

AIG Women's Open

Sunday, 23 August, 2020

Sophia Popov

Press Conference



OLIVIA McMILLAN: It is my great pleasure to welcome our 2020 AIG Women's Open Champion, Sophia Popov. Amazing from you all week, especially today. Tell us how you're feeling.

SOPHIA POPOV: Over the moon. I honestly don't even know how to describe it in words. I tried to do it earlier on in the awards ceremony, but I think no words will describe what I'm feeling. It's a mix of just overexcitement and emotions, just all kinds of emotions, and I honestly can't quite believe it yet. It hasn't sunk in.

Q. Has it hit you yet how your life has just changed?

SOPHIA POPOV: No, I don't think so. Earlier on, I was made aware that I got my LPGA card back, and honestly, that was like one of the biggest things that was on my mind the whole round was just, you know, getting my card back and being back where I feel like I belong.

So it honestly hasn't sunk in, and I don't even know what's coming after this, but I guess come at me.

Q. You say being back like you belong. Do you feel like you belong in the small group of major champions now that you're there?

SOPHIA POPOV: Now that I'm there, I would say I belong in it. Previous to this week, I honestly don't know, I think ability or capability-wise, I always believed yes, but it was all about getting it together during the right weeks, and for me honestly my biggest goal was to win an LPGA event, period.

For it to be a major right off the bat, it was obviously more than I could have hoped for but also something that I did know I was capable of.

Q. Could you talk about some of the struggles that you've alluded to health-wise and injury-wise during some of your other press conferences?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, it's honestly something I haven't really talked about a lot before, but my rookie year, I started having a lot of health issues, and honestly we didn't

even know what it was. It took about -- a total of about 20 doctor visits three years later to figure out that I had Lyme disease. At that point it was so chronic, though, that I had just been struggling a lot with fatigue, and honestly, I had like ten different symptoms and it was just very, it was a tough time to go through just because I didn't know what it was, and it took so long to pinpoint exactly what was going on.

For me to regain all my energy, all my -- I lost like 25 pounds and had to regain all of that and get back to where I was before, and it was just a struggle, and really, only my inner circle knew about that until now.

Q. Do you feel good now? Do you still have any symptoms? I know Lyme can linger?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, Lyme is obviously something that sticks with you to be honest. But I'm very disciplined as far as, you know, my health goes, my nutrition goes and working out and doing everything in my power to have as little as possible symptoms, and round, I have it under control really well. I want to keep it that way.

But it took -- it was a long road to get here because there was a lot of personal research and figuring out on my own what would make me feel better, and I'm glad I got to the point where I'm feeling pretty good, and hopefully it stays that way.

Q. The walk down 18 typically should be something that is incredibly special with a ton of people cheering. Obviously you weren't able to get that but what was the walk like with your boyfriend? How did you soak it in?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know when there's no gallery, at least I can see the views, you know. It's such a beautiful walk. You look down the last and you can see the ocean and you see -- it honestly looked a little bit like Lord of the Rings to me.

I said, "Doesn't this remind you of something?"

He said, "Yeah, this is straight out of a movie." And it was really nice because we could really soak it in. I think the course itself, you know, I mean a lot of times, grandstands and huge galleries don't make you see the course exactly



the way it is.

The other day, I re-watched Henrik Stenson's win here because I just -- it was one of my favourite rounds he played, and it looked so different just because of all the stands and everything. I think it honestly was nice.

Of course I would have loved to have the galleries and everything that goes with it, but it was a different kind of nice, I would say. I personally really enjoyed it.

Q. And after that opening bogey, what was your self-talk like to bounce back so quickly?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, I actually made a really good run at my par putt on 1, and I knew, okay, my putter is there. I know that was a good attempt for par, and I said, you know, if I just keep it in the fairway and I give myself opportunities to hit irons in, like I knew judging off my range performance that I'm capable of hitting it close.

So I told my boyfriend, I said, "That's all right. We're going to make bogeys out here. It's fine. But we have plenty of opportunities for birdies." And you know, the next hole, right away I hit it close.

After that birdie, I knew, okay, I think now -- also my level of -- my nerves went down and I settled in a little bit, too. That opening tee shot is just tough. Honestly, I was so used to playing it with about 40-mile-an-hour wind from the right.

So it was a very different feel off the tee this afternoon. So it was just -- I just needed that first hole to be honest.

Q. You showed tremendous composure out there. Can you talk a little about that, of how calm you were and at what point did you think, job done today?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, you know, I was a lot calmer, honestly, than I thought I would be. I was very nervous the first hole, but I said, all right, just try to not let people see that. Try to be -- if you're calm to the outside you're going to be calm to the inside.

I figured, you know, if to the outside people, I look calm, then inside it will be like that, too. That's what I try to do the whole round. Honestly after I hit that tee shot on 17, and I hit the green, I think the tension started going. I took a deep breath and I was like, that's the one. That's the shot I needed because going into 18 with a three-shot lead, I believe, made it that much more comfortable. So I think it after that tee shot on 17, I knew this is probably my week.

Q. Can I also ask, you had your mitts on out there

today. We've seen a lot of players in Scotland in October wearing mitts, but in the middle of August, was it really that cold?

SOPHIA POPOV: (Laughing) You know, maybe I was exaggerating a little bit, but I have a tendency, one of my things, I get really cold hands. Even when it's warm outside, I get very cold hands. I think just my blood flow is not very good.

So the rest of my body is fine, which you can tell, because I wasn't really wearing that much as far as layering, but my hands are always cold, and for me there's nothing worse than hitting a shot with cold hands. So I said, you know, there's no -- I can exaggerate today because I'm allowed to do that.

Q. Absolutely a dream win. Can you share with us your mind-set when you were playing during the pandemic in Arizona, playing on the Cactus Tour? You won three of them, for a total sum of about \$8,800 for three wins and here it is suddenly \$675,000. What was your mind-set in cactus, and how does all this money change your life apart from your status now for, I think almost five or ten years now?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, I think that I didn't even know that. Thank you for clarifying to me what this actually meant, because I honestly -- I knew that the winner's cheque is very big, but I didn't know it was that big, which is awesome.

But yeah, I was honestly just happy to be making any money during the pandemic, and I'm honestly very thankful to Mike Brown for still continuing with this tour because it gave me an opportunity to keep playing.

You know, obviously the winner cheque doesn't compare at all to what I made now and how my life has changed, but it gave me the opportunity to play, and I have that to be thankful for because I don't know if I would be in the shape round that I'm in without that.

Regardless of how small or big a tournament is, the nerves are always there and a win is always a win; I always told myself that. But yeah, I'm glad I didn't think about that whole prize money thing going down the 18th hole.

Q. Does it give you the luxury of choosing which event you want to go from here for a few years?

SOPHIA POPOV: I believe so, but I think I've played a couple seasons on the LPGA. I know the courses that I like. I know the ones that I don't like as much. Maybe, yeah, it definitely opens it up for me to kind of



pick-and-choose, but I honestly don't want to change a lot about the way I'm playing. I'm a player that likes to compete quite a bit. I don't take huge breaks, just as many as my body needs and I think that's just going to stay the same.

Q. What is your connection to Germany? When have you been here the last time?

SOPHIA POPOV: I actually came back home -- I still call it home because that's the way it is for me, last November. So I haven't been home since then. But I'm actually flying there tomorrow. I'm really excited. I still have my whole family -- my parents live in the States but the rest of my family still lives in Germany. I have my national team coach and my whole national team friends and club team friends and everything there, so I like to come home and check on everyone, and everyone's babies, everyone is having babies, so I like to go home at least two to three times a year, and obviously with my main sponsor, Allianz, I like to be home at least two times a year for them. I'm thankful for their continued support and everyone at the German federation, too.

Q. Can you speak a little about, it just seems like golf is able to throw up these extraordinary stories, and I just wonder what your take is; did you possibly dare dream this could even happen when you arrived here and how it developed?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, I think honestly, I guess it is an incredible story and I think just personally for me, I think that's why I broke down on the 18th hole because it's been something I couldn't have dreamed of just a week ago, and it's incredible that golf allows for these things to happen because, you know, I think the difference between two players any given week is never that big, but it might be 15 to 20 shots that week. But really, the ability of the player is not that far apart, and the hard work they put in is the same.

I think it nice that every player, every week, gets an opportunity to win, and you know, I was one of however many players this week, I don't know, the field of 144, and I'm one of 144 that has an opportunity and that has the skill level and that just happened to have pretty much I had the week of my life.

Not to say, you know, that I haven't been playing this well as of recently. I have been playing really good golf, but yes, in the conditions, it was probably the best golf I've ever played.

So I'm just incredibly thankful for the sport and anyone involved in giving us an opportunity to play every week.

Q. How much confidence does that give you going forward, and how much inspiration do you think that gives to the rest of the golfing world, as well?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, the last two holes, I really had to think about this, because it's pretty incredible. I have a great group of friends, also, on the Symetra Tour, and on every tour level, I have a group of friends. I always talk to my friends, and I say, you know, honestly, anyone at any given time, you just keep your head in it, and you work hard, and you can make it, because essentially, you've had the scores that I've had.

You know, it's possible, and I think now a lot of the girls on smaller tours are also, they know, you know, I can be there, and I can do it, and I want them to have the confidence to go out there and know that they can.

Because you know, there is no such thing as, of course there's an elite amount of players that are always there and they are always in contention and they are always playing well. But there's so many other players out there that can make it any given week and I want them to know that and have the confidence that they can do it, too.

Q. Can you just share with me, because I'm also an alumni from USC, what was your experience, and tell me a little bit about that, and how did that contribute to your going forth in your golf career?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, honestly the four years in college to me were some of the most important years I've had in my career as a golfer, and as a person. I don't think I'd be the person that I am today without those four years. I had an absolutely amazing coach, Andrea Gaston, and a set of great assistant coaches, Justin Silverstein and Josh (Brewer), and shout-out to you guys, thank you so much for everything that you did there.

But it was just incredible to get the experience that I had there, and I think just playing at an elite level as an amateur for the four years just helped me so much and gave me that stepping stone to the Tour and made me feel a lot more comfortable with my game and confident, also. You know, I'm forever thankful for them and everything they did, and obviously winning a National Championship there, that's something no one can ever take away from us, and it's probably -- now, it might be the second-biggest highlight of my career.

Q. Could you share your methods about how you refocus after you make a mistake? It seemed like you're not afraid to show your frustration sometimes when you play.

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, I mean, honestly, I think I used to be a lot more emotional of a player. I think all in all, I think I've calmed down a lot. Yeah, if I do make a mistake, I kind of -- I might get annoyed for a minute but I'm pretty -- I'm pretty good at just, you know, I give myself about ten seconds and then it's over, and I have to refocus and it's on to the next shot.

That's something I worked on a lot this off-season/quarantine, is just to not focus on the bad shots and just play every shot wherever it lies, no matter what, you just have to -- you can't turn back time, anyways. So just be a lot more patient, and just not get as frustrated.

It's okay to let it out a little bit every now and then, but it cannot carry over into the next shot and I think that's what I worked on the most this week, too.

Q. You had said yesterday that when you were caddying for Anne, you got a sense of what it was like to not go for every pin, to hit it in the middle of the greens, and it appeared as though you were doing that a lot today. Was there a temptation at times to revert back to your aggressive styles, or did you just say, no, middle of the fairway, middle of the greens?

SOPHIA POPOV: No, not at all. It was just middle of the fairway, middle of the greens. I knew my putter is really hot this week and I've been putting real little well, and all the putts that I've missed, I've almost missed short on line or just barely lipped-out or something. I knew as soon as I'm on the green, I have an opportunity, no matter how long the putt is, I felt like I'm putting so well, the hole looked pretty big to me.

I think for me it was fairways and greens all day. I never really attacked any pins. There were maybe four or five where we said, all right, let's go right at it. But all the others were just, you know, let's play it a couple yards left or a couple yards right of the pin, and just give yourself opportunities.

I knew I could make a couple, if I keep giving myself 15- to 25-footers all day, a couple of them are going to fall and that's what happened at the end, so I'm glad that worked out for me.

Q. I was wondering if you could talk about like how hard it is, or maybe it wasn't hard for you at all, to keep swinging pretty aggressively as you were coming down the stretch? I was just really impressed by that because it seems like it would be hard when you have a good lead, to just keep swinging hard and aggressively like it's the first round.

SOPHIA POPOV: Honestly that's the only way for me. As soon as I start thinking about things or I start backing off, or I have this tendency and I can see at the beginning of the round I did that a couple times or midway through the round where I pushed out my irons a little bit because that's my tendency. When I get a little tentative, I hang them out to the right. I was like, okay, after I think 11, I said, no more of this. Just swing aggressively. You're fine. Like your misses are just barely right right now, which is great. You can just kind of be aggressive and let everything fall a little bit to the right.

And so that really helped me in order to swing as hard at it as I was because I knew my misses aren't very far off. I can just go after it, and I knew that's the only way that it could work for today because every time I swing tentative, it's not a good outcome, so that wasn't an option.

Q. And you said your boyfriend was really good at kind of keeping you calm. What kind of things was he saying to you out there?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, a lot of times he would just like refer to some sailboat that's out on the ocean. He was like, "Did you see that sail?"

And I'm like, "Are you talking about the spinnaker on that boat?" You know, he would just basically talk about something, like the birds. I was like, how is he like even looking at these birds right now? I'm so nervous; I'm thinking about my next shot. But it was great, though, because he would say things that would just make me laugh or he would find of talk about something completely different.

I don't know if my sister-in-law would want me to say this but she's expecting, my third niece; and all we could think about today is what if my niece comes today, what if she comes today and we kept bringing it up again just to get my mind off of things because those are things, honestly, that more important in a personal life, and that put golf into perspective and what was online and I think that really helped me because I said no matter what happens today, I have this amazing gift of a niece coming and I'm so excited about that, and so a lot of times, we talked about stuff like that. Yeah, and he told me to eat and drink, which I always forget.

Q. I'm calling from India. You mentioned about 144, the number of people playing in this field in The Open, which is a far cry from, say, 20 to 25 people that actually teed up at Cactus Tour every week and you played there about nine weeks. Would you by any chance remember of an Indian amateur girl, a

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

16-year-old who played in most of those tournaments including two of the three that you won, Anika Varma?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yes, definitely. Definitely. She played a bunch of the events, I remember. Yeah, I remember her, definitely.

Q. Can you say something about her? Did you get a chance to see her? Did she play with you?

SOPHIA POPOV: Well, I don't know her personally. She warmed up a couple times next to me on the range. I kind of knew a little bit of the social media stuff that was going around whenever she was mentioned. I mean, she seems like a super talented player. I mean, she's young, 16. Oh, man, could go back.

But yeah, I think she's doing a great job because as much as our social media content goes on cactus, I heard a lot about her. That's how I knew exactly who you were talking about. But yeah, I'm not sure exactly what her career or her schedule looks like. I'm not sure where she's playing right now. But I'm hoping that, you know, she makes her way on to the LPGA, too.

Q. I just wanted to clarify something. When you won the first event on the Cactus Tour, was that your first professional win?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah.

Q. How did you celebrate that?

SOPHIA POPOV: With a couple of glasses of champagne. Am I allowed to say that? I don't think so, but yeah. We had a couple drinks at home because my mom, she was so excited. She's like, finally. Not in a mean way, finally. I had been so close to winning on Symetra and all kinds of tours. She said, it doesn't matter if it's cactus, I'm so happy, and we had a couple drinks. But yeah, it was nice. I celebrate that had one quite a bit.

Q. How do you think you'll celebrate this one?

SOPHIA POPOV: I don't know. Man, I'm probably going to be -- you know, I'm probably going to be exhausted but at the same time, I think we are going to have a thorough celebration tonight at the hotel, social distanced, but we will.

So yeah, we'll see. Let's see what our boundaries are as far as what we can do, and let's see what can be offered, but as soon as I get home, it will be a little bit more extensive probably.

Q. Is your whole family based in Phoenix?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, right now my immediate family is all in Phoenix, yeah. My brothers are also both in Arizona and California, so all on the West Coast.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Just off the 18th there, you saw Dame Laura Davies and I believe she might have sent you a nice little message of support last night. Can you talk to us about what impact that had on you in the final round today?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, you know, she drove past me, so we were just getting in the car yesterday afternoon after my round, and she was just leaving.

She just, you know, rolled down -- scrolled down -- what do you call that, rolled down -- God, Millennials.

She rolled down the window and said, "Congratulations on today, and if you just keep doing what you did today, you'll be just fine tomorrow."

And I really had to think about that because my round, to me, yesterday was almost flawless. And I knew today, I said, you know, the conditions are pretty good, a lot less windy and it's kind of nice -- nice, out there; it was really cold but kind of nicer.

I just said, all right, if you just stick to your game plan and just keep doing what you're doing, essentially that was the message from her to me. It was like, just stick to your game plan, be aggressive when you can, but don't when you don't have to, and actually, yeah, it really resonated with me a lot.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: And Sophia, 2020 AIG Women's Open Champion, now a Major Champion. How does that sound to you?

SOPHIA POPOV: I could get used to that I guess (laughing). Amazing.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: On that very lovely note, we will leave it there.

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