
HP CLASSIC OF NEW ORLEANS
English Turn Golf and Country Club
New Orleans, Louisiana
April 29, 2004

First-round leader quotes

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL AZINGER

JOAN vT ALEXANDER: Thank you, Paul, for joining us for a few minutes here in the media center at the HP Classic.

A good finish there with 3 straight birdies on 6, 7 and 8, why don't you just talk about the day and your round a little bit, isn't that right?

PAUL AZINGER: That's right.

I started on the back nine and just, you know, got a little bit of confidence from last week, and I don't necessarily feel like it's the best course, scoring or anything, so I kind of went out there today thinking a little more conservatively probably, but tried to be very aggressive with my swing.

I think I kind of had a hard time letting go of the reigns off the tee for quite a while, but when you don't know where it's going, it's hard to let it rip.

I think last week I really recognized I had to start swinging a little more free at impact with my driver and I had a hard time doing it as the week progressed.

But today, I did a great job with that. I hit a lot of balls on the range last night. I tried to feel it out. I drove it really well. I missed 3 fairways, I think, and I didn't miss a green until the last hole which is humongous on this golf course because the greens are really small.

I hit 17 greens in a row. I mean they are like Hilton Head, except harder than Hilton Head right now. I'm pretty happy with what I hit.

Q. Is it because it's a Nicklaus course with your sort of low-ball flight, is that why you think it's not a good course for you?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, I mean, I would say that if my natural flight was a little higher, it would be a little easier to stay on the greens. Instead I hit every single green in regulation until the last hole. The last hole I flew it right over the flag. It just hopped over.

You can't really count on doing that all week. The greens are tight, man, they are really small.

Q. Are you playing as well this year as you have in the last several years?

PAUL AZINGER: The last couple of years I played awful. My swing was a disaster and my body was hurt and my back was a disaster, too. I changed coaches and trying to get the club to go more around me, a little flatter plane. So far it's been paying off.

I started out really well at the beginning of the year, but the shaft was still more upright, even though I was doing other things well, and I decided at Bay Hill to flatten out a little bit more. It didn't pay off right away.

But there is no way I could have hit the ball at the beginning of the year like I hit the ball the last couple of weeks because of the position my club was in.

Q. At the top?

PAUL AZINGER: Yes. Just a little too upright. I lay down a little better. It's a little more on plane. I'm a little more accurate. I decided to do it at Bay Hill mainly because I wasn't at TPC. I thought if I really wanted to have a chance to contend in a big tournament, then that's just one more fundamental thing that needs to be fixed.

And really, the last thing in a series of October lessons, it's like this is the last thing.

Q. Who did you switch to, Paul?

PAUL AZINGER: A guy name Jim Hardy.

Q. The young guy now out in Florida, right?

PAUL AZINGER: No.

Q. Where is he?

PAUL AZINGER: He is 62 years old. He played the TOUR for seven years.

Q. Never mind, I think I have him mixed up with another Jim Hardy, H A R D Y?

PAUL AZINGER: Yes.

Q. Since you last won, how many times have you contended since your last tournament win?

PAUL AZINGER: I won in Hawaii in 2000, and then I probably rattled off like 25 cuts in a row or something in that little span and crawled back into the Top-20 in the World Ranking. And then I really wasn't getting in contention even though I was -- I had a couple of chances, but not very many. I don't know. I don't know the answer to that. I really haven't had have many chances at all. Canada, after two rounds, I was there a little bit. I haven't really felt like it to the last week.

Q. Anyone thing keeping you going?

PAUL AZINGER: I don't know. Just the fact that it's the greatest lifestyle in the world if you are playing good. Other than that, I don't know what else to say. If you are playing bad, it's pretty hard.

Q. Paul, can we go over your 6 birdies starting on 10?

PAUL AZINGER: Yep, I hit a 3-wood, 9-iron, three feet. I hit -- 11, par-5, driver, 3-iron right in front of the green, chipped up to four feet.

Q. 14, the par-4?

PAUL AZINGER: 14, I hit a driver, 9-iron, 25 feet.

Q. And then 6, 7 and 8?

PAUL AZINGER: Is 6 the par-5?

Q. Yes.

PAUL AZINGER: 6, I hit a driver, 5-iron over the green and putted it up eight feet. Made that.

7, I hit driver, sand wedge about ten feet.

And then 8, I hit 8-iron, nine feet.

Q. You are playing with your career money exemption this year, is that right?

PAUL AZINGER: I'm playing off a Ryder Cup. I still have a career. I have Top-50 career money and Top-25 career money if you have to use them.

Q. Hopefully you won't.

PAUL AZINGER: I'm kind of hoping.

Q. How hard is it, not that you're an old man, but at your age too, to have to make swing changes, you know?

PAUL AZINGER: You know, I don't know. It's just something that I just saw that I had to do. I was playing pitifully. So I didn't have a problem making the decision to do it. I worked with several guys. I just started getting better -- I thought really good information.

Q. From Hardy?

PAUL AZINGER: Yes. I was getting good information. And I think that sometimes you get bad information, and bad information -- you know, I really believe that if you go down the list of guys here, you probably would be able to say that, no matter what you told the individual, in a very short time, they could do it.

But if the ball is not flying right, then it's bad information. That's the way I look at it.

If someone said I had to go like that, to make good contact, I can probably do it pretty soon. It wouldn't take long.

Jim Hardy just said -- I told him when he started telling me stuff. I said, man, I never done anything like this before. He said well this isn't going to take six months.

Q. That's what I mean, it's such a commitment, it's such a foreign feel once you start?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, the first thing we did was bend me over more from the waist. Shoulders more over away from -- out in front of my hips kind of. That's really all he had me do, keep my right shoulder in front of my hip on the way down.

And then the next thing, two weeks later, three weeks later, he said, let's try to square it up a little bit.

Q. Stance?

PAUL AZINGER: Yes, because I was playing from a very open position which is inside of the ball. His whole deal is to try to get me on the back of the ball and get me on the inside of the ball.

Then the next last thing was taking my weight, from being way left, and cranking it more to the right which, to me, believe it or not, was the hardest thing. Now instead of making contact with the leading edge, I'm hitting with a bounce.

Everything was different. It was one of the hardest things for me to do. And I wasn't with him every day. I would hang with him for 3 hours and be gone for three weeks.

About the 5th lesson was the big one though. He said ideally I would get flatter. And that did take me about three weeks. No, it didn't, it took me actually about 3 hours to get flatter. But to hit the ball, it took me a while.

So I don't know, I just think -- he kept saying you don't have to believe me, if your golf ball is not flying right, just believe your golf ball. No BSing on the golf ball. If the ball is not flying right, then I'm giving you bad information.

Q. With is the last time that you hit 17 straight greens?

PAUL AZINGER: On a course like this, never. They are small. I mean lucky to do it really. It's been a long time. My greens in regulations stats are pathetic. My driving accuracy has been bad. But I'm on the mend. I really think I am. The great thing is, my low back doesn't hurt anymore.

Everybody was saying, well, does your swing hurt your back, or does your back hurt your swing? I didn't really know the answer to that. I just assumed maybe my back hurt my swing. But the reality was that my swing was killing my back. I was crashing down like this and it was just awful.

Q. How did the new swing respond in contention?

PAUL AZINGER: Not terrible, not terrible. But it could be more free. But that's a state of mind probably more than anything. I hit some good shots when I had to last weekend and down the stretch was okay. I hit 3 of the last 4 fairways. My short game was so good last week. I just went like a bulldog.

Q. Your putting has been okay on and off?

PAUL AZINGER: I had about a 3 week stretch where I putted bad, but I would say. I think I'm leading the TOUR in putting, or Top-5 or something. So my putting was exceptional on the West Coast, and then got kind of bad, and now it's really good.

Q. The progression of your swing changes, do you expect progression of finishes in tournaments?

PAUL AZINGER: You know, all I really want to do is just get looser and more free, more comfortable. That's really all I'm looking for and let the result take care of itself.

Q. 66 makes you more comfortable, right?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, yes, but then you tee off tomorrow with a different feeling because you shot 66 the day before, so the goal then is can you be looser and more free in that situation.

And then if you play good again, you know, it's just what you are looking for. Eventually you can get comfortable enough.

I have been in spots where I feel great every day. You just go. You don't even think about the fact that you have a chance to win a U.S. Open, or a PGA. You are just doing it. You are playing, that's the result you are getting. But it's been a long, long time, you know.

Q. When was the last time that you actually had that great feeling?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, Hawaii.

Q. So 4 and a half years?

PAUL AZINGER: Pretty much. I haven't lead or anything. I probably haven't had maybe two or three or four, five, legitimate chances to win going in Sunday, but being behind all the time. But I don't know. I can't remember if I made the cut here the one time I played.

Q. You only been here once?

PAUL AZINGER: Yes.

Q. You came and you knew that you didn't like the golf course?

PAUL AZINGER: I knew it didn't suit me. Someone told me yesterday I finished in the Top-20. I knew it didn't suit me.

Q. So the logical question is you are here because you played well last week, or

--

PAUL AZINGER: Well, my caddy is from Louisiana, from Lafayette.

Q. You are doing him a favor?

PAUL AZINGER: No, I wanted to kind of come this year anyway.

Q. What's your caddy's name?

PAUL AZINGER: Ted Scott.

Q. It didn't suit you because of the small greens?

PAUL AZINGER: Well, small, hard greens, real narrow. The green is as big as this room.

Q. Well, the portion where the pin is even smaller than that, but a lot of these angles?

PAUL AZINGER: If you look at David Toms or Steve Flesch, I don't even know the list of winners here, they all sky the ball. My natural flight isn't a sky ball.

Q. Do you have a favorite Nicklaus course?
PAUL AZINGER: Muirfield village.

Q. Best of all of them.