

AIG Women's Open

Saturday, 22 August, 2020

Sophia Popov

Press Conference



OLIVIA McMILLAN: Sophia, what a wonderful round for you here on Saturday at the AIG Women's Open. Tell us about that eagle the 4th.

SOPHIA POPOV: It was nice. You know, it was a great way to get into my round. I started off with three pars and missed a couple birdie opportunities on the first few holes that I thought were makeable, and so then I hit that driver off the deck. It was about -- I believe 258 or 259 and a little up hit. Just suited my eye. Good lie. I just said, all right, I'm just going to go for it and I hit it in the perfect spot and it just curled around and I was able to make that putt which was nice, because I felt like that made up for the opportunities that I had missed previously and got me going into my round and gave me a little bit of a confidence boost for the rest of the round.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Correct me if I'm wrong, but bogey-free today.

SOPHIA POPOV: Bogey-free today.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: That must be a huge confidence boost going into tomorrow's final round?.

SOPHIA POPOV: Definitely. There are a couple holes around the back 10, 11, 12, 13, that have tough tee shots and definitely are kind of get-through holes, where I'm just very happy that I was able to stay bogey-free and make some really good up-and-downs and some clutch putts for par, and obviously it was definitely more than I could have hoped for today, but I did make the key putts and shots when I had to, and I'm proud of them.

Q. You have always said that if you could just get out of your own way mentally, that you would win a lot. How have you been able to do that this week and what are some of the techniques that you're doing to be more mentally strong out on the golf course?

SOPHIA POPOV: I think patience is probably key for me. You're absolutely right, I think my golf game has always been there and the shot-making has been there but it's always been about coming up with it in the right moments and not being too hard on myself with bad shots that I hit. I

think sometimes, I just expect myself to play perfect golf and that's just not realistic, especially not out here.

I think for me it's just important to -- how I handle myself after I don't hit a great shot and I have to make up-and-down from par, and just know that I'm capable of doing it from anywhere around the green here, and so just keeping my head in it, and yeah, just my attitude. Honestly, I have plenty of mental games that I do on the golf course, and a lot of them the Justin clued staying quiet and no negative talk, because whether it's out loud or not -- out loud, you know, golfers definitely have a tendency to do that, and that's the biggest thing that I have to basically stop myself from doing.

Q. And the fact that you have won so many Cactus Tour events, winning breeds winning; does that give you a great deal of confidence coming in?

SOPHIA POPOV: It definitely does. I mean, you know, it was nice to get a breakthrough win earlier this year to know, okay, I have a win under my belt. It helps, but on a scale of things, also, I mean, realistically in my head, this is obviously a lot, lot bigger deal, and so I just have to be aware of that, and just be -- I guess, up front about it, and let myself know, okay, it's fine. You know, this is a big deal and whatever happens, happens, so that I can just stay calm and do my thing tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned staying calm. What are your plans for yesterday and tomorrow before the final round and what were your expectations coming into this week? And would you have imagined finding yourself in this position?

SOPHIA POPOV: So first of all, my plans won't change a lot tonight and tomorrow morning, just the same routine, have dinner and just relax in my room and try to get some good sleep tonight. Then the same tomorrow. You know, sleep in, take it easy and kind of do everything a little slower than I'm used to doing them.

I just kind of -- it's almost a little tough for me because in general, I'm kind of quick paced with everything, so I just take it easy, telling us, we're going to go to breakfast later, everything is a little later. The plans haven't changed the last couple days.



As far as seeing myself in this spot a week or two ago, definitely not. Although, my golf game I knew was in a good spot. I said, it's not -- I was joking about it last week. I said, well, you never know, maybe I can get myself in contention next week. Even though I was joking about it, I knew I'm capable of it. I think the expectation in my head has always been there. It's just whether I can make it happen, so it's really nice to see that I can.

Q. I confess I don't know that much about the man on the bag. Is your boyfriend a player?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yes, he is. He actually played for the University of Kentucky. Graduated this year in May. He played for the German national team for a long time. That's actually how we met. Had plans of turning pro but COVID kind of got in the way of that. He's definitely a good golfer himself.

Q. And at the end of last year, what was sort of your approach, your attitude, looking ahead to 2020 with your status and your game plan? Did you have to give yourself a pep talk at any point?

SOPHIA POPOV: Definitely. I've had, I don't know, maybe three or four years out on the LPGA, and then last year, I basically missed my LPGA status by a shot at Q Series. I got very down on myself. Obviously I'm turning 28 this year, and even though it feels to me like I just graduated last year, I didn't (laughing).

So in my heart, I feel young, but time does go by and I think I was kind of sad about that because I knew my game was better than the status that I had, and then when COVID hit, I think that was -- that really hit me hard, just because I knew, all right, I don't have one season of Symetra, I have two seasons of Symetra. That was a little rough.

But at the same time, those are things that you can't change. This is my life and I think this is how things are supposed to go, and with all the health issues that I battled my rookie year, and then the two or three years after that, I think this, to me, maybe this is the way it should have played out. Definitely had a little bit of a mental slump there during the winter, but I have awesome support from my family and friends and they all said, we know what you can be, and so I fed off of that.

Q. Getting into Marathon, that's now obviously a huge deal that landed you here, but did that shock you that you were in that field?

SOPHIA POPOV: I was definitely shocked. At the beginning, I didn't even realise that we were going as far

down as the Symetra fill, and so I didn't even know, and I had other players telling me, you know, did you sign up, because I see some other Symetra players there, and I knew all right I'm No. 1 pretty much on the priority list. So if anyone gets in, it should be me,.

And so I signed up and yeah, I got in, and I think a lot of that was due to COVID because I think a lot of players didn't want to come to the States, either from Europe or from Asia. So I obviously took advantage of that, and again, that was a bonus event for me, but yeah, I took advantage of it and used the opportunity to get here.

Q. You putted so well, it seemed, today, and there were some key putts that you holed for par, as well as the long putts for birdie. How important do you think those putts were in keeping the momentum today and what was your perspective on your putting?

SOPHIA POPOV: I think those were huge. On No. 9 and 10 and 11, really, I had par putts, kind of longer par putts, the longest one being on 11, and I think those 3-putts, to me, were absolute -- like they just kept my momentum up, and allowed for me I think to make that putt on 12 for birdie because I was just kind of riding that wave of good putts going in, and I saw them all go in the hole, so I think that helped me for 12 and going forward, too. But yeah, I think it's huge. Honestly, I was surprised how calm I stayed over those because I knew these are -- these are the key putts that I have to make during the round, and so I'm definitely very proud of those.

Q. Last night was very difficult conditions, but you managed to sort of grind out a score in tough conditions. How important do you think that was, as well in maybe giving you confidence for today?

SOPHIA POPOV: I think yesterday, honestly, was probably even the more important round for me because after the first round, I said, all right, this was just -- I just went out and I just played. Now I've got a little bit of expectation going into the next round I played really solid. Went over -- doesn't sound great to the people at home, but it was honestly, it felt like a 4- or 5-under par anywhere else just because the conditions were really brutal.

So I think yesterday was a key round for me to get through and then obviously now, it's just me and me versus pressure and shot-making in the right moments.

Q. Do you mind if we take it back a couple weeks to when you were caddying for Anne Van Dam, and if you can talk about what that experience was like and if there was anything from that experience that you took that's helping you at all?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, this is going to be a little bit of a shout-out to Anne, because Anne's my best friend. We've been hanging out a lot during the quarantine, too, because we have nowhere to go for like three months, and her being my best friend, we just kind of did a lot of stuff together, including obviously practising, but also other activities, and I think we got very close and I kind of fed off of her energy a lot, and I think that week when I caddied for her, it was a similar deal. It was very interesting to see the course being played from a different perspective; the way she hits it, obviously she's a bomber.

But you know, I did realise when I caddied for her, I said, you know, there are certain things about my game where I see similarities and course strategy-wise, I think that helped me a lot. Because the next week, going into the next week, I thought about the course as a little bit more from a caddie perspective. I said, what is the smart decision to make here. You know, I'm someone who tends to be very aggressive. I go at pins. But do you have to be? No, not really. You can give yourself a lot of chances just with safer shots going for the middle of the green, and so definitely that helped me a lot, and I think just in general, Anne's positive energy, I think she's been a big influence on me the last like four or five months. Just keeping my head in it and basically telling me that I'm capable of doing this, and she's just been probably one of my biggest like cheerleaders out there. It was nice.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Do you feel like there will be some nerves there tomorrow?

SOPHIA POPOV: Absolutely. There are going to be a lot of nerves there, and I would be lying if it wasn't that way, and also, I'd be very said if it wasn't that way. That's why we play the sport. We do this in order to be in a position like I'm going to be in tomorrow. Yeah, definitely, it's something I've never been in, so we are just going to have to see how it goes and take it one shot at a time and just try to do my thing.

Q. Just wanted to ask you how the German programme, the national team and the coaches, how are they helping you now, even, as a 28-year-old?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, they support a lot. I'm extremely lucky to have them in my corner. Just from the day of when I was 13 years old, they have supported me. They have a great programme going for the pros, as well. You know, if you haven't quite settled in or you're not quite as established as some of the other players, then they help you out so you can -- financially they support you in a way that you can make it through the season, and not just that. I mean, we have amazing coaches and physios and we

have training camps and it's just nice because my coach has been -- my national team coach has been my national team coach for 12 years or 13 years now. He knows me better than anyone else. It's really nice to have someone who I can trust with my game and my emotions and everything as much as him and I have the Federation to thank for that.

Q. Sorry, what's his name?

SOPHIA POPOV: Stephan Morales.

Q. And your boyfriend's name?

SOPHIA POPOV: Maximilian Mehles.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Thank you so much for your time this afternoon and best of luck in the final round of the AIG Women's Open.

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