

2015 US Open Championship

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Press Conference

Gary Player

An Interview With:
GARY PLAYER

MODERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, it's my pleasure to welcome Gary Player, nine-time Major champion, into the media center. Mr. Player, one of the greatest players in the history of the game, won more than 165 tournaments worldwide on six continents, and inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in the inaugural class of 1974. 50 years ago you won the 1965 U.S. Open at Bellerive to complete the career Grand Slam. The third player to do it, Sarazen and Hogan before you, and only Nicklaus and Woods since then. Where does that rank on your list of career accomplishments in golf?

GARY PLAYER: Obviously winning the Grand Slam was something that is very important in my life. And my great golf hero as a young man growing up in South Africa was a man of Ben Hogan, because he was the best striker of the ball that I ever saw in my life. And I was the same size, so I could relate to him. And seeing Gene Sarazen, who I played with on many occasions, it's not a good sign to tell you how old I am, but I played with him on many occasions at the Open Championship. And I obviously wanted to beat Nicklaus to win it. And Nicklaus was actually instrumental in me winning, because I was going to Greensboro, and he said, Why don't you come and practice with me for the week. And I reluctantly went along with him. I think I prepared harder there for anybody that's ever prepared for a major championship. I went through the pain barrier every day. I visualized. I went to the gym. I was squatting with 325 pounds every night. And in fact, Mr. Jones, the father of the young architects today, said Gary Player could never win a golf tournament past the age of 35. He's doing all this weight training, you can't do it. But I didn't blame him for thinking that, because I was ridiculed by all the players and everybody worldwide, you couldn't do weight training and play golf. I then went to the tournament and I'm able to fulfill a promise that I made to one of the greatest men in my life, Joe Dey of the USGA, that if I won the tournament for my gratitude for what American golf had done for me, the opportunity to play in this wonderful country, that I would donate my prize, whatever the prize money



would be. I won it and it was a thrill to be able to give it back, because my mother died of cancer when I was eight and obviously loved children. I have 6 children and 22 grandchildren and was always interested in junior golf. I was able to fulfill my promise. So it was obviously a very big thrill in my life. But the biggest thrill was winning the Senior Grand Slam because I was the only one to do it. And I was able to do it because of the hard work and the way I organized my fitness program, that when I was 50 I was in the same shape I was when I was 25, which I can't say everybody else was, because they didn't adhere to that. So I think the fact that staying in shape, I'm 80 and still almost in the shape I was when I was 25 has stood me in good stead. I think where I've just been the last two weeks at my age, I was in Johannesburg, Germany, Florida, Philadelphia, West Virginia, I went to St. Andrews for one day and flew back here. And I'm full of energy. So energy comes from what you put in the bank.

MODERATOR: You've been an advocate of physical fitness your entire life. I don't know if you've been out on Chambers Bay, but certainly a course that is demanding physically to walk. Do you think a course like this gives an advantage to someone who's in better shape, someone who is a little bit younger and has that physical fitness?

GARY PLAYER: You know, I don't know, because I've never seen this golf course. There are a lot of conflicting reports both in Britain and here. I can't say. I don't know what the course is like. I have no idea. But obviously anytime you're playing golf. It's an interesting thing, when we played Augusta, sometimes I played 36 holes, and I played a practice round with some of the young guys a couple of years ago, and I got off the golf course and I'm in shape, I really felt it. And I realized just having strong legs what it really meant. And later I played Jack Nicklaus in the final of the World Match Play in England, over 36 holes in wet weather, and he really could hardly walk when he was young. So I beat him very easily, because he really -- he said I'm getting leg cramps. And that's when it started to make me realize that your legs, when you're playing golf, and to exercise not only your thighs, but your calves and your feet, because most golfers, I found in my career, complain about sore feet and bad feet. So it's imperative if you want to have any longevity. When we

were young, we never dreamt there would be a Champions Tour, and what that's done for people and the level of golf -- well, we had people win on the regular Tour, become seniors, win on our Tour, go back on the regular Tour and win and come back on our Tour. So that just shows you those people were pretty strong.

MODERATOR: Absolutely. And of course we're here at the U.S. Open, you had a great U.S. Open record in addition to the 1965 win, you finished runner up on your first U.S. Open, 1958, at Southern Hills. Had another runner up finish, nine top 10 finishes. What makes someone a successful U.S. Open player, and specifically what made you a successful U.S. Open player?

GARY PLAYER: I vividly remember playing in my first U.S. Open, which was at Tulsa, Oklahoma. And I was so blessed, who do I play with is Ben Hogan, my ultimate dream. And I play 36 holes with him and he says five words in 36 holes, Morning, fella. Well played, son. Well, somebody said he was very talkative. But I played with him and it was a great thrill. And who won the tournament, Tommy Bolt. You know, the even-tempered lad; always mad. They used to put on his bag: You must buy Tommy Bolt's clubs, they stay in here longer than anybody else's. I said to my wife, after 36 holes, I'm going to win, because this guy is going to lose his temper and he'll never finish the tournament in the same passive mood that he should. But he met a priest, and the priest gave him, which they related to: You will win The Open this year, you're meant to win it, you've got to have tranquility, the Lord is looking after you, it is his wish for you to win. I looked for that priest for five years to give him a big pop on the beak. Of all the times he should give it to him it was then. He was a wonderful golfer, Tommy Bolt, tremendous golfer. And I won \$5,000, and I stood in front of the scoreboard, they have it at Southern Hills still today, and it said my name, there was \$5,000. And I called my wife, we've got enough money to play this great Tour forever. Now you finish -- now you're an ordinary player and make 10 million bucks, which is great, that's why we played.

MODERATOR: I think a lot of that is thanks to you.

GARY PLAYER: Hogan and Snead and Bobby Jones. And funny enough, those three players are still the best players I ever saw, put Nicklaus in there, and Tiger Woods. Those are the best players I ever saw, remarkable. Sam Snead and Ben Hogan and Bobby Jones would have been very interesting to see if they had the equipment and a million dollars and a jet and the way we looked, today how they would fair would be quite frightening. I used to watch Hogan and Snead play, hardly ever miss a fairway, and just remarkable

with that lousy equipment that they played with.

MODERATOR: It's very impressive. Let's open it up to questions.

Q. Gary, you won that 65 Open at Bellerive, which has been out of the public eye for a few years, but is coming back. Tell everybody a little bit about what kind of golf course Bellerive is. Maybe even mention some of the best holes or your favorite holes and tell us how you think the players are going to fare there, whether it's an easy time or whether you think it's going to be really tough.

GARY PLAYER: When I went there it was the longest U.S. Open course in history. And it was young. And I go back there now, which I went back to be inducted into the Hall of Fame in St. Louis, which I appreciated, and looked at Bellerive and trees, it's just in undated with trees, and this beautiful golf course today. And it's an appropriate place to have an Open. But very few places today in any tournament, due to the mismanagement of the golf ball, which is actually deteriorating the game to a large extent, not in professional golf; professional golf has never been so healthy, ever. But amateur golf, which is the heart of the game, we're getting less players and less players. You can buy a golf course for a dollar today, if you take over the debt, which nobody does, but rounds are down because they're making golf courses longer, they're putting bunkers in front of the greens, they're making crazy undulating greens, and the members hate it, and then they levy you and so they resign out from the club. We're desperately running out of water in the world, and the fertilizer and the machinery and then they levy you again. So if they just leave the golf course as they are for the amateur members and cut the ball back 50 yards for professional golf we wouldn't have to waste hundreds of millions of dollars altering golf courses and making them 7900 yards long and increasing the expenses and getting less people to play. We're in dire straits at the moment. If you look at Augusta, from what I've heard, if I'm correct, they're now buying the street on No. 2 and the street on No. 5, and they're making the tee back on the street. Augusta cannot go back any further, they cannot go in the streets. Well, they are. They're buying the streets. So where are we going? And we've never had a big man play golf here, guys, ladies. We've never had a big man other than George Bayer, who played in our time. Wait until a LeBron James and the Michael Jordans and the Shaq O'Neals, and they're coming. Because this is the only sport you can make more money at 80 than when you were world champion. It doesn't apply to other sports, because you finish at 30 years of age. And so where are we going? We saw Bubba Watson at the 13th hole of Augusta hit a driver and a pitching wedge. We saw him hit a driver and a 9-iron over the

15th on a par 5 over the green. So where are we going? It's making a farce of the game. And they're two different games. And our leaders won't adhere to that. They insist that it's the same game. Well, go and watch some of these guys play and you'll realize it's not the same game. And so what we've got to do, we've got to go accordingly on the right path and make the right decision. Because if you make the wrong decision, it will be comparable to what happened with Polaroid and Kodak, who are now extinct today. And their executive, their CEO said, I'm reluctant to change because we're doing so well. And his advisors are saying change, and they're nonexistent today. And Steve Jobs did the opposite, he had vision and went the right way, and was highly successful. So the decision our leaders take now has a great determining factor in what happens in the future.

Q. I was watching a documentary called "The Short Game" and you were featured in that. And you had a great quote about what it takes to be a winner. And I'm paraphrasing, but you said: There's something called "it" that nobody has been yet able to describe. It was very short. And I wanted to ask if you can elaborate on that. We've been talking about it this week, and your thought on what makes certain players able to win certain tournaments and others not able to?

GARY PLAYER: First of all, you meet a young -- anybody today, a parent or a professional at a club and he says, I've got a junior who is going to be a champion. He hits the ball 360 yards, he's 16 years of age. Length is the most overrated thing. I hear it every day of my life. Strictly speaking, according to the stats, the two best drivers in the last 20 years on the Tour are Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson. And yet they've been No. 1 and No. 2. Why? Because as the old Scot said: You drive for show and you putt for dough. And golf, the best players who win, and win the most, are the best from 100 yards in because 70 percent of shots in your round are from a hundred yards in. And so the short game is imperative. And that's the determining factor. Now, I've always said, and it's just my humble opinion, there are superstars, there are stars and there are very good. I love all sports and I always listen to people talking about, say, hypothetical, football players. He's a superstar. And the two other people say, no, he's not, he never did this and this. And you're right. So in my opinion, to be a superstar you've got to win six majors. If you win four to six you're a star. And then very good, you categorize them. So somebody said, well, what makes people win these tournaments? Well, Tom Weiskopf is a good friend of mine. And Tom was a better player than Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player. But he never won one major on Tour, and should have won ten because he was so good. But he never did it. He never had that thing called "it."

I cannot describe "it." It's something that is in my opinion a loan from God. A lot of people would laugh at that. But in my opinion it's a loan from God. It's something you cannot describe. Can you accept adversity, can you enjoy pain, can you keep your cool at the right time? Will you play the right shot at the right time? Will you accept a three-putt and go to the next tee with a positive attitude? It's a combination of a lot of things. And I can't describe it. And nobody can. If we could we'd have a lot of superstars.

Q. This course and Bellerive has no physical similarities, but both were built with the intention of holding a U.S. Open, both realized that early in their life span, and both are unknown to the field when they show up to play this championship. When you met Nicklaus in '65 in St. Louis and had to learn the golf course, how did Gary Player go about learning a golf course?

GARY PLAYER: If I heard the question correctly, it was a conventional course, as most U.S. Open golf courses are. And to digress for a minute, there was a very interesting discussion, I came out with somebody in our car and this man said to me, have they ever played the U.S. Open on a links golf course before, which I didn't know. They said, have they ever played the British Open on an inland course, which I didn't know. But I said I certainly don't think that the British Open -- it's typical to play on a links golf course, thank goodness, which I love. But I think this is quite unusual to play the U.S. Open on a links golf course. For me I love that. But I really couldn't answer that. And as far as Bellerive is concerned, I went out there, it was an extremely difficult golf course and long golf course, and I was playing with fiberglass shafts, which made each hole at least 20 yards further, because there was such inferior equipment to what others were using. So it was long. So I had to work out where I was going to put my second shots and what side of the fairway to drive. A different philosophy, whereas today they say, let me just hit the fairway. Because they obviously -- length is on their mind and they're belting it, and it's a different philosophy because time that you play. Did I answer your question adequately?

Q. Yes. I'm just curious how big a deal was it to complete the career Grand Slam when you did 50 years ago? We've got Phil Mickelson trying to do that here this week.

GARY PLAYER: Well, it was a really big deal. My goodness, me. I remember arriving back in South Africa, and South Africa, you know, has produced the most number of Major Championship winners in the world, post-War, the last World War, other than the United States, 23 major championships. It's a miracle. We have some of the best golf courses in the world and the most enthusiastic golfers. They had a school

band, they had politicians, they had everybody to meet me in the airport. In those days you could walk out onto the tarmac, no security, my children came up the steps to meet me. It was a very big thing in our lives as the man who won the four big tournaments of the world. It was a very big thing. And Sarazen, if you speak to most young guys today, they hardly know Sarazen. He was a marvelous golfer. I remember playing with him in awe. And Ben Hogan, I can never tell you how good he was. There's nobody today that could hit the ball like Hogan, nobody. He was just so-so, so good. So it was a big thing. And for me and in my country, and wherever I went around the world they were writing about it, which was very exciting for me. What is the other part?

Q. It's such an exclusive group, are you rooting for Phil Mickelson to join you?

GARY PLAYER: Yes.

Q. What do you think has held him back in this event?

GARY PLAYER: Obviously I would love to see Phil Mickelson win this week. He's been runner up, if I'm not mistaken, it's hard to keep up with all the stats, I think he's been runner up six times. I've been runner up in 7 majors, only your wife and your dog know about it (laughter). There's only one thing that counts, and that's to win. I really would love to see him win. The reason that he is the best PR pro playing the Tour today: This man takes his time in signing all the autographs, in dealing with the public correctly. His behavior is impeccable. And being left-handed would be a great addition, as well. So he really deserves to win it. We don't always get what we deserve in golf, but I would love to see him win it. I'd like to see Jordan Spieth win it because it would give him two legs of the Grand Slam, and he's such a wonderful young man and we're inundated with wonderful young men. I'd like to see Tiger win it because we need Tiger to come back desperately. This iconic man was on his way to being the best player the world had ever seen and he's come to a standstill. And only God knows if he'll win tournaments and majors in the future. We need him. I would be thrilled to see him, as well, to give us a big shot in the arm. So there are a lot of people we'd like to see do well.

Q. Pretty much established that Phil Mickelson has "it." What do you think has kept him from winning the U.S. Open?

GARY PLAYER: He's been a poor driver of the golf ball. And to win the U.S. Open there's no question his driving has been the reason that he has not won the U.S. Open. I have no hesitation. If you look at the stats and you watch him and you see how many times he's in the rough. It's very hard when you're in the

rough. When the flags, as the USGA put them in corners, and all of their events do, to shoot at those flags with great accuracy and with the necessary spin on the ball, it does not -- although the grooves today are very sophisticated and different than when we played, it still isn't adequate to make the ball come out with the right flight. And it's a great deterrent.

Q. Please tell us about Moe Norman, how much association did you have with him, and you hear what a great ball-striker he was, but most of us never saw him.

GARY PLAYER: I watched Norman a lot and was on the practice tee with him a lot. And of course, as everything gets grossly exaggerated over time, they used to say, he hits the ball so straight, and he did. And I loved his method of play, his teaching, which I think is a -- there's a great lack of today. His method of teaching was absolutely magnificent. But it got exaggerated to say, he's so good, he'd play a par-4, there's a bridge there, and he'd hit a wedge on the bridge and bounce it over, then hit his driver on the green. That got exaggerated. He knew a lot about the game, he was a very good player but he didn't win golf tournaments. Come to your own conclusion.

MODERATOR: I'll follow-up with another one. You won in 1965, it had been almost 40 years since a player from outside the United States had won the U.S. Open, it was Tommy Armour in 1927. You traveled a lot. You traveled more than 15 million miles, and closer to 20 million miles now in your career. Lately, four of the last five years, I believe, players from outside the United States have won the U.S. Open. What do you think that you were able to do to grow the game internationally?

GARY PLAYER: I hope that I played a role in growing the game internationally, because as you said, I have traveled more miles than any human being ever now, and went to all these different places and played and promoted the game to the best of my ability. So I hoped I played a role. America should win The Open more, this U.S. Open more than anybody else because you have 80 percent of the field or 90 percent of the field are Americans, so they should. But I think with players around the world having seen a little sort of runt like me beating the Americans and winning these major championships saying if he can do it, I can do it, which was appropriate, and they've since then realized that and have come and enjoyed the American TOUR. And you can never be known as a superstar unless you win here and everywhere. Everybody puts Byron Nelson in the top five best players that ever lived. I never put him in my top 15. What did he do? Won five majors and never won tournaments outside of America. You can say in America, but you can't say he was one of the best players in the world. I see fascinating things

happen in golf. I see the Ryder Cup, I see Europe, and I'm neither American nor British. They win 8 out of 10 times. Now the PGA, which astounds me, they get a panel, by the way, a panel of people who are not going to play in the Ryder Cup to decide what these players should do. If a man beats me 8 out of 10 times, I look him in the eye and I say well played, next year I am going to whip your butt, because man, am I going to practice hard. Well done, you're better than me. I don't come up with all the crap and excuses.

MODERATOR: Very good. I think we can end on that, Mr. Player, thank you very much. Appreciate it.

GARY PLAYER: Thank you.