q. As you progressed to the championship match, was there a particular moment or even one of the matches that you said, Wow, I've really got a chance to win this thing this week?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: I mean, every match was just a grind, even though I think it was my first four matches I didn't have to play 17 or 18. Just throughout the whole day I just knew if I just keep playing my game it will be okay.

Then eventually I was down in some matches, but after getting through that and winning the semifinals match, that's when I realized, Okay, I can actually win this.

Q. Had to be somewhat of a confidence booster when you knocked out last year's quarterfinalist, Ryan Smith.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: Yes, for sure. I remember seeing him online just -- I was pretty sure he was doing pretty well and everything. I mean, he was like the first person that actually like really -- I can't say like posed a threat because all my matches were a threat, but he was the first one that I think put me down in a match pretty severely.

He had a comeback I think throughout the late round that was kind of scary, but I was able to hold up.

Q. And then of course yesterday you go 21 holes, the longest semifinal in four years. Obviously you had to come back on the back nine to win that match.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: Yeah. The whole day Cameron and I, we weren't really making many putts. We were just hitting fairways, hitting greens, and just two-putting.

So the holes we won were just holes where our opponent didn't really play too well. Just towards the end I think I made a nice birdie putt and then another hole he might have made a little bit of a mistake.

But those last three holes after regulation, they were quite something.

Q. And probably by your own admission you would have to say you didn't get off to a great start today either. Down three after six holes. What was going on?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yeah, lost my 1st hole today. Got a little bit unlucky. Hit my drive in the bunker, on the lip of the bunker, and couldn't do anything from there.

Then I was just grinding through it the first six holes. Could have been a lot worse. I made a couple putts to halve, and even like -- yeah, just to halve the hole.

I didn't really win a hole until hole 12, I think, something like that. I just didn't really do a lot that first 18 holes.

Q. Right. But still, with everything that happened, you were only 2-down going into the afternoon. You had to have a sense of relief that you were only 2-down going into the afternoon.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yeah, I definitely felt like I could have played a lot better, so I was thinking to myself, Maybe if I made a few more putts or just hit a few shots closer I could definitely come back from that 2-down deficit.

Q. And then in the afternoon, certainly seemed to me that you turned it up a few notches. Your ball striking seemed to be a little bit better and getting a little bit better feel on the greens.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Right, definitely for sure. Last few holes during the first 18 holes I was actually really stroking them really. I was hitting good putts; they just weren't falling; just weren't dropping.

I just continued the same mindset on the second 18 thinking, Okay, eventually some of these are going to drop. They did, which is very fortunate.

Q. You squared the match when you hit a 50-degree wedge for about 130 yards on the 5th hole to about seven feet. Tell us about that shot.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: I got actually pretty fortunate with my tee shot hitting my 3-wood. That was actually my second 3-wood I've hit all of match play I'm pretty sure. I haven't hit any 3-woods on the range or on the course before just thinking because I've only hit 3-iron off that tee.

Got fortunate. Kicked out of the trees into the fairway. Just as I was about to hit my second shot, I looked up at the tree just online with the pin and I'm thinking, I'm going to hit that tree if I hit this 56-degree wedge.

Switched to a 50 and kind of choked up on it and hit a low spinner up to about 15 feet, I would say.

Q. Akshay kept you at bay, though. He still either was in the lead by one or you were all square. Finally on the at 12th hole you made a decent sized putt to square the match again. Would it be the 30th hole overall in the match?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: I think...

THE MODERATOR: It was the par-4 after the par-5.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yeah, I just talked about that one, right? I'm sorry, I'm just confused right now.

Q. So let's go back.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Okay.

Q. Earlier we were talking about the 5th hole, which would've been the 23rd hole of the match, when you hit the 50-degree wedge.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Oh, yeah. What hole was that?

Q. The 5th hole, the par-4.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Oh, right, yeah.

Q. On the front side.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Okay, I'm sorry. Yeah, I'll talk about that shot. Yeah, so earlier in the morning I was around the same yardage so I hit -- I thought I hit a good shot, but it actually kicked and took a big hop all the way to the back of the green.

So during that second round today I was thinking to myself, Okay, I'm going to put that in to factor. Hit it just a little bit softer and just made sure I could calculate like how much it would bounce and roll you, because they weren't really checking up and spinning back like they were earlier this week.

Q. Okay. You already talked about squaring the match on the 30th hole. You finally take the lead on the 14th hole of afternoon, the 32nd hole overall. Tell me about the tee shot on 14.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yeah, I mean, I was really feeling confident at that time with a nice little fade. Just because if I hit a regular drive up 14 I'm pretty sure would've gone long, and long on that hole is absolutely dead.

I mean, earlier this week when they had the tees up on

9 I was alternating with baby cuts, maybe not full drives, but nice little cuts right into the green. I felt like if I could just do that, but just have a full swing, I could end up pretty close to the pin.

Q. And you had about 24 feet for eagle.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Right.

Q. It looked like you had a pretty good line it.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yeah, I had a good line on it. I saw Akshay's putt go by, and I'm thinking to myself, Okay, I just need a two-putt; I'm not trying to make this; don't want to force anything.

So I just picked my line. I was a little sensitive on that putt, but it was okay.

Q. So now we're halving holes 15, 16, 17. Tell me what's in your mindset now coming down the stretch and you have the lead?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Playing hole 15 after hitting my tee shot to around ten feet I would say I felt pretty good about my game. I was hitting the ball well, rolling them decently, but I was actually really frustrated after I missed that putt.

It was, if anything, it would break probably a centimeter left, but I just played it right edge and ended up pushing it.

Then on the next hole I got a little fortunate with Akshay missing his birdie putt as well, as the next hole after I also missed my birdie putt on both holes.

I mean, the whole day we weren't really making that much, but I just happened to make some putts when I really needed to.

Q. Tell me about the second shot on the closing hole, the 36th hole. I believe you hit a 7-iron.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yes. So it was 187 yards, and I remember when I played Cameron and I won on that hole, I remembered I took a little bit less club. And I just remembered what the rough was like, and I felt that if I just land this just before the green or just barely on it will roll pin high.

So I just took a nice little simple swing, nice and smooth, and ended up being pin high just to the right.

Q. So Akshay putted first and obviously it was pretty close, so now you're looking at a little over 40 feet. What are you thinking about? What's the line look like on this putt?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: It broke about three feet left. That's if I read it well. I can't really remember where my putt ended up.

But all I was thinking was just speed. I mean, my caddie, I've been working with him just on speed the whole week on every single putt. Even if it's 10 feet or if it's 15, just speed is so important on these agrees.

I felt pretty confident with my speed control today as well as the rest of the week, so just put a good stroke on it. Turned out okay.

Q. And then there is the moment you realize you're the champion and obviously everything that comes with that, including the 2019 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach. What does that mean to you? Has that sunk in yet?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: I'm pretty sure a lot of stuff hasn't really sunk in yet, like the U.S. Am definitely, as well as the U.S. Open.

But right when Akshay took off his hat and I realized it was over and I actually had won, I didn't know like what to do with my hands, with my hat. I didn't know where to go.

I was just smiling from ear to ear, so I was just really happy.

Q. When that moment comes when you do get to the U.S. Open, who are the one or two players that you would love to play a practice round with?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Tiger Woods. That would be something really special. He's been my favorite player ever since I start watching golf or have even known about golf.

As well as Brooks Koepka just because I was supposed to play (indiscernible) holes with him at the Junior Invitational, but he already found a foursome. I missed out on that. It's okay.

Q. You seemed a little tentative starting the afternoon just around the greens. Like you weren't quite sure what you needed to do. Is that because you concentrate so much on speed that it's tough to concentrate on a line, or just because of the situation? I know you felt look you started pretty good, but just seemed to...

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yeah, for some of the putts it was -- I mean, these greens are very difficult. (Audio skip) Oh, I have to make sure this goes over this line perfectly, or sometime you just have to go up and just hit the ball and just go with your gut and what you really feel.

Q. The wind also seemed -- both of you spent a lot of time -- I know you changed clubs a couple times. Talk about the wind as it went through the day.

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yeah, this is definitely the hardest it's blown throughout the whole week. It was swirling out there. If it was consistent out there, just stayed one direction, same miles per hour, would've made things a little bit easier.

But it switched, it swirled, it gusted sometimes. It would change up and make things very difficult. So I just decided to take my time and just wait for the right time to strike.

Q. When you found out you were going to play this event did you try and do much reconnaissance on Baltusrol? Did you talk to anybody? Read? Did you see any videotape?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: No, not really. Actually when I heard it was at Baltusrol, the first thing I did was ask my friend if I could stay with him because he lives 20 minutes away. I actually ended up just staying with my mom here because she decided to come.

Thankfully my friend came to watch I think this morning and yesterday morning.

Q. And what was the hospital that you went to?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: I can't remember. I'm sorry.

Q. Where was it?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: In Massachusetts.

Q. What town?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Not sure. I almost passed out, so...

I'm sorry.

Q. That's fine. Tell us about your relationship with Akshay. You've known him for a long time. Even though you're only 16, you've known him for a long time. Where did you guys first meet and how has your relationship grown over the years?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Well, I remember actually when we first met. It was during the -- oh, man, 2012 U.S. Kids World Championship at Little River. I think it was one of the last holes during a practice round. He was coming up and he was on the hole in front of me and they decided to let me go.

We actually practiced on that green together and decided to finish our round together, and every since then we've been really close. I mean, he's obviously one of the best junior golfers in the world if you can't tell from all the titles he's won with in the past year and even here at the U.S. Junior.

Just lately we been seeing each other at different high-

end tournaments and he's been doing well. I mean, I'm just trying to do my best out there. It's always a good time to play with him and see him at these tournaments.

Q. Did it help you today to be playing against a friend?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Yes, I think it did, because I knew what to expect. I'm not sure if that was a good thing, because I knew -- like I personally think like right now Akshay is probably the best junior golfer in the world. Not just ranked-wise, but just in general. He's the hottest golfer right now. He's just coming off a win a few weeks ago at the Polo AJGA.

I just knew what his game was like and what it would take to beat him.

Q. Finally from me, obviously you've competed at a high level as a junior. You won the Drive, Chip, and Putt at Augusta National. How does that experience compare with everything you've done in the past, or is there any comparison?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: This is by far the biggest win I've had, and just everything that comes along with it is above everything else. Just the rush of emotion and just the thrill of it, just like realizing when I won far exceeds every other tournament I've played in and won. It's really something special.

Q. You mentioned earlier that the first four matches of the week didn't even reach the 17th hole, and then extra holes yesterday and then you go all the way to the 36th hole today. How does your approach change, your mindset change, when you're in a situation like you were in the last two matches versus earlier in the week?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: Well, very beginning of the week I had a set game plan. I was thinking just hit fairways, hit greens, and then two-putt or make the putt. That's just my game plan pretty much for every tournament I play in. I was thinking, It's just another hole. This hole has a fairway, this hole has a green, and a pin. I'm just trying to hit it in the fairway, hit like a decent drive, and then same thing with my second shot. Not trying to get too aggressive because it's such a long hole.

Q. So do you feel like when you're in the situation you were in today, and then yesterday where you're getting deeper into the match and it's not going to be an easy ride to victory, what changes in the way you're standing over the ball, planning a shot?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSSEN: I don't really think it changes that much. It's just some more hole to play, because obviously Cameron yesterday and Akshay today, they're both just amazing golfers. I wasn't

expecting anything less of them. 18 holes, 21 holes, 36, doesn't matter. I had a feeling I was probably going to play 17 and 18 this week at some point.

I expected it to be later in the matches.

Q. You been working on anything last six, eight months? Anything in particular?

MICHAEL THORBJORNSEN: Just making sure that my ball striking is always top notch. I feel like that's definitely the strength of my game. If I'm doing that well, if my putting isn't great, just hit the ball closer, and that's how I try and make birdies.