

26THECUT #2 - AMEX - MASTER SCRIPT

A1 - AMEX LOOKAHEAD

ANNC: Bob Hope would be so proud of what the American Express has become. Dreamed of this event becoming a staple in the sport at the highest level. The second full field event of the PGA TOUR season, and the best golfers on the planet here in the California desert.

A2 - CUT TITLES

A3 - SEPP STRAKA FEATURE

ANNC: Sepp Straka is back in the winner's circle on the PGA tour for the third time in his career.

SEPP STRAKA: This, of course, kind of makes it easy because you just have to hit your shots. I mean, there's no safe play, especially as far as the greens are. You just have to execute. And I made it easy to focus on each shot. Very happy with the way I hit the ball today and just overall very happy with the week.

ANNC: You have watched him all day long. He has looked calm. He's looked collected. He's looked completely in charge.

ANNC: They all say it looked like one word, champion.

SEPP STRAKA: It's great to get a win early. It's awesome to get ahead of the curve. But that's a long year. So you just got to keep stacking good results and keep playing good golf.

ANNC: Sepp Straka has taken advantage of his game, his skill, his work ethic, his mind. It is all working right now.

SEPP STRAKA: Swing coach, short game coach, physios, trainers they all just spend their lives trying to help me out. And they're always trying to improve different aspects of my game. They've got a process that they believe in, that I believe in, and that's worked really well here.

LUDVIG ABERG: He is so consistent. He plays the same ball fly, you know, 98% of the time when he plays golf. There is a lot of value to that. He keeps improving. And when he has a good putting week he's definitely going to be up in the leaderboards.

ANNC: Sepp Straka, right now looks like he's on cruise control.

SEPP STRAKA: I feel like a few more people know my name. It's exciting and hopefully I can keep it going.

A4 - FEC STANDINGS

HAVING HIS BEST YEAR ON TOUR DURING THE 2025 SEASON, CHRIS GOTTERUP GOT OFF TO A HOT START IN THE NEW YEAR BY WINNING THE SEASON OPENER IN HAWAII ... PLAYING HIS FINAL 12 HOLES IN FIVE UNDER PAR.

(need to wipe)

A5 - SONY WINNER

ANNC: And the first event in 2026 goes to Gotterup, a winner again on the PGA tour for the third consecutive season.

CHRIS GOTTERUP: Having a win or two under your belt always helps coming down the stretch, knowing that you've done it and that you're able to execute under pressure. And I felt like I did a great job with that.

B1 - BUD CAULEY PART 1

15 YEAR TOUR VETERAN, BUD CAULEY, TAKES US THROUGH HIS JOURNEY TO RECOVERY AFTER HIS COMEBACK SEASON IN 2025.

BUD CAULEY: The worst thing that's ever happened to me led to the best thing that's ever happened. Getting married and starting a family. It changed my perspective on life a lot. I spent all day just thinking about them. When I was a little kid, one day my dad said he was out on a run and that he felt like quitting. He said what kept me going was that what was inside of him was inside of me, and he didn't want me to quit. When something got hard. That's something I thought a lot about when I was trying to get healthy. So I wrote 'Don't Stop Running'. He didn't quit. So that means that quitting isn't in me. And even now, with Cooper and Miles. When things get hard, you don't quit. We keep running.

BUD CAULEY: The last seven years have been a lot of change. Getting injured, you know, the car accident and then getting married and starting a family and going through everything with my recovery and then playing again. It just feels like every year has been very different.

BUD CAULEY NAT: Want to hit them really fast? All right, go for it. Good shot. You just walked right. Good job. Good job buddy.

BUD CAULEY: We come out quite a bit. You know, I've tried to not really ask him about coming out. I kind of try to wait until he asks. And it's at least, you know, 2 or 3 days a week where he will ask to come out. And as you can see, he's been practicing, so he's getting pretty good at it.

BUD CAULEY: I mean, golf's something that I love. I've played since I was a little kid and it has been such a big part of my life. I mean, that's taken away. You kind of get lost a little bit and try to figure out how I could, you know, get back.

KRISTI CAULEY: Life has changed so much, but I think it's given him, you know, perspective on golf in general. And not that it's not important, but I think he's very much aware that, you know, it's not everything anymore.

ANNC: A lot of talk about this young man, right from college to the PGA tour out of the University of Alabama and All-American there, Justin Leonard, Tiger and Ryan Moore. He's going to join that list now as the only player since 1980 to go from college to the PGA tour in the same year.

JUSTIN THOMAS: He's so good and so talented, and he's got one of those games that can just play out here for so long. It's probably been the biggest hurdle that it's been a career full of injuries.

BUD CAULEY: It's like everything's fine one moment and then your whole world's turned upside down the next.

ANNC: Bud was competing here in the tournament. Missed the cut. And he was involved in a serious car accident on Friday night.

BUD CAULEY: It was really a freak thing. I was a passenger in the car. I got knocked out and woke up on the ground already outside of the car. And I remember kind of just looking up and seeing the car, you know, and the car that I was just in and, you know, a million pieces and, you know, just the amount of pain that I was in. You know, my life could have been over before I even realized that it happened, which is kind of a scary thing to think about and really makes life seem very, you know, very fragile.

BUD CAULEY: I couldn't remember where I was, what state I was in. I had a broken leg, collapsed lung, six broken ribs and a concussion. So they put him in the ambulance. We go back. And that's when I learned that I had fluid getting into my lungs. They had fixed that, like, right there. So I had surgery the day after the accident. It was really hard to wrap my mind around, but my weeks or months or even years were going to look like after that.

BUD CAULEY: Krista and I met right after the car accident in 2018. You know, we met through a mutual friend. And had it not been for that car accident, I would have been out on the road playing golf. And, you know, it's like, the worst thing that's sort of ever happened to me, lead to, like, you know, the best thing that's ever happened. So just funny how that, you know, that stuff kind of works out.

BUD CAULEY: We got married in October of 21. We have two sons, Cooper. And then our youngest, Miles, was born January 30th of 2025.

KRISTI CAULEY: He's the best dad. He's super involved and super present. When he's here, he's totally here. And you know he's doing all the school runs and all the drop offs. It softens him up a little bit, too. And, you know, brings out his little playful side, which is great to see.

BUD CAULEY: We'll take a break, then we'll go to the golf course. You want to do that? Yeah. Okay. Oh, sure. Sure. The golf course? Yeah.

BUD CAULEY: Golf is just a great game to play. I always envisioned being able to share that with the kids that I would have. It seems unfathomable to me that golf could be such a big part of my life. And then they would grow up and I would be unable to actually go out and do it with them, only be able to talk about it.

BUD CAULEY: My chest and ribs and chest wall were all a mess, and trying to recover from the place that they had to put on my ribs to realign them. You know, I'd ask the doctor if I was ever going to be able to play golf again. And, you know, fortunately, a few months after that accident, I recovered well. And, you know, I was able to start hitting some balls.

ANNC: Good to see Bud Cauley back in action at that car accident back at The Memorial, hasn't played on the PGA tour event since June.

BUD CAULEY: I think it was about five months. I was able to play later that year on the fall and really everything was kind of going well. I felt okay, but like I had recovered and, you know, almost not that everything was behind me.

CATCH THE REST OF BUD CAULEY'S INCREDIBLE COMEBACK AFTER THE BREAK

C1 - REJOIN

C2 - BUD CAULEY PART 2

BUD CAULEY: I played my round Saturday, I forget I was, I think, you know, top 15 or something. And I went to hit balls after my round just to work on a couple things. And I'd been hitting balls for maybe 30 or 45 minutes and was almost finished. And in the middle of my swing, felt the sharp pain in my side that I had. I hadn't felt anything leading up to that point.

BUD CAULEY: I tried to go to the trailer afterwards and get some ice, see if I can make it feel a little bit better. I go out there the next day and it still hurts, but I'm able to kind of play through it and finish the round. You know, we were trying to figure out what could have possibly gone wrong and took a couple of weeks off, and then I tried to go to the next tournament and play and wasn't able to even get through nine holes. And that was the last time I really went to a golf course.

KRISTI CAULEY: It really was like overnight. It was just kind of taken away. And I think, you know, it's a hard pill to swallow if that's taken away at any point in time. But it was hard because

it wasn't even about his game. I think he was just really determined to not you know, let that be a final say.

BUD CAULEY: Even after the accident, the surgery had gone well. So I maybe was a little naive to the fact that things could really go wrong. It was the second surgery I had in my chest. The plan was to go in and remove the plates to hopefully alleviate the pain that I was feeling. And during the surgery, they weren't able to get the plates out.

BUD CAULEY: After I recovered from the surgery, I developed a stroma, which is basically just a pocket of fluid underneath my scar, and I was getting my scar leaking a lot. My incision had popped open and there was just a hole in the top of my incision. So, you know, just infections and bacteria getting in there was scary. So we had to go straight to the emergency room. If my infection couldn't get under control, they were going to have to remove my ribs in order to remove the plates to get the metal out, to get the infection under control. I mean, if they take your ribcage out, it's not great for golf. You know, that kind of started this three year process of doctors and treatments and needles and being injected with different things. And it was, you know, a tough time.

KRISTI CAULEY: I'm not sure if the lowest time for him was really the beginning or the end, because in three years, the beginning, you're almost like, oh, it'll be fine. Like you'll miss a couple events. So you kind of have this hope. And then after a while, the hope diminishes a little bit.

BUD CAULEY: My quality of life wasn't too great. Sleeping at night was sort of difficult enough. I didn't have too much optimism that hitting balls was going to go well.

KRISTI CAULEY: Everything we tried that didn't work was then us coming up with another solution of maybe what else could it be? Or what else could we try? And so like as many things as you checked off that list, it kind of became more daunting. Like what's going to happen when the list runs out?

BUD CAULEY: Golf is sort of the last thing on my mind, and I'm having these conversations with doctors. I felt like things were spiraling out of control

KRISTI CAULEY: It was a little bit scary.

BUD CAULEY: Oh, I couldn't have gotten through any of it without my wife, Kristi. You know, three years is a long time, and you, it was happening to me, but she was really going through it as much as I was. And, you know, she kind of helped me, you know, get through everything and she would always say what's next and that, that was really helpful.

KRISTI CAULEY: You know, he really handled it with, you know, Grace. And he never let that part interfere with being there for me or Cooper or any of that. And I think that that was, to me, the most impressive part of all of it.

BUD CAULEY: the final thing I did up at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, which was the hydro dissection, which finally kind of released some of those muscles on my chest wall and was able to start swinging and felt a lot better.

JASON BAILE: He's an extremely hard worker, but none of his success is surprising. And this is exactly where Bud's supposed to be. We're just a little late because of the accident, but now it's a matter of continuing to ascend.

BUD CAULEY: I take a lot of pride in my golf. You know, I work really hard at it and want to do as well as I can, but that does just put, you know, everything in a different perspective.

KRISTI CAULEY: I think he plays with that mindset. And now that you kind of got the opportunity to play again, I think that helps him actually perform better.

MEDIA OFFICIAL: We'd like to welcome Bud Cauley to the media center. Bud your first start on tour since the 2020 Fortinet Championship.

ANNC: It's been seven years since that devastating car accident that nearly ended the career of Bud Cauley. The fact that he is back at a PGA tour member again is nothing short of amazing.

BUD CAULEY: To be able to play well there this year was kind of surreal for me.

JUSTIN THOMAS: I had to do some really, really weird things for Bud to win today. I'm happy to have him out here and playing and seeing him all the time.

ANNC: Co leader with a birdie at 17.

BUD CAULEY: That's obviously a tournament that I've dreamed about playing in and having a chance to win. And then you know played fairly solid. And I think it's something that I can build on and hopefully get myself in that position again.

MEDIA: How does being and a near life altering experience change your perspective going forward?

BUD CAULEY: Well, you know, I thought I thought the car accident was life altering. And then we had a couple kids and that was really life altering. But, yeah, it does. It makes you appreciate things a lot more. You know, when I do have bad days, it's not the end of the world. Just come out and try again tomorrow.

BUD CAULEY: Going through hard times obviously can create that resolve. And, you know, and mental toughness. Just keep going. You never know how things can change. And never quitting is really what comes to mind the most.

D1 - TEE IT UP @ AMEX

LAST YEAR'S WINNER AT THE AMERICAN EXPRESS WAS SEPP STRAKA, WHO MAKES HIS 2026 DEBUT AS A REIGNING CHAMPION. STRAKA HAD TWO OF HIS CAREER FOUR TOUR WINS LAST YEAR, AND HE LOOKS TO BECOME JUST THE SECOND PLAYER TO GET BACK TO BACK WINS IN THE DESERT.

FELLOW GEORGIA BULLDOG RUSSELL HENLEY IS COMING OFF OF A T-19 FINISH AT THE SEASON OPENER IN HAWAII. HE HASN'T PLAYED LA QUINTA SINCE 2022, WHEN HE FINISHED T-14. THAT WAS HIS BEST FINISH IN SEVEN STARTS HERE.

AND LASTLY, WORLD NUMBER ONE SCOTTIE SCHEFFLER RETURNS TO THE DESERT FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2024, WHERE HE WILL KICK OFF HIS 2026 SEASON. HE FINISHED IN THE TOP 8 IN 15 STRAIGHT TOUR EVENTS WITH SIX WINS. HIS BEST FINISH TO BEGIN A YEAR WAS A THIRD PLACE FINISH AT THIS EVENT IN 2020.

D2 - TV TIMES

THE PGA TOUR IS HEADED TO THE CALIFORNIA DESERT WHERE INCOMING ROOKIES AND RETURNING VETS LOOK FOR EARLY SEASON FEDEX CUP POINTS

D3 - AUSTIN SMOTHERMAN FEATURE

AFTER LOSING HIS TOUR CARD IN 2024, AUSTIN SMOTHERMAN HAD TO PROVE HIMSELF ONCE AGAIN ON THE KORN FERRY TOUR

AUSTIN SMOTHERMAN: The unknowns of the golf life I think Korn Ferry season in the middle of a couple of years on the PGA tour is okay. We can handle those kind of adversities.

IN 2021, AUSTIN SMOTHERMAN EARNED THE FINAL TOUR CARD

ANNC: Smotherman finished 25th in the regular season, and a couple of years ago in Omaha, he was on that bubble bouncing around.

ONE OF THE TOP PLAYERS ON THE KORN FERRY TOUR IN 2025, TWO WINS PAVED THE WAY FOR SMOTHERAN'S RETURN TO THE PGA TOUR

ANNC: A winner again on the Korn Ferry Tour!

THE TOUR BOUND NEWS CAME EARLIER IN THE SEASON AS A SURPRISE FROM SOMEONE SPECIAL

SMOTHERMAN'S GRANDPA: Hey, how you doing, mister?

AUSTIN SMOTHERMAN: What are you doing?

SMOTHERMAN'S GRANDPA: Well, I don't know. They dragged me into this.

ANNC: By the way, that's Austin's grandfather. Go ahead sir. Do you have some news for us?

SMOTHERMAN'S GRANDPA: You are going to have to go back to the tour!

AUSTIN SMOTHERMAN: Is that right?

SMOTHERMAN'S GRANDPA: You're going to get another card. You can use a little card.

AUSTIN SMOTHERMAN: I will, I love it. I love it. How about that? It's cool to hear from him. It's chills. And it's a lifelong memory. I'll never forget. He's been watching play golf since I was three years old. I want to be back on tour and be tour bound for me and my family. Getting back to the PGA tour. That was one of our biggest goals. We had the birth of our second daughter last June. I want my girls out there with me. I want my family with me. It's the best players in the world playing together every single week. Just go enjoy every shot we hit and see where they fall and keep smiling along the way.

SMOTHERMAN LOOKS FORWARD TO THE REST OF THE 2026 SEASON WHERE HE WILL MAKE HIS SECOND START OF THE YEAR IN THE AMERICAN EXPRESS IN PALM SPRINGS CALIFORNIA.