

Hilton Grand Vacations Tournament of Champions

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Lake Nona Golf & Country Club

Annika Sorenstam

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good morning Annika Sorenstam, thank you for joining us at the Hilton Grand Vacations Tournament of Champions. Obviously it's a home game for you here. Talk about just being back again.

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yes, it's great to be back. Like you said, it's home turf, so good place to be this time year with my partner, Hilton Grand Vacations, to start off the season here.

We had just finished ANNIKA Invitational, Hilton Grand Vacation is a sponsor of. So it's nice. Everything is coming together. The winner will be here playing as an amateur, Natalie Yen, so looking forward to that.

Yeah, the course is looking great. Family and friends, they're ready, maybe more than I am. It's great to start off the year at this beautiful place.

Q. Tell us more your tournament this week and Natalie. Have you talked to her about being excited to join this field?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yeah, we been out here literally since they started these young girls had to battle through cold and rain and we almost had -- well, we did have fog and almost had thunder yesterday to finish.

But great competition. Had chance to spend some time with Natalie at the tournament site, but also at The Wave at the hotel with her parents.

She's super excited. For her to earn a spot in this event I think it's a big deal. I know she's excited. Just the support that Hilton Grand does for the women in general is really, really great. She also against an invite to the Epson Tour later in the year, so it seems like our tournament is getting better and better.

We had Angel Yin came over and she spoke to the girls at Boxi Park on Monday, because we do more than golf. We



had Danielle Kang last year and this year she came, because she won in 2015.

Then when we told her what we're doing, she was like, your event is getting cooler and cooler. I said, yeah, you should come and hang out a little bit.

Yeah, we felt like that was our 15th anniversary and the event has just gotten better and better I think with obviously some of the previous winners here this week. So, yeah, we're very happy about it.

Q. Tell us about your relationship with Hilton Grand Vacations, their support of the ANNIKA Foundation, and what this week's donations do for girls moving forward with your foundation.

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yeah, number one, the player get to come here and participate. This is a great motivation for all of the young ladies because they know if they play well they can come here.

Overall just to provide resources for us to continue our initiatives. Now we have seven global tournaments. We have a lot of what we call Share My Passion Clinics. We do they have around the country. We have now The ANNIKA Development Program, which we've talked about before, at Barnwell, a little north of Augusta.

We've increased from 4 to 12 players, which gives them an opportunity to practice, and also gives them a little cash to pay for coaches and tournaments they want to play in.

Then we are joining forces with the All Women's Pro Tour this year. We are doing a little bit more every year just growing the foundation. The goal is to be able to be a platform for all girls and women's sports. Golf I should say. It's been really good.

So Hilton Grand Vacations makes it possible for us with their support. I do some corporate outings for them. We obviously have some other sponsors as well. Rolex is a big partner of women's golf and us. Me personally, too. I want to throw that in.

Q. Thursday you are paired with Landon Donovan, the soccer star, and Cheyenne Knight. Talk about what you expect tomorrow.



ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yeah, I'm excited about my pairing. Thank you for the late tee time. I look forward to that. Also with good players. Cheyenne I know. I played with her a few times. Really sweet and I like her a lot.

You know, I look forward meeting some of the celebrities. You know, met several of them yesterday but I think it's going to be great. Everybody loves sport and the game of golf, and to go out there tomorrow and share my passion will be fun.

Q. We were talking to Landon yesterday and he said he's excited to meet you. There are LPGA players in the past say they look up to you and watched you as a kid. What does that mean to you and does to hit you that you are in the celebrity field and everybody wants to meet you?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Well, I take it as a compliment. Yeah, it's very nice. I met Landon yesterday for the first time. I watched a little bit of soccer. He's probably one the best soccer players this country has ever produced. I didn't know he was such a golfer, so pleasure to meet him. We spoke a little bit and he was excited, so excited about that.

I look forward to spending time and getting to know him. Super guy and glad he's part of this event. I think it elevates it.

Q. For you, this up close and personal with the state of the LPGA, what does that mean for you just being out there and seeing these ladies continue to compete and get better as the years go on?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: I mean, I think it's a dream come true for everybody. Everybody in this room I would say cheer for women's golf. We want to grow and elevate and we want to get more exposure and purses, you name it. I think the LPGA is going in the right direction. We been seeing that the last -- I mean, it's been a good run.

But a lot of that is thanks to the players themselves or being great ambassadors and influencers and everything they do to create the stories people are attracted to. If you come here and play they're very personal. I know a lot of people in the pro-am are like, wow, they're not just good but they're nice and friendly and interact with you.

I think we've been saying that for what, 20, 30 years. I am glad that people are noticing and being part of it. It's nice to see now that women's sport in general are getting some bigger sponsorship money and it makes a difference.

It elevates everything we do and trickles down. The young girls we saw at the ANNIKA Invitational, but even younger girls there, now it's cool to play golf and they want to be part of it and they have dreams and look up to the players as role models.

Q. When you first started your foundation, could you have imagined not only are you guys global, but an event where you get to play and one of your ANNIKA Invitational winners also gets to compete. Would you have imagined it would get this big this quickly?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: I like to dream. I like to dream big. Not all dreams come true. That is one dream that has come true. It takes a team effort and we have been doing this, like I said, this is the 16th edition of the tournament.

We planted a lot of seeds and are starting to see the fruit. We have good -- Rob Ono that came from the PGA TOUR has done well, and with Mike and Morgan and Taylor. They work so hard behind the scenes.

It's funny when I spoke to Angel the other day because she's been calling about getting some advice on things, and she goes, how come your awards are getting so much attention?

First of all, people like yourself are talking about it and players are winning and inspiring other young players. It takes time. Takes a Village. With all the support we have and partners like Hilton Grand Vacations, now we can talk about Natalie Yen for a little bit, and that brings up Celine Boutier, and that brings up Angel Yin, and that brings up, I mean, whoever.

That's what it takes. I have fun doing it. I know the girls enjoy it. Together I think we have a good time. That's really what I think the recipe for success is.

Q. You're a trailblazer in your own right. Yesterday's news Judy Rankin received the PGA of America Lifetime Achievement Award. Speak to what Judy has meant to the women's game and golf in general.

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yeah, first of all, congratulations to Judy. I think that's fabulous and the right choice. I'm surprised she is the first woman to get it.

Q. Yeah, first woman.

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yeah, thank for breaking that barrier, Judy. She's broken lots of barriers. She had a great playing career, Hall of Famer and all that.

Then to go into the TV world which really is a man's world



as we know is be one of the elite analysts for so long, I think she deserves all the credit she gets plus more.

Q. Annika, I was at your first event in Houston when you played with legends down at the Woodwinds. Talked about you didn't know if you would play again. You had blisters on your hands. Talk about your own evolution playing in tournaments and getting your kids involved and how that worked for you personally.

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yeah, the game of golf is a big part of our family, as you know. Started with Mike's dad and his mom played and my parents play, and now we're into the game. It's just something that is so close to us and we've always brought the kids out to different events from being this small to this, and now Ava is almost as tall as I am.

I just think it's a great sport for life. I really do. Whether you play at a high or middle or low level, it's something I think you can do. It's good for your soul. Good for your mind. Also it's a social sport.

Yeah, golf is a big deal for us, and hopefully continue. Seems like Will has a passion for it. He's been bit by the golf bug, and we have a good time together when we practice. Hopefully can continue the family tradition and take the game to a different level.

Q. Are you playing more yourself than you envisioned five years ago?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: I am. I did retire in 2008 and I did use the words "step away." But, yeah, I wasn't planning on playing -- I mean, at that time the didn't have U.S. Senior Women's Open. That came along and I thought I need to support that, and then I realized to play decently there I have to play in some other events and keep my game going.

Yeah, and then with Will playing and us being invited to the PNC, I need to do my part and my share so I need to -- otherwise I will hear a lot about it.

So I got to keep my game somewhat sharp. Yeah, it's a lot more than I intend. I do enjoy some parts, but it's tougher at this age I must admit. At times my mind is 27 and my body says it's not, so I battle inside of me a lot, why am I doing this, and then I do it and it's like I don't get as much out of it as I like to.

I do practice quite a bit and play with him on some weekends, but it's fun to have that common bond. Again, goes back to golf is a sport for life. You want to continue that as much as we can. My game is going down and your

game is going up, buddy, so soon we'll be changing roles.

Q. That leads to my question. We never know how much year to year we're going to see you. How much do you plan to compete this year?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: I really don't know either, to be honest. This year I'm probably more -- I mean, haven't really made up my mind at all. Going to take week by week. Really not that much to play. I'm not playing in U.S. Open. Not playing in any LPGA. Not playing in LET or anything like that.

If it's a celebrity event I appreciate the invites. It's a big commitment for me and the family. The answer is less, but I don't know how much less.

Q. How much having come close here in this event before have you prepared coming in and what would it mean to have a good week here?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: I know, I've been so close. Mike has all the stats of all the events I played in. I've been knocking on the door but haven't really been able to put four great rounds together. That's what I would love to do. Where that takes me, we'll see.

But it's more this can I just play four good rounds. Seems like there is always a part of my game that is just not where I want it to be even though I put in time. This year I'm just going to go out there and enjoy it as much, and I don't know if we're going to come back here. Obviously to be seen and heard. But that's why I want to enjoy this as much as I can in front of the members and our family.

And then, yeah, put the pressure away. I'm not here for it the way I used to be. It's more, okay, enjoy the moment. I know the kids will be out and everybody. Let's smile about it.

Q. Thoughts a few weeks ago the USGA and R&A announced the golf ball rollback and that it will impact the women's game. What are your thoughts on that decision and what sort of impact do you think it's going to have?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Well, I don't think it's going to -- I mean, I don't think we need to do it for the women. I was talking to Callaway the other day and driving distance, and compared to the men it really hasn't change that had much. I don't know. I think overall, it's -- we need to do what's good for the game.

One thing that's been good for the game is that everybody can play the same golf ball. People enjoy that. When we

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

play in the pro-ams they can use the same driver, same ball, same wedge. I think it's very relatable that way. If we start changing the equipment for the professionals it will change.

I know on the men's tour that's where we saw the big difference. The men's tour, I don't know what the percentage is of golfers, but it's a small number it's affecting. I know it's not happening tomorrow, but I know that many of the players are not happy about it.

We'll see what the results will be. Doesn't seem like it's going to be a lot either, so then it's like are we going to have this discussion in another ten years? Because the athletes are going to find ways to get better, stronger, and continue to do it.

So it will be unfortunate I think if we have to punish the players that are getting better because they're working hard.

Q. Speaking of change, the season openers are the perfect time to talk about the future and things like that. Is there one thing -- purses are growing on the LPGA. Is there still one thing or concern that you have or one issue that you would like to see improve or change this year or over the next five, ten years?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: You know what? I applaud the purses. This says a lot about the commitment and sponsorships and companies that want to be associated with women's golf.

To continue, I think TV, it would be nice to see the women on TV more consistently and bigger coverage. Same thing in print and so forth.

It's a fraction of what other sports get, and compared to the men's sport it's just not there. That's what I would love to see. It's getting better, but continue to work. There is no doubt.

Other than that, I think the women are doing a great job and the LPGA is in a good place. So let's continue to work.

Q. Have you done much research or given much thought to the USGA, the development program development team they're starting to create? Sweden has one of the better junior development programs in the world and the U.S. is trying to catch up.

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: I think it's a great initiative. I really do. Obviously with Mike Whan spearheading it with Heather Daly Donofrio, and I think they're doing a good job. What I've seen. I'm not involved in it.

The way they're going good it I think it's going to be very successful. I think it's going to be -- if we had a crystal ball I think in a few years the U.S. will be really hard to beat. I don't know what Sweden thinks about that.

I remember think it's a really good thing in the end. There is so many wonderful things about this country that you are doing. When I came over here it was for college. We don't have that. And now improving in different areas.

So I think it will make a big difference for the young players coming up and coaches getting involved. It's a good thing.

Q. Lastly, what's your best Tim Wakefield story?

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Oh, you know what? I didn't know him before all the celebrity events and this is how I met him, through the sport, his family, and it's heartbreaking. I don't want to really hear his name. It's like you have more tears than you have happiness because it happened so quickly and sudden and unexpectedly.

But then we try to look at the bright side because he did bring a lot of joy. You know, I played with him several times. The recent memory was just in Tahoe. We were standing on the 17th tee and we had to wait for the group ahead and there is a basketball hoop there and we were shooting and kids were there. They played ABBA and Mike and I were dancing...and he was right there with his daughter. What she's going through is just unreal.

We talk a lot with him about it, and that was kind of our thing, how we can help. Literally we just read about it. I told Mike and we got in touch and I texted him and he texted back. I really didn't think much about it. On Friday before I said, hey, is there anything I can do and he gave me the thumbs up, and on Sunday he was gone.

So it's just his smile and -- I can tell you one thing: We did the media day here like two years ago. He was there, and then he didn't show up for the tournament, which we thought was strange because it was like two or one month later. We found out his kind of Stacy had cancer.

When this happened I was walking down the hill on No. 9 from the tee shot, and I'm telling you every day I play that hole down the hill I think of them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Annika.

ANNIKA SORENSTAM: Yep.

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