A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSIONAL GOLFER ANTHONY KIM

Rodrigo Bettini 00:02

I love that. This is a documentary that's forthcoming. We're not sure exactly which platform yet, but should definitely check it out. So, Anthony, welcome.

Anthony Kim 00:12

Thank you.

Rodrigo Bettini 00:12

So happy for you to be here. So, I want to start at the very beginning, Anthony. Take us back. How did you discover golf? At what age did you fall in love with the game, and at what point did you realize that you could become one of the best in the world?

Anthony Kim 00:32

Well, coming from an immigrant family, my parents obviously had high expectations. They came over here to the US for a reason, and they had high expectations of me. So, because of that, I think they knew that school wasn't going to be a viable option because I didn't care too much for it, and I liked just playing sports. But they realized that I had some talent in golf, and so at two and a half, they put a golf club in my hand and I started golfing. I didn't realize till probably 15 or 16 that I could do this for a living and not have to go to class. So, I really focused on being the best player I could be, put in as much time as I could. I didn't know that I ever loved the game of golf, but now as I'm sober, 41 years old, I realize all the life lessons it's taught me, and so for that, I'll always be indebted to the game.

Rodrigo Bettini 01:40

That's fascinating. You talk about sacrifice and what it takes to be a top performer. We're in a room that's filled with top performers in their industry, so folks that are not strangers to sacrifice and dedication. What sacrifices did you and your family make for you to get there, and how did you handle the pressure that came with those expectations?

Anthony Kim 02:08

I think seeing the sacrifice my mom made, no vacations, no birthdays, no days off. And so, watching my mom struggle, not speaking the language, and seeing that the hard work she was putting in was for my future, made me more focused on what I wanted to do. I wanted to pay her back in some sort of way with effort. And so to be able to have paid her back that

way means a lot to me. And even though I may have fallen off the train tracks a little bit, now I'm paying her back again for all the hard work she's put in.

Rodrigo Bettini 03:01

And being there for you. Let's talk about success and the price of being great. You reached number six in the world before you turned 25. When you look back, was there anything about that level of success that you weren't prepared for?

Anthony Kim 03:23

I wasn't ready for any of the success because three months before I made my first check on the PGA Tour, I was living on a futon in Northern Michigan in my golf coach's basement. So, I think I had $50 in my account at that time. And then after that, once I started making a little bit of money, all the access that I got to different things wasn't just the money, it was everyone saying yes, and partly my fault for keeping a lot of people that just told me I was the smartest in the room and everything I said was right. But the access that it gave me led me to believe that I was a smart guy. And so I think that, in addition to other things, including addiction, depression, and mental illness, led me to a dark path.

Rodrigo Bettini 04:25

Let's get into that a little bit because you stepped away from golf for more than 12 years. What do you understand about that chapter of your life today that you couldn't see at that time?

Anthony Kim 04:43

I understand so much. I really—since I was a little kid, watching my mom struggle and some of the issues that we had going on in the house, I really thought suicide was an option for me. And every day I used to pray that I wouldn't wake up in the morning. But once I had my daughter, now my thing is that I pray that I get one more day. But obviously, going through some of those struggles, I realized that I was taking life for granted. I've got a lot of great people that support me in my life. I've got a lot to be grateful for, but I definitely forgot what was important in life, the relationships that I've built. But I'm at the stage in my life where I can appreciate those things with my sobriety.

Rodrigo Bettini 05:43

Sure. What would you say was missing? A set of guardrails? A stronger parental influence? A coaching voice? Something to help you "stay in line," quote unquote? Or were you resistant against that? Did you have it, and were you resistant against it?

Anthony Kim 06:06

Like I said, I think I had some good people around, but if they told me no, I didn't want to hear it, so I kicked them out of my circle. And the bad people, I kept in it, and those were the people that were taking from me. Those were the people that were taking advantage of me in my lowest moments. So, having the clarity now to realize if somebody tells me I'm doing something wrong and I trust them, to listen to them and at least look at it from their perspective.

Rodrigo Bettini 06:42

Sure. If you were coaching a young player today with a similar disposition, a younger Anthony Kim, how would you approach that?

Anthony Kim 06:53

I think golf would be secondary. I think the most important thing is to have a good foundation, some stability in your life that you can go back to when the golf isn't good. Because I put a lot of pressure on myself to play well to retire my mom. And once I did that, I didn't really have any more goals, but to set small goals. And during rehab, I found out that what they told us was, "You're not going to get through sobriety overnight. It's going to be every day for the rest of your life that you

have to fight." So, I came up with, "I'm just going to try to do 1 percent better every day." And that's led into my golf game, and obviously, I've started to see some of the results.

Rodrigo Bettini 07:43

I love that. Let's talk about that a little bit, the 1 percent better philosophy, because it's not just applicable in your athletic career, in your life. You approach this as a dad, as a husband, as a friend. Tell us a little bit about where the 1 percent came from and how you keep yourself in check and implementing it every day.

Anthony Kim 08:05

One of the best pieces of advice that I've gotten from one of the friends that helped me get sober is that before my feet touch the ground in the morning, I pray, and I ask God to keep the demons away. And so I know that this is going to be something that I struggle with for the rest of my life, and it's been working in my golf. It's been working as a husband, as a dad, which is the most important thing to me. Golf is very important in my life right now, and it's one of my priorities, but being there for my family and being able to be present is the most important thing.

Rodrigo Bettini 08:47

Sure. Definitely. So, as we're aware, you're in the midst of this amazing comeback, and while golf has changed, you're coming back in your 40s after years away. We've talked about the game of golf getting younger, kids being more athletic, stronger. How are you training and preparing differently today—both physically and mentally—than you did back then?

Anthony Kim 09:20

I'm definitely practicing with more intent. I have a goal in the morning where I write in this journal, and I try to set small goals, whether it's to putt for six hours that day, whether it's driving the ball, whether it's playing 36 holes in a day. But it's to set small goals and try to accomplish that. That's the 1 percent better. Even if I don't get better that day, even if I have a bad day, it's more about the mindset of accomplishing your goal. So, I'm not worried about the results right now. I think in a few years that I will be as good as I've ever been.

Rodrigo Bettini 10:03

And setting incremental, achievable goals, whether, as you said, you achieve it or not, but rather than this outlandish, "I'm going to win 50 tournaments," it's, "I'm just going to get a little bit better within the environment that I can control."

Anthony Kim 10:22

Yeah. The first year I came back to LIV, I hadn't had much practice. I had just left rehab, and I was not sure if I wanted to play golf, let alone professionally. My wife wanted to play. It took her 12 years for me to actually teach her and give her a lesson because I asked her, I said, "Why would you want to pay to play a game where you want to tear your hair out every day?" But she wanted to do it, and that's a huge reason why I'm playing this game now.

Rodrigo Bettini 10:56

Maybe it's her brilliant strategy and her way of getting you back in the game. Right?

Anthony Kim 11:02

She's much smarter than me, so that's probably it.

Rodrigo Bettini 11:05

Yeah, I can relate. Do you handle defeat differently now and victories, and how has maturity, sobriety, and being a dad helped you in both of those scenarios?

Anthony Kim 11:25

I'm still probably a sore loser in my heart, but outwardly, I understand that this is a game that I play for a living. I'm blessed to do so. But I remember my first tournament was in Riyadh, and when I got done, I finished last by, I think, 33 strokes in three days. And when I got done with each round, I'd get to go home and see my daughter and have ice cream with her. And before, I would just go out to the bar and go start drinking. But just getting to go swim with her, go have ice cream with her, made me realize this is just a small part of my life. Even though I'm putting everything I can into it. The biggest part for me is to be part of this family and be present.

Rodrigo Bettini 12:21

Yeah, for sure. Golf being so technical and so mental and competitive, as you build your comeback, what are you working hardest to improve, and how high do you believe that you can climb again?

Anthony Kim 12:37

Well, when I first came back, I needed to improve on everything because I was flat-out terrible. I knew I was going to be terrible, not just with the rust from not playing the game for so long, but tournament rust because as you guys know, the ones that play golf, just playing with your friends is different than playing in your club championship. So, I needed to knock that rust off, but right now it's all mental for me. I'm making better decisions than I was two years ago on the golf course, not being as aggressive. Maybe at my age, I'm getting scared more, so I'm hitting to wider targets, but I'm doing different things mentally than I did before where I really went for everything and was super aggressive.

Rodrigo Bettini 13:30

Yeah. There was this moment after you won in Adelaide and a very raw press conference, and you told people who were struggling, "Don't f*****g quit." A lot of the founders in the room, a lot of the folks that have run into incredible difficulties, what do those three words mean to you beyond the obvious, and is this something you build into your 1 percent better every day strategy?

Anthony Kim 14:08

1,000 percent. I noticed that the F word there got cut off in the video.

Rodrigo Bettini 14:14

Okay.

Anthony Kim 14:14

No, you're good. But that's what I meant, and that was from the heart. As I get older, as I see one more birthday for my daughter coming up, for me, I want to set a good example because who I was in my past life before sobriety was not a good example. I wish I was a better son. I wish I was a better friend. I wish I worked harder. I wish all those things, but I know now there's nothing I could do about the past, but try to set a good example for my daughter. And, seeing as you go through difficult things in your life, not just in golf, but obviously for you guys in business, in your respective fields, you're going to come across challenges where you want to quit. And believe me, there were times where I was struggling on LIV, and I knew I was the laughingstock of golf, not just on the LIV league, but throughout all the people that watch golf. And I read all the comments, which inspired me to try harder, to practice harder, to stay out there one more hour, and that's where that quote came from.

Rodrigo Bettini 15:32

See, you do that and that's insane to me. That's something that Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, David Goggins, these types of characters do. Reading and thriving on the bad comments. Is there no part of you that thinks, "I should just post and ghost and not even get into these deep rabbit holes of negativity?"

Anthony Kim 15:54

My therapist thinks so. And so does my wife. When we sit on opposite sides of the couch and she sees me smiling at my phone, she knows I'm reading something terrible about myself. But I keep those receipts because as much as I am trying to prove myself right, I think that there's still a big part of me that likes proving people wrong. So, even though I am doing it for my family, it's nice to shut up—to make those people shut their mouths.

Rodrigo Bettini 16:31

Yeah. Wherever you draw motivation from, right? It boils down to something you said after Adelaide, too, which is that nobody else has to believe in you but you, regardless of all the noise and everything else. How do you maintain that belief at the most difficult times and when nobody else around you shares that?

Anthony Kim 16:56

I think from my childhood. I watched my mom get ridiculed, for not speaking the language. I watched a lot of terrible things happen to her, and no matter what, her focus was to give her son an opportunity to succeed in his life. It didn't matter the cost, and no matter all the struggles she went through, it was nothing to her. And to see that, and reflecting on that is the reason that I feel like I stay focused on my goals. And even though my goals are pretty high right now, I feel I'll be able to achieve them.

Rodrigo Bettini 17:37

That's amazing. We talk about the influence of our parents. I come from immigrant parents as well, and it is so different from the way we're raising our girls. We're both girl dads. Has becoming a father changed how you think about winning, losing, competing, and what do you want your daughter, Bella, to learn from watching you?

Anthony Kim 18:02

Yeah, that's kind of a loaded question because I want my daughter to win at everything. She just started soccer, and when they're doing the sprints, a part of me, when she lets up at the last second, wants to tell her to keep going, and beat them by 15 feet, not 10 feet, because she is the fastest on that team. But, yeah, there's such a fine line between that being the only thing you think about, winning, and learning that there's a time and place to put things. I want her to be super competitive, she already is, but I also don't want her to lose her identity outside of whatever she's doing.

Rodrigo Bettini 18:53

Sure. And more broadly, you've said you want to use your platform to help people, help people that have struggled, and to be there and be a presence. What do you seek to accomplish now, not just in golf, but beyond? What do you see for after?

Anthony Kim 19:17

Yeah, I mean, I'm 41 years old now. Obviously, the game is getting a lot younger. I think I have about four or five good years of golf in me. But I made myself a promise in rehab, or in the emergency room, when I was there for six days, and the doctors were telling me that unless I did this transfusion, that I would only have a couple weeks to live. And after having Bella, that lit a fire under me to get motivated again, to be able to be there for my daughter. So, I made myself a promise that if I got through it, that I would help other people. I prayed to God to get me through it and be present for my daughter. And so the goal is to send the message. I think the world needs it right now. The world's in a weird space, and I think we need more people talking about how to help other people. And hopefully, with my growing platform, I can speak to the people that need it and struggle silently.

Rodrigo Bettini 20:28

That's fascinating. What is next for Anthony Kim? Tell us a little bit about next year. I know you're done playing for this year, but what does next year look like?

Anthony Kim 21:39

I'm not sure exactly what next year looks like. I'll be playing golf somewhere. I'm not sure where. But obviously, I play on LIV right now, and would love to continue to play. So, depending on what happens in the future, we'll see.

Rodrigo Bettini 20:59

And there's a tournament here in Mexico, right?

Anthony Kim 21:01

There is, yeah. The ball goes so far out here. I've never played well, but hopefully next year I'll be able to play better.

Rodrigo Bettini 21:08

You can make those adjustments. Well, Anthony, we wish you the absolute very best. We will all support you and wish you the best of luck in golf, in life, and in accomplishing all the amazing things you want to accomplish. Thank you so much.

Anthony Kim 21:25

Thank you.

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