

2015 US Senior Open Championship

Wednesday, June 24
Press Conference

Hale Irwin



THE MODERATOR: Hi, everyone. Welcome back to the Media Center. Here with five-time USGA Champion and World Golf Hall of Fame member Hale Irwin. Hale is the 1974, 1979, and 1990 U.S. Open Champion and the 1998 and 2000 U.S. Senior Open Champion. Hale turned 70 a little bit earlier this month. You'll be playing in your 20th U.S. Senior Open. Can you believe it's been 20 years?

HALE IRWIN: (Shaking head.) Can you print that? It's been an awfully, awfully good ride. A long one. But, no, it's hard to believe it's been 20 years playing in the U.S. Senior. I was asked earlier today how many regular Opens. I don't know. Maybe someone researched that once upon a time. I've been in a lot of USGA events throughout the years, and that's really defined my career. It's been the U.S. Open, the U.S. Senior Open. So I'm indebted to the USGA and all that's been able to come my way because of those victories.

THE MODERATOR: Other than the victories, obviously, '98 and 2000, what are some of the your fondest memories looking back at 20 years you've played in the Senior Open?

HALE IRWIN: I think, obviously, the wins stand out, and it may sound a bit trite, but I truly mean it, to see players that didn't have a successful or perhaps a lengthy regular Tour career. I think Allen Doyle for one, a two-time U.S. Senior Open Champion. I think of the guys -- Dave Eichelberger, another one -- that are friends and achieved things at the pinnacle of our Tour. It's fun to watch these guys and in a way understand how excited they are and what it means to them to achieve that. There's a little bit of a -- not that I didn't want to win, but to see that they were able to and share in that, it's been rewarding.

THE MODERATOR: Dave is playing in his 22nd U.S. Senior Open this year, Dave Eichelberger, the only one that's played in more than you, playing in your 20th.

HALE IRWIN: But he's a lot older than I am.

THE MODERATOR: Of course.

HALE IRWIN: It's great to have somebody older in the field than me.

THE MODERATOR: You've played some of your best golf, as you mentioned, on some of the most difficult courses. Is it the challenge of the course or the Championship that draws out the best in your game or something in your game that is suited to these difficult courses?

HALE IRWIN: Maybe all of the above. I've said this many times. When I was a young man practicing or playing, this shot was to win the U.S. Open, because I didn't know what the Master's was. I couldn't get in there anyway. And I wasn't a professional, so I couldn't get in the PGA. And the British Open, it was like, where's that? So the Open was the only tournament which I could qualify and get in, and I did get in as an amateur in 1966, and that really turned me on to what was the Open. It was at Olympic Club, as we know, where Arnold kind of blew the lead he had and Billy Casper won. So that really kind of set the stage for my love affair with the U.S. Open, but I think you bring up a point. My game seemed to be suited more for keeping it in play, being rather tenacious, if you wish, and not giving up. I really credit my athletic background for that. My football career in college really helped me a great deal, and the discipline and the mental tenacity -- I use that word again because I think that's what is needed to play successfully in a USGA event. I think that was more than apparent last week. So I think those are two of the most prime ingredients you can have is that discipline, that tenacity not to give in. And that's sort of been my game, being able to keep the ball in play, keep it in the fairway, had a good iron game, keep it on the green. All the things you need to do well. You don't have to be superior in any of them, but you have to do all of them very well and manage yourself. That's what I was able to do.

THE MODERATOR: And you certainly did. Let's open it up to questions now.

Q. Happy birthday.

HALE IRWIN: Thank you.

Q. Don't take me wrong on this, but given what you

were just talking about, I'm curious -- by the way, it's 34 U.S. Opens, I think.

THE MODERATOR: It is 34.

Q. I think so. You're 70. Why are you still out here? How much of the game you were just talking about do you still have?

HALE IRWIN: I don't know why I'm still here. I think I still have this belief that I can accomplish something in the game. Now, I'm not going to be -- sit up here and say I can win because I think anybody is an odds against you winning. I am, at best, a long shot, but there are things that I can still do on a course like this that could help me out, the experience part. The difficulty there is that of late, I have not been playing particularly well. There's other things in my life now that have a higher priority than golf. Once you hit that and realize that, it's a slippery slope. I'm kind of on that fine line between nursing a few little aches and pains here and there -- I don't have a bucket list. I have a barrel. I'm just starting to scratch the surface of that. Once you kind of think in that vein, it's kind of hard to reel in that focus and to prepare the way used to and get out there and play with that tenacity and that discipline. There's just other things in my life that are increasingly more important. My career's back there. I want to say my future ahead of me is rather short compared to what was back there. So at 70 years old, you just be realistic and say I've got X number of years in which I can physically and mentally do what I want to do, and that's what I say. I get torn between the can I do this, or do I want to do that? That's where I am right now. If I concentrate -- for instance, if I'm out practicing and I'm concentrating on that shot, I'll hit it. But if I get the slightest thought, oh, I forgot to call Dan O'Neill, I hit the worst looking shot. I can't multitask mentally the way I used to. I can focus, and I still have extraneous thoughts, which were fine, I dealt with them. But now it's one thing at a time. That's where I find myself on the golf course. If I get to wandering -- I can play 14, 15, 16 holes really well, but if I get to wandering, heaven only knows what I'll conjure up. That's the hardest part.

Q. Hale, as recently as 2011, you almost won a Senior major. You were right in there with the one Watson won at Valhalla. Was there a time where you started noticing this wandering or this falling off, or was it just a gradual thing?

HALE IRWIN: I think it really came to mind when I went home and it was the wrong house. (Laughter.) No, I think you look at your results that you've had, and the results I've had over the last several years have not been particularly good. I look back and try to find the reasons why, and there aren't any real apparent reasons other than I'm just not in focus the way I once used to be. I get in these situations on the golf course

where I confound myself with my stupidity. And it just seems like yesterday, that was not even a problem. I just went right through it, got to it. Now I sit there and have to think about it. When you stop and start thinking and not reacting to whether it be the shot itself or a situation, then you're kind of headed in the wrong direction.

Q. If I could just follow up, that said, your current struggles notwithstanding, you pushed the envelope of playing well in older age, almost better than anyone else. How rewarding has that part of your career been that you've been able to do that?

HALE IRWIN: I think it's great. If I can contribute to the game of golf by showing to other senior players -- I don't care if they're professional or not, but to show that there is activity still going on. You can still perform. You still can do the things. You just have to have realistic goals. If it you can do that, then feel proud of yourself. You feel like you're contributing to yourself because, if you do that, then you're going to contribute to somebody else. If I can play to the level that I really believe I can, then I'm going to contribute to somebody else that's going to be turning 70 or is going to -- I don't care if they're amateur or pro. Then what better way to give back to the game than that?

Q. Hale, there's a lot of talk and controversy, I guess, about the Open last week and Chambers Bay was not what a U.S. Open certainly traditionally looks like or some people felt should look like. I wonder how you felt about that and how you feel about this golf course, which appears to be more of a traditional kind of U.S. Open course.

HALE IRWIN: Well, not being at Chambers Bay and having never been there, I feel a little bit ill at ease in speaking because I wasn't there. I have talked to others that have been there. I have visited with the announce team. And to a person, they were kind of coming away scratching their heads. So I can only scratch mine and say -- see, when I turned it on, I was rather surprised by the look of the greens. I thought I'd gotten on the European channel. I thought I was watching the European Tour, that they were playing some links course somewhere. That's kind of what it reminded me of, and I had to check my channel again. So it was different. We didn't see the green, and I understand the desire and perhaps the mandate the USGA has set for itself in being environmentally friendly. I understand that. I understand the need, perhaps, or the want to go to public golf courses. But not all of those are in the traditional vein of what the U.S. Open championship has been. As a player, I don't know how I'd play. It appeared to be very willy-nilly as to how your ball would end up. Good shot or bad shot weren't necessarily awarded or penalized. Some bad ones ended up really well, and some good ones were

-- I couldn't believe how far the ball was running not just forward, but sideways. As a player, if you're tasked to hit the ball here and you end up there, that seems to be a little at odds with what the committee is asking of you. But, again, not having played it, I don't know. It was different. It was outside the norm, outside the box, if it you wish. Maybe it's a one off. I just don't know. I'd love to hear the conversation that the USGA had on how it was set up.

Q. What about this place?

HALE IRWIN: This place is great. It's right here in front of you. As you say, it's more of the traditional look. It's got some length. This is not a short golf course. Players like myself that are not hitting the ball as far as we once did, we're going to be really pushed to perform well. But it's in great shape. There's no, if you want to call, trickery. Where you hit it is probably where it's going to end up, unlike last week, where you didn't know exactly. So this is more the traditional setup, and I think the players to a player that I've heard are really liking what we're seeing this week.

Q. Here's a question for you as far as the longevity factor is concerned, Hale. Tom Watson has had a pretty remarkable run of good golf late into his career, almost won an Open Championship, in fact. We certainly knew the things that you could do well. What are the things that made Tom a good player later in his career?

HALE IRWIN: Just beside the fact that Tom has always been a very good player. He's got great experience. He hits the ball still quite long. He's been a great manager of himself and his game. When you come to these kinds of events, how you manage yourself is maybe the most important of all the disciplines. If you can manage your emotions -- and I think we saw that in Jordan Spieth last week. If you can manage that, if you can manage your highs and lows and keep sort of on that equilibrium, then you're not going to fall through thin ice. You're going to stay on top. Tom, in my estimation, of all the things that Tom has done very, very, very well in his career, I think he's managed himself very well. There's been no doubt in my mind to all of us that, when Tom first came out, that he was going to be a winner. It just took him a couple of years to get the experience he needed to become the major championship winner we all expected he would be.

Q. When you were winning and then you kept winning, was there ever a point in time where -- not necessarily that it got old or boring or anything of that nature, but that you almost expected it because you just were on such a great roll?

HALE IRWIN: No, I really always fought the expectation. I expected myself to play to my best that week, as best I could, but I never expected to win.

That's too hard. Throughout my athletic career, I always gave my opponent the most respect I could, and that's the same way with the golf course and the golf tournament. Always has my attention, always my respect because, if you don't, then you're the one that's going to get run over. For me, it was never the expectation. I knew I had some skill sets that might adapt themselves better to one course than another, but it was always to try and maintain that equilibrium that I just spoke of Tom. My skills weren't greater than anybody else, but I think my ability to stay on point and not back off was equal to just about everybody's.

Q. Hale, I assume that you played in the Raley's Gold Rush when it was in the suburbs about 10 or 15 years ago.

HALE IRWIN: Yes.

Q. Do you have any other ties to Sacramento, either personally or professionally?

HALE IRWIN: No, I don't. Other than playing in the Raley's, I really haven't been to Sacramento much. There was a golf course design opportunity up in the foothills once upon a time, but that didn't happen. I really haven't spent a great deal of time in Sacramento. I was maybe confused with someone else the other day when they said I'd been here. Maybe I have. It was in another life because I don't remember it. But I do like the golf course. This is the kind of course where you say I've played this hole somewhere else. It's just strung together a little differently, but I like the golf course. Thus far, the hospitality has been fantastic. We've all been well received.

Q. I'm just curious about if the heat will be difficult to manage. It's supposed to be 106 tomorrow.

HALE IRWIN: 106? Is that 103, add three?

Q. Something like that, yeah.

HALE IRWIN: Absolutely. I think for those that maybe are not accustomed to being out in the heat, playing in the heat, it will be. It could be for any of us. Those that are expecting the heat to be a problem, it will be. Those that go out there and play golf, it won't be. I do think that your mindset is such that, if you believe you're going to have a problem in the heat, you will. My main residence now is in Arizona. I was out playing 113, 115 degrees last week and just trying to get ready for the anticipated heat this week. So that's not to say I'm going to handle it, but I've been trying. But it will be an issue for some.

Q. Hale, have you scripted how your last chapter of your career is going to play out? Will you tell everybody when you're going to step away, or are you just going to play it by ear?

HALE IRWIN: There will be no scripted act. You know

better than that. It's going to be when the time comes.
It will be my call.

THE MODERATOR: Hale Irwin, Thursday, 8:13 a.m. on
the 10th tee. Thank you very much.