

U.S. Open Championship 2017

Tuesday, June 13, 2017

Steve Stricker

Press Conference



BETH MAJOR: Good afternoon. Welcome, again, to the 2017 U.S. Open Championship at Erin Hills. It is our pleasure to welcome Steve Stricker to the media center today.

Steve is playing in his 20th U.S. Open. It's probably safe to say that this one is a little bit more special than usual for the Wisconsin native and the Madison resident. Steve, can you give us some thoughts about playing in the U.S. Open in your home state?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, very exciting to be here. I wasn't sure if I was going to be here, but very excited, relieved. Worked hard to get here. Put a lot of extra effort in playing some extra tournaments to try to get here. So, all in all, it worked out for me to be here. So I'm excited to be here, it should be a great event, and excited to get it going. We still have a couple days left, but excited to tee it up here and get it going.

BETH MAJOR: You've obviously been familiar with Erin Hills for quite a long time. Can you talk about your initial visit through now arriving here for the championship?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, I was asked quite a few years ago when Bob Lang, the original owner who built the golf course. I can't remember the exact year, 2006 or 2007, somewhere around there. Once it was complete, we came down here and played it before it was open, and maybe played it a half a dozen times or so. Then I was asked to come around with the USGA and Mr. Lang, at the time, they kind of wanted a player's perspective of the golf course to see if it was a legitimate U.S. Open course. We talked about the good things about the course and then some of the things that we thought needed to be changed about the golf course. But I haven't been here, probably, since the last seven years or so. No reason why, I just hadn't been here. I had opportunities to come here. Rich Tock is the head golf professional or the director of golf here, and I'm a friend of his. He's invited me down a number of times, but just haven't come down here. So it's been a while. So I just saw the changes for the first time myself this last week when I came over. A lot of good changes. The course is in magnificent shape. Probably the best conditioned golf course we may see ever in a major. They closed this course down in September, October, and nobody's played on it since. So all in all, it's shaping up to be in really good

condition and should be a great championship.

Q. Other than the Straits and Erin Hills, what is your favorite place to play in Wisconsin?

STEVE STRICKER: Oh, good question. There's a number of good courses. We're lucky to have a number of good courses in Wisconsin. The ones that I always seem to -- I get the most thrill out of is going back home to play in Edgerton, believe it or not, or to go back and play Lake Ripley Country Club in Cambridge, courses that I hardly ever play anymore, but they bring a smile to my face. Because I go back there and I haven't played for so long and it brings back all the times I was there as a junior golfer and playing. Just keep going around Edgerton. It was just a nine-hole course at the time, so I really have fun when I go back to those two places.

Milwaukee Country Club is pretty nice. I have not played Sand Valley yet, but we're lucky. Obviously Whistling Straits, we're lucky to have a number of great golf courses. Century World was one of my favorites growing up, so we're very fortunate to have a lot of ability to play some really nice courses. I didn't really answer your question to a specific one, but I gave you it in a round-about answer.

Q. With your limited tournament schedule, how have you adjusted your practice schedule?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, I'm just playing more competitive golf this year so far, I think, is what I've been doing. I don't think I'm practicing anymore. I'm just playing more competitively. When I was only playing the 12, 14 events, 15 I think I played last year, I still practiced a lot, and I think that's why I would come out and play pretty sharply at times. But it really hasn't changed. I really have just played more. I've been practicing a little bit less, if anything. I've been trying to conserve energy and trying to get my world ranking up some, so I would play more events and practice a little bit less, probably.

Q. Can you describe the range of emotions from when you first were denied the exemption into this tournament through the sectional qualifier when you earned your way in?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, when I wrote the letter and sent it in, I really had no hopes of getting a positive response back, and that came true. They were right on

about that. After looking at the list of past exemptions, there were a couple in there. Aaron Baddeley was an amateur. I thought well, maybe if they give an amateur one maybe they'll give a pro one that's won 12 times and in his home state. So I held out a glimmer of hope there, so that didn't happen. I was fine with that. I talked to -- they were very professional. Mike Davis called me, Jeff Hall called me, and just apologized to no end. And I was fine with that. I really was. But then as it kept going on, I was like, you know, I really want to play here. This is our first U.S. Open. Then I had more and more people come up to me and say, hey, why aren't you in? And pretty soon it became a little chip on my shoulder that I had to work a little bit harder to try to get in.

I still don't believe I should have got a spot. I'm convinced of that, but it would have been nice if they would have. But the way it worked out, I feel much better the way I got here. After the qualifier, that was pretty sweet, because I earned my way in. I feel like I belong here. No one gave me a spot, where if somebody would have given me a sponsor spot, I would have felt like I owed somebody something. So as it all turned out, it was meant to be the way I did it, and I feel better about the way I earned my way in here.

Q. What was it like playing the Dell hole, the blind par-3 with the bell? Do you think it would have been okay for the championship?

STEVE STRICKER: It was a unique hole. That was one of my -- it was so long ago, I mean, it's ten years ago, 10, 11 years ago, but they had 19 holes here, right? The one that they didn't play is the current ninth hole, and I'm like, wow, that's a cool hole. We should be playing that one. So I don't know if that stuck with them or if they thought the same thing. But I wasn't a big fan of the blind par-3. I think we're playing the right hole now. I think that ninth hole is a great par-3. We're up there, sitting up there on top of the hill where the elements, the wind, can be pretty exposed, and it's -- the green isn't great yet. There is a little runoff area that guys are going to get a little upset with that if that ball hits in the middle of the green it can roll all the way off the green and maybe 10 yards down into some chipping area. I think at some point that may need to get a little bit softened.

But just the look of that ninth hole is pretty sweet from up there.

Q. After the qualifier, at what point then did your focus turn to preparation for this tournament? And how well did you feel you knew Erin Hills and, I guess, how would you evaluate your expectations going into this?

STEVE STRICKER: I don't know Erin Hills all that well. I guess I had played it a half dozen times more than anybody else probably up to this point. But as soon as I made it, I took really one day off. I had to withdraw from Memphis just because I've been playing too much golf and pretty fatigued and not sure that I'd be able to play this whole stretch that I have coming up too.

I stayed at home on Tuesday and then came down here last Wednesday and Thursday, played a couple times. Nicki and I walked around and got to learn it a little bit more.

As far as expectations, I go into every tournament expecting to play well, and this is really no different. I'm going in thinking and trying to compete at the best that I can, and hopefully get in contention. That's my goal is to try to get in contention and see what happens.

I can look back at the British Open last year finishing fourth. I really wasn't in contention, but I was up around the top, so I can look back at just some recent history for me to say that it's still possible and be a cool spot to do it, I know that.

Q. This is your 20th U.S. Open. I guess you paired up yesterday with Scott Harvey who is 39 and playing his first. I'm just curious what are your recollections of your first National open, and what are your thoughts on Scott and his game?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, my first open was at Baltusrol where Lee Jansen ended up winning. All I remember about that, I ended up making the cut there, which was my goal going into that week, if I remember right. But I remember on Friday afternoon just we were waiting for Lee to finish his last hole, and he was towards the end of the day on Friday. He determined the cut line. If he made a birdie, he was going to knock me and a bunch of other players out. I kid him about it. I was rooting against him so I could play the weekend (laughing). But that was my recollection.

Yeah, Harvey, who I played with yesterday, he's a great guy. We had a lot of fun. Played nine holes with him. Talked a little bit about what he does. He's got a nice game. He seemed comfortable. He hit the ball well. But I can remember it's a nerve-racking time. You've got to fight those nerves and power through it, I guess. But he'll do fine. He looked like he was having fun with it all.

Q. First question, we recently saw a nice outpouring of emotion for Sergio Garcia's first major victory win. Speaking in general terms, what is it like for you personally when you see a fellow professional record an emotional victory like that?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, I felt extremely happy for him. I'm a friend of Sergio's, and played a number of times with him. I thought it was great. I was rooting for him down the stretch there to see if he could finally do it, and I think a lot of the golfing world was too.

But, yeah, it showed how much it meant to him. He's been bitten a few times and he hasn't come through on a few others. But it was good to see him finally get it done and take care of it.

Q. Also, about this particular venue, and your knowledge of the course, what is most challenging for you here at Erin Hills, out there in the heat of battle?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, I think it's the length more than anything. I think I'm giving up 20 to 40 yards sometimes. Some of these kids, I would have rather seen it stay dry, like yesterday. I've got a flight that I can get a little bit extra on the ground, and I was knocking it out there pretty good yesterday. But now with the softer conditions, the length, I think will be a challenging factor for me and for everybody keeping it out of the Fescue. It's a penalty, for sure, hitting it in there. Half a shot to a shot, maybe. It's a challenge some of those areas just to get it out back into play, back into the fairways. So that's going to be the challenge for everybody is to stay out of there.

Q. Could you take us back through your qualifier day? Your emotions of the day when you got up, knowing what was on the line and maybe wondering if you should have gone to a different site, or were you comfortable with the golf course? I think during the second 18 you kind of went on a birdie run that sort of cemented your spot. Could you take us through those emotions and what you were thinking at those times of the day?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, I woke up very excited. I had the opportunity -- it even goes back like on Saturday of the Memorial tournament, we had some weather issues -- maybe it was Saturday, Sunday. We had some weather issues and they gave us the opportunity to switch sites if we wanted to, but I really wanted to go back to Memphis. I played Memphis last year in the qualifier, and missed out at the playoff by a shot. I enjoyed the two courses. I thought they fit my game just fine, so I wanted to go back there. So, woke up that morning excited and eager to get out there and play.

I didn't feel really any extra pressure. I always, in those qualifiers, you want to make it. But deep down knowing if I don't make it, you know, I'm going to be home. We can do something as a family. My daughter's playing in a golf tournament today and tomorrow. I could have been down in Racine with her.

So there are always things to do to take your mind off of it. But I really wanted to make it.

Just going through the day there. Like you said, I made a stretch in that second round I think four birdies in a row that kind of got me into a position where I'm like at that point just make pars on the way in and maybe a birdie here and there and we'll be just fine. That little stretch of holes, I think it was 5, 6, 7, and 8 in that second round that kind of propelled me to make it. Just, I think, the relief of doing it at the end. That was the most satisfaction that I've had in a while was just knowing that I made it and I was going to be here to play and excited to be here.

BETH MAJOR: And I will say the web traffic that followed that qualifier was far above any of the others, so there was great interest and great support for you being here. So lots of happy folks on that one.

STEVE STRICKER: Cool.

Q. You've played in other tournaments here in Wisconsin. But what is it about the U.S. Open when you hear that phrase "U.S. Open," what's that do for you?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, I think it means tough. You better bring all parts of your game. It's challenging physically, mentally, maybe even more so mentally because it just keeps beating you down. Usually the courses that we play are so demanding that you just don't -- you don't give up, but it wears you out. It's a tiring week. So I think all those things -- I didn't say too many good things there, I don't think, but that's what comes to mind (laughing). They're just very, very challenging. You've got to either accept those challenges, which I think I have over the years. I enjoy playing in U.S. Opens and coming to play in tough conditions, but that's what you think about when you think about U.S. Open is challenging, tough, and you better be willing to accept those challenges.

Q. When you've been to sort of the tip top tiers of the game as you have, the rankings and so on, and then you're in qualifying, I wonder, is there some sense of suspense and doubt or tinge of desperation that it reawakens maybe some old things that make it really, really especially fun?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, for sure. I mean, it brings you back to the days when I didn't have a TOUR card. I didn't play on the PGA TOUR, and I would go down and I'd first qualify out of the Wisconsin local section. We had a guy there, Gene Haas who set up our courses very difficult. So we got a taste of it.

Then I'd usually sign up for the Chicago section, and I think that's where I qualified the year 1993 to play in

my first one.

So, yeah, it brings back a lot of memories. I actually took it as a fun opportunity to try to do it. I didn't look at it as a negative. I thought it was probably my best opportunity to get into the U.S. Open.

I was trying to play my way in through world ranking as well, and I was 85th in the world or something like that, so I needed a couple of top 5 finishes, and I'm like that's going to be harder to do than going out and playing 36 holes on the Monday qualifier and getting in that way.

I always felt like the Monday qualifier was going to be the better opportunity for me, and I had fun with it. My brother-in-law, Mario, was on the bag. We had a good time with it, and it worked out.

Q. In Wisconsin golf history it's kind of Andy North and then you and now Jordan Niebrugge. Can you talk about what you've seen from his game and what you've seen from him this weekend and into the future?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, Jordan's got a tremendous amount of talent. He's in that next wave of really talented, young players. He hasn't quite made it out here on TOUR yet, but I think some day he will. But he's got the body shape, the club-head speed of this new generation of how these kids play. And that's hit it a long ways. And they're coming out with a lot of talent and a lot of experience right out of the chute. He's the same. Very impressed with his game. I've played with him a few times, and he impresses me a lot. Along with Charlie Danielson, another kid from our state. 6'4", both these kids, you know, they've got a tremendous amount of talent. I keep trying to think if I had that length and talent like that how much fun that would be to hit it 30 yards further than what I do now. But that's the abilities they have. It's impressive.

Q. You mentioned when you qualified in '93, one of the unique things about the U.S. Open is you do get qualifiers. Guys who are not out on the TOUR often, if at all. What does that do to this tournament or add to this tournament having a mix of pros like you and guys who are weekend players?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, I think it makes it very unique. You don't see that in any other majors. I guess the British Open a little bit. They have some qualifying aspects there, I think. But I just think you've got to -- I forget how many thousands of entries going for, I think, 53 spots or something like that?

BETH MAJOR: 78 spots all together, about 9,000 enter, and then we had 78 through both stages of

qualifying to get in.

STEVE STRICKER: That's pretty remarkable. So people have the opportunity to get in, and it truly is an open tournament. If you can play well enough, you can make your way in. I was lucky to have that opportunity this year.

Q. If you hadn't made it, what would you be doing this week? Would you have been able to come out here or how would you have felt?

STEVE STRICKER: I would have been about on the second hole with my daughter, probably, caddying (laughing). Like I said, she's down in Racine today, first round of the Women's State Open.

I went down there with her Friday, went around with her, and tried to help her out a little bit. She's in the process of trying to play. She hadn't played that competitively since last year. She just started up trying to play golf, so I've been trying to help her out a lot. So, yeah, she's teeing it up today for an event, her first one of the summer. So I'm sure I would have been down there watching and caddying with her.

Q. In your time out on the course yesterday, have you gotten a sense of the support you have from the people here? How does that strike you and make you feel?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, it's overwhelming at times, you know, the amount of people that are coming up to me and wishing me luck. The ovation I got when I went up on nub 9 yesterday. I got a nice round of applause during the practice round. So, yeah, it's pretty cool. Yeah, hopefully I can play well to make it worth it on everybody's part. But it's just special to be here. I'm looking to play well. That's the thing. I don't want to stop by just qualifying and being here ceremonial. I want to play well and hopefully get in there.

Q. I'm assuming you're sleeping in your own bed for this major. So what's it going to be like waking up with your family, and how does your routine change now that you're home?

STEVE STRICKER: We went home last night and we're moving down here tonight. We rented a home like everybody else. Kind of want to make it feel like it's a tournament, like what we do any other major, probably. Yeah, and then my wife and kids will be there starting tomorrow night. So we're trying to make it just as normal as can be when you're on the road.

It takes us about an hour and ten minutes to get back and forth from home or one way from home, so I just thought it was a little bit too far to be doing that.

Q. Obviously next week's a big week for you as

well, hosting and playing in the Am Fam in Madison. Have you been able to just put that out of the picture here and concentrate on this week?

STEVE STRICKER: Yeah, very much so. We have a tournament director, Nate Pokrass, and the American Family Insurance Company, they're taking -- they take care of pretty much everything. So it's really something I haven't had to deal with very much, and they understand that. A lot of them are going to be down here this week. I know American Family Insurance had purchased a chalet or a suite of some sort, so they're going to be par taking in the U.S. Open.

Yeah, so everything's pretty much running like it should back home. I mean, they're doing a great job, and all I've really got to do next week is show up and play.

BETH MAJOR: Steve, thank you so much for joining us, thrilled to have you with us, we look forward to watching you throughout the week.