

# US Open Championship 2016

Tuesday, June 14, 2016

## Ernie Els

### Press Conference

MODERATOR: Welcome to the 2016 U.S. Open Championship at Oakmont Country Club. It's my pleasure to introduce this afternoon Ernie Els of South Africa, two-time U.S. Open Champion who memorably won here in 1994, his first Major victory.

Ernie, we were just talking about how time moves so quickly. Can you offer some thoughts in terms of how many years it's been since '94 and just thoughts about coming back this week?

ERNIE ELS: It's crazy. I don't know how many of you guys were here in '94. Oh, there you go. A couple. But it's amazing how we played the game in those days and how we play today with the golf ball, and a lot of us were still using wooden drivers back in '94 and so forth. And it's amazing how the golf course has also changed. You could definitely move the ball out of the rough on to a lot of these greens. Nowadays, you can't really do that.

I don't know what kind of chemicals they put in that grass, but it's growing. So that changed a lot. It's been how many? 22 years since '94. Obviously, a lot of tournaments have passed. I think I played in my second U.S. Open then, and I think I'm playing my 24th. It's been quite a journey, to say the least. It's all good.

THE MODERATOR: I'm certain it's always special coming back as U.S. Open champion. But particularly here at Oakmont, are there different emotions coming here?

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I mean, obviously it's a very unique place for myself. Winning here at this unbelievably historic venue is quite something. It's almost like you win an Open Championship, you want to win it at St. Andrews or Muirfield. When you win a U.S. Open, Oakmont is one of the iconic venues. Some great champions have won here. I'm fortunate to get my name on the trophy here at Oakmont.

A lot of stuff happened that week, obviously, with Mr. Palmer. I'll never forget his visit here when he retired from U.S. Open play. It was quite emotional. A lot of players waited for him to play 18 holes. I was on the range, actually, when he finished that morning. So it's great.



**Q. Ernie, you mentioned the changes to the court. When you won, it was 50,000 more trees than there are now. How can you describe the impact the lack of those trees will make this week compared to how it played in '94?**

ERNIE ELS: It's obviously helping the grass grow. Without the trees, I've never been the straightest driver in the world, but I got myself around because I could kind of muscle it out of a lot of the rough.

Obviously, back in '94, the U.S. Open is renowned for its thick rough. That's never changed. I would say they've really upped the ante the last five to ten years with the rough. Whatever they call it, the graduation of the rough, whatever, it's just thick, and it's a lot more dense than it was back in the day. We could move the ball around. It was almost more fun to play that way because you could advance the ball, you could get the ball to run towards the green. You're not always going to hit the perfect shot, but you had a chance of actually hitting a shot.

Now it's at least a half a shot penalty. You try to get a wedge out to where you can play your next shot from. That's just the way it is. They've really got the premium on accuracy and ball striking. It is what it is. I'm just saying, back in the day, it was a little different. We could maneuver the ball out of the rough.

**Q. Ernie, what was it that pushed you over the line in '94? Secondly, you talk about changes in the game. You look at changes in your own game. How do you look at it today against this background?**

ERNIE ELS: Well, in '94, I had a wonderful Saturday. I shot 30 on the front nine on a Saturday. The greens were holding a bit. I think they got scared because the weather was so warm, and they put a bit of water on Saturday. So there were quite a lot of good scores. That obviously put me in great position for the title.

I got myself in the final group through Saturday and played with my good friend Frankie Nobile, who's with Golf Channel now. I played with him in the final round, and it was a nice, comfortable pairing for me. We were good mates. I felt comfortable with that grouping.

But the equipment has changed a lot, as I said. The golf course itself, with the trees out, the look is totally

different, just from an eye point of view. When you're looking down the first fairway, you couldn't basically see the 2nd hole. Now you can see a lot. So that's really changed a lot.

But the holes itself, your strategy on the holes even, with today's equipment and stuff that we use today, it's really similar. They've moved some tees back, but you're hitting it into the same position as we did in '94. That's what I love about Oakmont.

I think through all the years with the tees they've moved back and stuff they've done to the golf course, they've saved an absolute iconic venue. It hasn't got too short. It definitely never got too easy.

So this has just stood the test of time. So the changes they've made is spot on. And I guess I've got to say, with the rough, I've got to say that I had to do that also because with today's equipment, the hybrids that we have, we didn't have that back in the day. The guys could play hybrids out of some rough. You're not going to get it out of this rough. It's too thick. So I guess they've kind of stymied the guys trying to use those kind of clubs out of the rough.

**Q. When you won that first career major in '94 here, how difficult was it to balance sort of the joy and elation of that win and that breakthrough accomplishment with the desire and the necessity to move your career forward from there?**

ERNIE ELS: It was a great step for me. I just started winning some tournaments internationally just before the '94 U.S. Open. I started winning in Japan, and I won in the Middle East, and I felt my next step was to win tournaments in the U.S.

The week before, I finished second at the Buick at Westchester to Lee Janzen. And obviously, winning the U.S. Open as your first win over here is just an unbelievable step in the right direction.

I had a ten-year exemption, so a lot of unbelievable positives came out of that win. And that pushed me forward. I kept winning. I won the next year and year after that, and I started contending in a lot of Majors after '94. So it really established me as one of the top players.

**Q. After you win that first Major, is there any pressure, whether internally or externally, to come out of the second one fairly quickly, with the possibility to maybe legitimize you or anything like that?**

ERNIE ELS: Yeah. I mean, as athletes, we want to keep getting better. Some of us have huge margins that we can enclose, and other guys are so good that

they keep getting better, the margins are much smaller. You want to feel like you're getting better. Obviously, winning my U.S. Open, I felt like I wanted to get the career Grand Slam. Those things were always childhood dreams of mine, so I wanted to really start stepping on that and start contending in a lot of tournaments, which I did.

Looking back, I gave it a pretty good shot. In this game, you need some breaks to go your way. My dream of completing the Grand Slam, that didn't quite materialize, but I really gave it a very good shot. Looking back from '94 to where I am now, things look pretty good.

**Q. Ernie, the way that this U.S. Open ended last year between Jordan and Dustin, I wonder if you could relate at all to Jordan, if you go back to Lytham, and you've done what you've done, but you're standing in a ceremony with a guy who bogeyed the last four holes and he's a friend of yours. Is that awkward for you in victory, and do you have to handle the elation differently than you had at Muirfield or here or at Congressional?**

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, I think it affects you a little bit, especially with myself and Adam in 2012. Before that round started, I did some interviews with BBC and -- was it ABC? I'm not sure who did the U.S. coverage, but I did some interviews, and they asked me if I had any chance, and I said, yes, I believe I do have a chance. I felt the wind was coming up that day, and I knew how tough the course would be if you started missing shots.

I looked at the leaderboard. And mostly, of all of those guys, no one has ever won a Major. So I felt like those boys were really thinking about getting their first Major win. When I saw nothing was going on on the leaderboard, I thought I played a really good back nine. As it turned out, Adam bogeyed the last four holes, and I felt absolutely terrible for him.

I was absolutely delighted winning an event, but I really felt for him because he's such a good player. I know how much work he's put in and all of that. He'd changed his whole life, his whole schedule to win a Major and had the perfect opportunity and then bogeyed some holes.

But, yeah, I just kept encouraging him. I couldn't stop hugging him that afternoon. I just wanted to put some energy back into him. But he felt terrible, and I felt terrible for him. So it did affect my celebrations, especially in front of him. I didn't want to overdo it too much because I know.

I've been in that position myself. You feel absolutely

terrible. You don't want to be on the green. You don't want to be near anybody. You want to be away, and he had to stand there and basically suck it up.

So I can feel for Jordan. He handled it unbelievably. I think Danny Willett mentioned him in his speech. He did a good job too. That's why this is a good sport. There's good people playing this game.

**Q. Ernie, so much is made of the greens here, but when they're so fast and so hard, does it almost negate the advantage for the best putters? Does the best ball striker this week have the edge over the best putter?**

ERNIE ELS: That's a good one. I've never been a really big stat man, but I remember in '94 I hit the most greens. I think I hit 50 -- I don't want to lie now. I think it's 52 or 54 greens, but I know it was over 50 greens for the week, and I believe I was the top putter in the field that week also.

So I guess that answers your question. You got to hit it, and you got to putt it. And I had a ball on the greens. I just loved the greens. I had a big putter, and I just went on feel. I was feeling it all the way around the golf course, and I had a really good feel of where to put the golf ball on the greens and had a nice game plan.

But this course is going to test everything and especially, as you mentioned, your ball striking and putting. That's premium.

**Q. Ernie, U.S. Opens are typically the ultimate test in golf. What's the most challenging hole you've played at a U.S. Open and why?**

ERNIE ELS: Well, this course has about 14 out of 18, and Winged Foot has about 12 out of 18. Pick one? Man, that's a tough one. I would say, just for sheer accuracy, No. 10 is a great hole. You don't need to hit driver. You've got to hit something in the fairway, and then you got to get something to stop on the green somehow. And if you miss a fairway there, I mean, you could be there all day if you start missing shots. If you go through the green, go past the hole, you could three- or four-putt there easily.

So on this golf course, I would say No. 10. No. 1 is difficult. It's tough to pick one, to answer your question. If I pick one, I'll take the 10th hole, which is probably the more difficult hole out here.

**Q. Ernie, getting back to Arnold Palmer, what does he mean to you and what he's meant to you and to the game of golf?**

ERNIE ELS: Well, I mean, he's the King. He's the man. I mean, Arnold -- you know, there wasn't a lot of

television, especially in Europe those days. He went to the Open championship, won it twice, I think '61 and '62. And the famous shot he hit at Birkdale on 16 and hit out of little bush. He took the whole bush and the golf ball together, and hit the ball on the green and won the tournament. He established his legend over there and over here. He was just a guy that everybody wanted to look at, see. Everybody wanted to be like him.

You know, he was kind of the guy that took the game and moved it forward himself. He kept playing a game that he loved for such a long time, established the golf tournament after his name.

And there's another benefit. He gave young guys like myself an opportunity to play and basically earn their keep to the play over here and kept giving back to the game. I think he's the most unbelievable example of a sportsman through all sport that you can ever find.

If you want to look at a guy that you want to emulate and you're going to be okay, you look at Arnold Palmer and follow what he did.

**Q. Ernie, back to the 1994 U.S. Open, your win is kind of a footnote on a really interesting day in U.S. culture and U.S. history. With Arnold Palmer, it being his last year Open, and also the O.J. Simpson case.**

**What do you remember? Do you have any stories or any memories on the events surrounding that win that day?**

ERNIE ELS: Well, I knew there was a car chase going on. I think that whole weekend was getting kind of weird. I'm trying to remember if the car chase was on the Monday or the Sunday, but I knew there was some kind of chase going on. I think they cut the golf coverage to go to L.A., some helicopter chasing the Bronco down the highway. So I remember that. And I knew there was a lot of talk about it. The newspapers was on it, and ESPN back in the day was covering it a lot. I didn't know much about O.J. Simpson, but he was very famous to have all of L.A. chasing. So I remember that.

And then, obviously, Arnold retiring on that Friday, that was a big deal. I remember all the people on 18. And then afterwards, I saw the replay of his press conference where he got quite emotional. That was quite something. Yeah, it was quite a week.

**Q. Ernie, in '94, how much time were you able to spend here and prepare for the championship? And how much were you able to glean about Oakmont ahead of time? How much do you kind of**

**have to figure out on the fly as you're playing the tournament? Can you kind of relay that to what advantage or disadvantage someone would have who hasn't played here competitively before?**

ERNIE ELS: Well, My father's here. We watched the 1983 U.S. Open, when Larry Nelson won, in South Africa. They showed quite a bit of that. So just from watching television, I kind of had a little bit of an idea. Even then, they were talking about the greens and how tough the golf course was.

To be honest with you, I couldn't wait to get here. After placing second to Lee Janzen, I couldn't wait to get here. I was here on the Sunday night, ready for Monday. I was out there playing. Played 18 holes, I think, every day. And then the tournament started, and it was 105 every day, and we had to play Monday. Shows you what a young man can do.

But I just wanted to get as much information in me as I possibly could. I wanted to see exactly what line on the 1st, what I'm going to play off the 1st tee, the 2nd hole. Every single hole, I really did my homework with Ricky, and I had a really nice game plan. And knowing that I had game, I could actually execute the shots that I was planning. It's tough to know what you've got to do. But if your swing's not quite in good shape and you can't hit the shot, then it doesn't really matter how much work you do there. But I felt I had good game, and I wanted to see as much as I could.

**Q. Ernie, you talked about in '94 the pairing with Frank Nobile and how it was very comfortable for you. You hear that a lot. Have you ever been in a position on Sunday where the pairing was not comfortable, just you and the guy didn't get along? Does that affect in any way your attitude or your day in general?**

ERNIE ELS: When you know a certain person, it kind of relaxes you a little bit. Playing with Tiger in the final round, there's an extra bit of tension. You bring something extra. With Tiger, you were always -- I don't want to say more uptight, but there was more intensity. Tiger brought a huge intensity to the 1st tee.

But I knew him pretty well too, so we're pretty loose with each other. But there's just a certain intensity. That, at times, helped me because it elevated my game a little bit. But at other times, you can't help playing (indiscernible) when you're playing it with a good friend of yours.

You can answer that question yourself. You're obviously going to feel more comfortable with a friend of yours that you're having dinner with, traveling together with, who's almost like a mentor to you. You get tips from him when you play practice rounds, and

that was Frankie to me.

So it was always comfortable for me. It didn't help my game much because I shot 2 over, but it was nice playing with him, and it's easy being two foreigners playing in your U.S. Open final round which was quite nice.

**Q. Ernie, earlier you answered the question of this lady over here, the challenge of the firmness and speed of the greens for approach shots coming in. From the tee, what would you prefer this week? Would you prefer the tee shots to bounce and roll out 50-plus yards, or would you rather have a little bit more reception out there slow it down?**

ERNIE ELS: Well, I think, obviously, when I get firmer and faster, you know, you can back off. You don't have to hit too many drivers or 3 woods even. There's a lot of slope that helps the golf ball, and same with the ball on top of the slope that haven't been dug out or shaped into slopes. The ball really runs on the slopes.

So when it gets firm, you're going to get a lot more distance, but accuracy is going to be difficult. And with this rough, you really can't keep scoring out of this rough. You might have got away with it in '94, but not this year.

So when it gets a little softer, then it's going to play a lot longer. I think most of the players would prefer it when there's a bit of rain or softness comes. It's more playable.

**Q. Ernie, I'm just curious. What does the mental exhaustion after playing a round here feel like compared to playing at other Major venues like a British, where there may be opportunities for birdies during the day or a Masters? How does this compare to other challenges?**

ERNIE ELS: This is going to test the boys this week, I promise you. This is, in many ways, of the four rounds you're going to play, at least one, maybe two is going to be a survival test. You breeze through four rounds here with you having your way with the golf course, you're going to win by quite a few golf shots. You're going to have stretches where you're going to have to try and survive, and it's going to happen to every player in the field.

That is why this is the ultimate U.S. Open test at Oakmont. There's some other ones -- I mentioned Winged Foot -- but this one is going to test your resolve. Mental, physical, everything. So you're probably going to need a couple of days off after Sunday.

**Q. Ernie, Jordan Spieth came agonizingly close to**

**winning his second green jacket earlier this year. Golf can be unforgiving at times. What moment in your career had you down the most, and how did you recover from it?**

ERNIE ELS: Yeah, the elation when you're winning is so high. And when you come so close and you lose, you go pretty low. That's why I like what Jordan did. He went with his buddies to the Bahamas and let it loose, and it's helped him. It's nice to see.

But me personally, there were quite a few. You know, back in '95, the PGA at Riviera, I had a two-shot lead there, which I squandered. The '96, British Open, I had a chance there. 2004 British Open, Masters -- there's quite a list of tournaments where I felt like disappointed. So that's what you have to put in the equation. Professional sport is a great way of making a living, but there's a lot of disappointments, a lot of great highs, but a lot of close, very agonizing disappointments.

It's how you deal with it, you know. We're all pretty hard on ourselves. I don't care who you are. It's how you come back from that. So I think he's done a hell of a job. He's won a tournament since then. He's back on top, second in the world again. So Jordan's done a hell of a job.

**Q. Based on what you just said about this being the ultimate test, what does it mean to you to be among the champions of this event, the U.S. Open, at this club, Oakmont? How much feedback do you get from Oakmont members about you being a former champion and how much maybe advice you could share with other golfers about what that means as well?**

ERNIE ELS: Yeah. After the U.S. Open in '94, a good friend of mine I played golf with, Bobby Friend, we played together on the web.com tour back in the early '90s. He's a member here. He was so excited when I won the U.S. Open, being a web.com fellow member and friend of his. He spoke with the membership here; and the next thing, they made me a member here at Oakmont. So I've been a member here for over 20 years.

Bob Ford is another great friend of ours. He's down at Seminole in the winter. We keep teasing each other, saying you've got to come up and play. This is such a great place, great club, great golfers here, really good amateur players. But I just haven't found the time to really come up here as often as I wanted to.

I was up here a couple weeks ago, and it was a club day, where it was one of the last Saturdays for members. I called up, and they said, no, everything's booked up, and I said, no, but I'm a member. They

gave me an opening. Me and my dad came that Saturday morning, just the two of us, and played here. I guess if I wasn't a member, we couldn't have played.

I know it's not as strict as Muirfield in Scotland, but they have their rules and regulations here. It was nice to play. And we played in three and a half hours. Guys don't hang around for hours. They play quite fast, and they know their game. Great club, great history. Obviously, as I said before, it's great to be a U.S. Open champ at this club.

**Q. Knowing that this is a survival test, do you look at this week more with excitement or trepidation.**

ERNIE ELS: Well, it depends on which hole you're talking about. There's certain holes that you're kind of licking your chops to get at, and then some holes you almost don't want to hit the tee shot, they're so tough.

You've got to take both equally. You've got to look at the tough holes and keep the big numbers off the card. If you're going to make a mistake, keep it to a minimum. When you get your chances, you've got to pounce. You've got to pounce on getting a birdie where you can and see what you shoot at the end of the day.

It's almost, you've absolutely got to put one foot in front of the other. You can just put one foot in front of you and just play with what you have at that moment in time. So count them up at the end of the day and hope it's under a certain number.

**Q. A quick follow, Ernie. Most weeks, you don't mind necessarily hitting in the bunkers as a bail-out because you feel like you can get up and down. Are there any bunkers on this course where you feel it's a good bail-out spot?**

ERNIE ELS: There are a couple actually. You know, a couple. If you can keep the ball under the hole when you've missed a shot, you've got to try to miss it underneath the slope. If you've missed a shot on top of the slope, you have no chance. I don't care who you are. The only thing that's going to stop will be the flag and the hole.

So if you miss it underneath the hole and you can miss it in the bunker where you can put a bit of spin on it, there's some places where you can try and do that, especially where you got yourself out of position on your tee shot. You've got to look at getting yourself underneath the hole, preferably in a bunker.

THE MODERATOR: Ernie, thank you so much for joining us today. We wish you well throughout the week.