

PRE-TOURNAMENT INTERVIEW: FRED COUPLES
May 4, 2017

THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome Fred Couples, who is making his first appearance here in three years but, Fred, start us off. How special it is for you having your ties to Houston to come back and play here? You played at the Shell a number of years ago, as well as here at the Insperity Invitational.

FRED COUPLES: I didn't know I skipped it two years in a row, I thought -- but I don't know a lot of things. I didn't know a couple of answers for the guys I was playing with today, but it is exciting to be here.

Everyone knows I went to school here and was roommates with Jim Nance and Blaine McCallister and John Horn, and I really like Houston. It was a great spot for me to go to school. Coach Williams was phenomenal, and that's really where I learned how to become a very good player. We used to play The Woodlands.

I don't particularly think this was built my first year or two, and we used to come and watch the Houston Open, but then when I got on TOUR we played here several times, and Insperity having the event here I think it's one of our better courses on Tour, and it's in really, really good shape.

Q. You must be feeling really good. I think every time you think you're feeling good -- every day you wake up it's a new adventure, basically?

FRED COUPLES: Yeah. You know, I have been feeling -- it's been a good year. Healthwise I am going to go hit a bucket of balls. I have to loosen up and I'm going to go to the trailer, and they've been good, but I have a guy back home that went to Augusta, which was really a blessing. I wish he could come out more, but I feel good because I'm on the right track.

I'm not certainly doing a whole lot of different things, but I'm trying to be able to play when I want to play, not overdo it. If I play well here and, for instance, if there is a tournament next week and I want to go, I have to semi try and keep a schedule. I tried this every year I've come out; it just doesn't work.

Now I am taking one event at a time. Everyone wants to know -- you have to commit two weeks early, which is fine, I have no problem, I'm just not paying attention to that. It's tomorrow's round, and if I get through that then I worry about Saturday's and go. I've had no luck doing it any other way the last two or three years.

Q. Obviously there is no such strategy, because you've never been able to fix the problem. Is there anything mechanical that you still try to tweak or just try to forget about it and hope nothing goes wrong?

FRED COUPLES: No, that's a legitimate question. For me, I think the ideal situation is to try and feel loose. I wouldn't say that today was a great day, but in golf you play outdoors, it's going to be windy, it's a little cooler so I wore my rain jacket. I didn't bring a sweater because I looked at the temperature and it was 80s -- you should always throw a sweater in your bag. It just was a little cool.

I just kind of played. I had a good time with the amateurs. I didn't play very well. But tomorrow, you know, is different. You start paying attention. It's going to be warmer, but if it wasn't then you try and massage the ball around.

Couple of years ago unfortunately I stepped over someone in a plane, and I hopped and just landed wrong, and that was nine months of, you know, just a pinched nerve. The rest of it's almost the same. I play, then my back will go out, then I rest for a while. But the one time -- the beginning of last year was really not much fun. I could barely move. I can play with an mediocre back, I can still get around.

Q. You managed to avoid surgery.

FRED COUPLES: I have, yeah.

Q. Have people tried to convince you surgery is the way to go and you said no?

FRED COUPLES: No, I don't think anyone has really -- you know, I've seen three or four guys -- but it's 20-something years. Part of it is I'm fairly agile and I can move around. It's just that I have some major problems that really won't go away. So it's the one thing surgery won't do anything for. The other thing, eventually when I'm done they can go in and clean it out where the nerve will have a little more space so I can possibly not have as many problems, but at the same time I've been told that I won't feel the same. My swing may not feel the same, so -- I play by all feel. I've told doctors this and that and I don't think anyone when I've walked away has said the guy is making a big mistake by not having surgery.

Q. We're talking like you're a cripple, but you're leading this Tour in scoring. You finished in the top-15 in all but one tournament out of your last 15 or 16. I know you didn't play last year, but --

FRED COUPLES: Right.

Q. So golf is pretty good.

FRED COUPLES: Well, no -- yeah, and so one of the things -- you know, I really enjoy this Tour and I want to play well. So I don't want anyone to follow me around and say well -- I push myself to the limit since really I was 45. It's been close to a nightmare. When I was 35 I kinda would laugh it off and get away from golf for a while but. I was strong enough that I could go pound the ball.

I think I've learned to play even a little more now than I did -- from 45 to 50 I played okay, I won the Houston Open when I was 43, but I didn't have that many chances winning after that, but I kept my card and I enjoyed it, but it's not much of an enjoyment when you don't feel well. So I think out here the courses suit my game, which is the only game I should worry about, not Langer's or Corey Pavin or Tom Lehman's, so I'm hitting just enough of the right clubs that I can be consistent.

So I feel like mentally, because I want to play well, it's almost more of a competitive thing with me. I wasn't that competitive when I was 35. I just did it all by playing however well I played. But now it's almost like I would say screw it, I'm going to play, and I'm going to play better or I'm going home. That doesn't make me a better player; it's just my mental part. I feel like I don't want to just walk around and play.

When I was 45 I just couldn't beat these guys. It was impossible. I could play okay. Out here I feel like I can play better. I have a shot at beating them. There's a little confidence to that.

But at no given time when I go play against Kevin Sutherland when I won at whatever tournament it was, the Chubb, or I lost to Langer in Hawaii do I think I'm better than them. It's all about me. So when I go play -- I wish I'd had this attitude when I was 35. I may have been better, I may have been worse, but for now I'm 57, 58, I don't have the body to keep doing this, but while I'm doing it, I don't want to come out and play poor golf.

Q. And you would rather be here and taking chances with your back than not playing. You love the game too much.

FRED COUPLES: Yeah, and I've said this. I love the pairings. The pairings make life so much fun out here, because they're with guys I've played with since I was 24 years old. We're all the same.

So for me that's the enjoyment of it all. And playing and trying to, you know, play the 18th hole at the crosswind, the 17th, this is a good little golf course. If we played in winds like this tomorrow I don't think anyone would shoot in the 60s but that's how tricky and tough this course it.

I think out here it's like the regular TOUR, we're just older, but the consistency -- right now, so far this year I've been very consistent. It could all change very quickly, but for me -- and if you look at -- I don't even look at Bernard Langer because it's freakish. He's No. 1 in every category for like seven straight years. I happen to be up there, and I'll fall, because I don't play that much, but right now I've played as many tournaments as I've needed to to stay up on the list and close to Langer in scoring and all that. But there is a nice little run coming with some Majors coming up. I have to pace myself. I just can't say I can go play -- there's five out of six weeks in a row, something like that. That's impossible.

Q. You never play back-to-back?

FRED COUPLES: If it's really warm I'm okay with that. I did it in Florida. But, again, I don't have to play until the next Thursday. Whereas, you get These majors, where you're playing four rounds and a Pro-Am and they're back-to-back and it becomes harder. But if there was a tournament next week and I finished Sunday, and the next tournament was wherever, San Antonio, Florida, I'm not going to do anything Monday Tuesday or Wednesday. Then I will play the Pro-Am on Thursday, I might practice a little Wednesday. So it gives you leeway to relax.

Q. With what you've gone through with your back can you relate to Tiger? What do you expect from him?

FRED COUPLES: I don't know how to relate except when you physically talk to someone and, you know, they understand. Like Tiger said, I understand when I see you and say it would be hard to just walk and have your heels hit the ground. It's like someone is tapping you all day long and by 4:00 you're miserable. You want to really hit someone.

It's just part of having your back ache all day long. So I can't experience what he has because I don't know what he has. He's got a bad back, so do I. But he's had surgeries to try and help. But we actually talk about everything that would be feel for golf. I don't know -- people ask what's wrong with your back? I personally don't know.

I don't know L4 from L1 or L5 from whatever it is, and I don't want to know until I -- I go take MRIs and everyone -- I've never really looked, I don't care. What am I going to tell a doctor? Am I going to look at a MRI and say, "Yeah, I understand that."

I just sit in a room and they tell me it will take time. Tiger is having surgeries, but he's getting the best help possible. His back might be ten times worse or it might be just horrible in one spot. I've never asked him. But we talk about do your kids ever run across the room and jump and yeah they did that once, and all kids jump into their dad's arms but they just know.

I will say what about after you hit balls? Well, I hit for 30 minutes and then I take a break, and then I go hit for another 30 minutes. And I say, I get it I do the same thing. A guy like Tiger wants to hit balls for two or three hours, because that's what he's always done, or even longer. I've never done that, so it's easy for me. Like I'm done here, I might go hit for 25 minutes, and I'm gone, and I think I've kinda done a good day's work, but those guys, they want to practice all day. So they have to feel a little better. But I don't. I've never really asked him.

Q. The thing that knocked you off the Tour all last year you said it started with stepping over somebody on the plane.

FRED COUPLES: Right

Q. It's just one of those things.

FRED COUPLES: Yeah.

Q. Next thing you knew, ouch!

FRED COUPLES: Yeah. First time I climbed over my leg actually -- he was a young kid, and he didn't move --

Q. Did he know who you were?

FRED COUPLES: I don't know. But the second time he didn't move either, so I didn't want to kick him, so I kinda hopped over and I got off the plane and didn't feel well and two days later I couldn't put my left leg down. But it could happen -- it could have happened somewhere else, too.

Q. (No microphone.) That's how quickly it can go bad.

FRED COUPLES: That was no fun. The back part, I didn't know. It started here and went -- leg pain, people say sciatica, I've never had that, I don't know what that feels like. But this going from here to my back, holy -- I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Q. Fred, I think you played in the first Players Championship at Sawgrass in '82. Do you remember your recollection of that week playing on the new course?

FRED COUPLES: Was it '82?

Q. Yeah.

FRED COUPLES: Okay. It was so unbelievably intimidating that I don't think I played very well. I might not have played very well in '83, either, I don't really know, but in '84 I happened to win. But in '82, it was just every shot. Like you go play here and you kinda know on the first hole if you pull a little bit you're better than pushing it. There every shot had to be hit really, really precise. So if you didn't, a lot of water, a lot of waist bunkers, a lot of difficult shots. So the more courses we played like that -- there was PGA West, and I lived in Palm Springs, and I played PGA West, the stadium course, and I always thought that was the biggest bear in the world, but once you play a few of these they don't seem that bad. So I have not played -- I don't know, when I was 49 I guess I played but I saw some changes they made. It looks incredible. But, again, I played March. So the weather was crappy, it could be rainy and cold all day long. Now they have it where the weather can make the greens firm and fast, and it's a pretty difficult place.

But, you know, I love it. I've won it twice but even because of that I still love watching it, because anything can happen. It's an amazing course. What Pete Dye has done is built a golf course that they keep tweaking a little bit but they have to. Some of those holes have become really hard from what I've seen on TV. I think they have changed 6, 7, 8 a little bit, and 12.

Q. How much do people bring up the hole in one for par?

FRED COUPLES: Every now and then, if someone makes a hole in one on the Tour and someone sees it, I have to explain it, a lot of people think it was a hole in one, but around this time I have friends that bring it up. But I was shooting -- I think it was more I was really mad that I hit it in the water. I think I holed it, and parred 18 for 78. Then I ended up finishing third or fourth, and I had a great last day and that's when Duval won, I believe, and shot -- very few people shot under par, if any, and I finished way ahead.

That was for -- if I knocked it on the green and 2-putted, I would have had 80, or -- I don't know what I would have done on the last hole but 78 for that. By the end of the week that was a good hole in par.

Q. Given where you live and the Astros have moved down there and Houston ties, did you spend anytime around them?

FRED COUPLES: No. You mean when I was at school and stuff or when?

Q. Obviously you lived in Houston when you were in college I guess you went to a few baseball games but now in Florida there is no real connection?

FRED COUPLES: No.

Q. And your friendship with Jim, I'm sure you have had some of Jim's wine?

FRED COUPLES: Oh, yeah, The Calling is very good. I'm going to try and see him when he's off here in the near future. He's up in Carmel, not far from where I live, but I still -- when I wake up I check the Mariners and the second team I always look at is Houston. It's very weird. I don't know why, there is just something in the blood by going to school here, and I'm a sport nut. I don't know many players on the team it's just my eyes go to -- you pummelled us early in the year. I think Houston beat Seattle every time they played.

Q. (No microphone.)

FRED COUPLES: Yeah, so -- but, again, it will be exciting to watch. I'm not going, a couple of guys are going to watch the Rockets play tomorrow. Houston is a good sport town. It was when we were in school. The Oilers was fun to watch.

Q. (No microphone.)

FRED COUPLES: Yep.

Q. You were talking about winning the '84 Players. You beat Lee Trevino. He's a guy you idolized. He's here this week as part of the "Greats of Golf" with Jack and Gary, some of those guys. What does it mean to have those guys around and can you tell a good story about maybe one of the guys?

FRED COUPLES: I think it's great. We were just at The Legends, the par 3 event where a lot of guys were there. The weather was poor so we didn't get to see many of them, but I did get to see Lee, and I certainly saw Jack and I played a practice round with Gary at Augusta. It was a blast. My teacher, Paul, there and for 18 holes, Gary, I think I told a story every hole. But I enjoy that. I don't know if other younger players do but for us, to be around Lee Trevino, who is, I think, a legend, and Jack Nicklaus is one of the greatest guys to be around, but Trevino, they're different. Jack Nicklaus, greatest player to ever play, and Lee Trevino if you look at their backgrounds and how they are -- I learned more from Lee Trevino because of the way he played, because he didn't hit it very far and Jack Nicklaus did. I just liked the way Trevino spun the ball around.

When we see them here -- I saw Don January this morning in the cart. Amazing just to see these guys, I love that. I wish we had it a few more times around the year. I know they will have bigger galleries than we will when they're out playing. We're all okay with that. But to have them around is very, very neat.