

Diamond Resorts Tournament of Champions

Wednesday, January 20, 2021

Lake Buena Vista, Florida, USA

Tranquilo Golf Course

Sophia Popov

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to Wednesday's press conference here at the 2021 Diamond Resorts Tournament of Champions. This afternoon we're joined by 2020 major champion, Sophia Popov.

Hello, welcome. How are you feeling right after the short break? How was Christmas and New Year's? What did you do?

SOPHIA POPOV: It was pretty nice. I got to spend some time with my family. Even though it was not very long, may or may not have had a short ski trip, which is always my highlight of the winter.

But, yeah, it was kind of nice. Obviously it felt like it was very short and I didn't really have a lot of time; definitely not enough time to work on anything, so you're just going straight back in.

It was nice, and I think I'm ready to get back into it.

Q. I've been asking a lot of players this, but did you put in place any New Year's resolutions golf or nongolf related?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, not really. I think it's -- I'm not -- I would say I guess I'm not a huge fan of New Year's resolutions. If I want to change something or I want to do something, sometimes I think of it in July; sometimes I think of it November.

I go as long as I end up doing it at some point I guess it's a New Year's resolution, so not really, no. I just want to keep doing what I'm doing and hopefully successfully.

Q. Very valid. Before I turn it over to Steve, how is the course playing and have you got a good amount of practice rounds in?

SOPHIA POPOV: I only played each nine once, but I kind of -- that's kind of how I like to roll, how I've always been



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doing it. I feel like that's enough.

The course is fairly straightforward, yet it's got some sneaky things that you have to pay attention to here and there, especially on the back nine where I'm starting tomorrow, I guess.

So, yeah, it's just you got to -- in the end, it's just pick your targets, hit those targets. It's pretty straightforward in that sense. Just have to kind of put yourself in good position on the greens. I think that is the most important thing that we learned the last two days playing.

I think nine and nine was enough. I didn't want to overdo it this week either, so hopefully that's the recipe for success.

Q. How excited are you to be in this event given what you had to do to get here?

SOPHIA POPOV: Very. Very, very excited. I mean, every year I've been watching it and it's been pretty cool. Been pretty jealous, not going to lie. You know, it's awesome. You're on the range. There is a little bit of music going on. You can tell it's a little bit more of a fun event.

Obviously you've got all the celebrities around you, and you catch yourself just looking around and looking at people's swings, and they hit it super hard. I'm excited for my group tomorrow. You know, it's just something that we really look forward to as soon as we qualify for it.

Since holding that trophy in August I've been pretty excited about this.

Q. Ever month or so I ask you this same question. The answer continues to change. How has your life changed since August?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, it still continues to. I mean, obviously now I have a great new partner in AIG for this year, which is awesome. My life has changed in that way.

I'm just still super busy. Still have a lot going on, and I don't think that's going to change. Talked to some players out there today and they said, Get used to. I'm like, Okay, I'm trying.

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But it's for sure definitely a different lifestyle that I'm living than I previously did before the U.S. Women's Open. But I quite like it. I'm enjoying it.

Q. When you say different lifestyle, can you get more specific about what has changed?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah. I think just the -- you know, the amount of I guess appointments that I have and everything that goes with my golf career in that sense. Just a lot going on. Get a lot more phone calls and emails about things I have to do.

A lot of them are great things; some of them are things that you don't really want to do or don't look forward to. But it's just my schedule is a lot more packed in that sense. I kind of cherish every moment that I get with my family and parents, nieces that are growing up really fast.

I just kind of have come to realize that I really have to use those days that I have and try to get golf out of my mind as much as I can just for those few days or weeks that I have.

Q. And you have to have a lot of media obligations both here and in Germany, because you're under the disadvantage of speaking English and German. So how is that different for you?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, you know, I mean, normally I saying being bilingual is a great thing. It has definitely increased my media schedule on both sides. I've got a lot of requests from Germany, and they're rolling in because everyone said, Oh, we'll wait until you're done with the season and then we'll call you. I'm like, Yep, sure felt that. After season was over everyone -- you know, I got all the phone calls in and emails.

I said, All right, now it's my time to kind of pick and be a little bit mindful of my own schedule and the people around me, too. But I would still say it's a blessing to be able to speak two languages, so thanks mom and dad.

Q. You strike me as the type of player that will thrive in this pro-am kind of environment. How much do you think you'll interact with Sterling and Marcus tomorrow, and have you Googled them to get more info?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, so as you can tell, I'm a really anti-social person. I don't talk a lot at all.

No, so, I mean, I talk a lot as is in regular tournament play. Sorry to all my fellow competitors out there; beware.

But I think this is, yeah, absolutely something that I really

look forward to, especially because of that. I knew quite a bit about Marcus Allen just because he went to USC and I always saw his poster. I was like, Oh, well, he must have done some good things.

I Googled him again just to make sure I got all the dates right of when he played and everything, but it's super impressive. Same with Sterling; very impressive career. I'm very excited to learn more about it, to learn about their careers as athletes and what they had to go through and everything.

I'm sure they strike me as people that would be pretty open about it, so I'm looking forward to a lot of talking and hopefully some really good golf tomorrow.

Q. Is it possible for you to get too distracted talking or that only plays to your favor?

SOPHIA POPOV: I have a great caddie that tells me when to shut up. (Laughter.)

No, you know, I have Max to tell me when I have to start getting in my zone again. I think I'm pretty good at -- I stop talking when I really need to focus on my shot. I try to not hit until I'm 100% committed and not thinking about whatever touchdown they made in the '90s sometime.

But I think I'm -- I think I'm fairly good at that, but I definitely told Max, I think I need a reminder when I talk a little bit too much, or make sure I'm focused on every shot I'm hitting. It is an important event for me, too.

So I hope we find a good balance there.

Q. When you said you watched from home and you were jealous that you weren't here, what was it that made you want to come out here and compete? What were you most looking forward to being a part of?

SOPHIA POPOV: I actually think this interaction between us players and the celebrities, whether it's the actors or the athletes. I think that's really cool. It's unique. It's something that only happens once a year pretty much unless you're lucky enough to play with some of them in pro-ams.

I think that's what I was most jealous about. When I saw pictures and the groupings that were out there, Man, I would pay a lot of money to be part of that group. Now it's cool because I get to be a part of that group.

So I think that's the biggest thing I was jealous of.

Q. Did you hear any stories from fellow pros about



what it was like, the experience of playing alongside some of these people?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, I did. Just recently. Yesterday I heard a great story. I don't know if I should mention her name. She'll probably know. But she said it's very interesting, because you get very excited, but these guys that play out here are very good. They actually spend a lot of time playing golf and practicing.

So they almost -- it becomes their second like career in some sense, and they're playing great golf. They hit it very far and you just have to -- you have to come to peace with the fact that your golf game is totally different. We are -- for most parts we hit it straighter and are probably more consistent players, but they'll hit some shots where they're outdriving you by 70, 80 yards. You're going like, My God, who's the pro here? I think that's important to distinguish.

I think I've heard two or three stories about that, just making sure that that you keep your head in it and you enjoy it, but focus on your own game.

Q. There is one Hall of Famer in particular in the celebrity vision that's new, Annika Sorenstam. Are you kind of hoping you get paired with her this week?

SOPHIA POPOV: For sure. I mean, she's obviously the best female golfer ever. It would be incredible to be able to play with her.

I was already like glancing at the tee sheet for the practice rounds, and I said, Should I sign up with her? I'm almost too intimidated to sign up with her.

I think it would be amazing. I think just so much to learn, and I'm just excited to see her play in general, see how she'll fare out here this week. Yeah, wishing her a lot of luck and hopefully she does really well.

Q. Any swings on the range that caught your eye in particular?

SOPHIA POPOV: No. Well, yeah. Yeah, actually. I mean, I been looking around. Especially like some of the football guys and the baseball guys are just hammering it out there. It's wild.

I just hear the driver and I go -- I turn around, and I'm used to practicing and playing with a lot of guys so I know they can hit it really hard, but it has another sound to it when a former baseball player hits a golf shot.

It's pretty incredible. I know it doesn't always go straight, but it's super impressive. It's fun to watch.

Q. Marcus and Sterling will not outdrive you.

SOPHIA POPOV: You think? That's only because I'm a very long hitter. (Laughter.) I try.

Q. My last question. I think no one else has questions. Last year was very emotional for you, but also for us. Overcoming lyme disease from around three years ago and then winning a major tournament, what advice -- and I know you've probably given a lot of advice -- or actually what were some of the things you said to yourself over the years that really helped you that might help someone out there today?

SOPHIA POPOV: You know, I mean, for me it was a gradual mental battle I think from reading just a lot of books and stories from other people that ave been affected by the disease.

I think it's very easy to just look for all the negatives all the time. I think for me it was kind of -- you know, I just -- as I stated in my Drive on I just have so much love for the game, and I think it's very hard, you know, if you've played a sport your whole life or done something your whole life to just quit.

It's very easy to use something like lyme disease -- it's not as excuse to stop, because it was very hard to play through it. But I think that you need to find like every day something that keeps you going and motivated and just a little positive things that happen.

Like for me it was just getting to know myself and my body and what I can put into it to make it feel better. The research I did on my own and the health changes that I have made in the form of nutrition and all that, I think now I look back I almost go it's a blessing for me to realize how healthy I am now just through all the research that I had to do.

If I hadn't done any of it, I don't know what my diet would look like now, whether I would be as nice to my body as I am now. So I think you just kind of have to take it step by step.

I mean, you just have to know there are going to be multiple times where you really think, Okay, you can't do it anymore, you can't go any further. I was honestly just blessed enough to have an amazing family and friends to keep me going and tell me, I think you can still do it. You just have to keep at it. Keep doing what you're doing and you'll be fine.

Yeah, like I said, I have just an amazing team around me

that helped me in the last four or five years.

Q. Last question, I promise. What was a really small thing back then that really pulled you through those days? A little bit of dark chocolate or like a stuffed animal?

SOPHIA POPOV: Yeah, tough to say. I think just honestly, my -- I would love to call him my big stuffed animal, but Max, my boyfriend. It's him, and my mom that just pulled me through every day. Like I guess every time when I would have negative thoughts or I thought, Okay, this is it or I can't do it, they just said, I think you can.

Every time I go to play with you you play amazing. I think it's just some mental things you have to overcome. You're good enough. You might not be 100%, but even your 80% is good enough to go out there. I think that for most parts was it.

And then a little bit of chocolate at the end of the day never hurts.

Q. I asked that question because there are so many people who want to learn so much from you. We just talked about all these people that you can't wait to play, but there are so many people out there whose dream foursome includes you. Thank you so much and good luck this week.

SOPHIA POPOV: Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

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