

# BNP Paribas Open

Thursday, March 17, 2022

## Maria Sakkari

Press Conference



M. SAKKARI/E. Rybakina

7-5, 6-4

THE MODERATOR: Can you talk about your match today.

MARIA SAKKARI: Sure, yeah.

I mean, I think I had a rough start. I was a little bit nervous. But then I just had faith in my game. I knew that if I was -- if I could break her back, I would get back into the match. Making a lot of balls after, being 4-1 down, gave me a good chance to coming back into the match.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. In terms of the nerves before the match. You played a lot of quarterfinals, won a lot of quarterfinals, I think at this point the last eight. Why did you feel extra tension?**

MARIA SAKKARI: Why did I feel?

**Q. A little more extra tension.**

MARIA SAKKARI: Tension.

I think it was because I was playing for the first time on Stadium 1, new scenery, I never experienced going deep into this tournament. It was something new for me.

It's actually exciting to have new things when you're 26 years old, new experiences. But I think it's normal sometimes to be a little bit more nervous than the usual. I was very happy with the way I handled the situation and the way I came back.

**Q. It is one of the largest tennis stadiums in the world. Can you explain what your experience was walking out there for the first time?**

MARIA SAKKARI: Actually I was very surprised that it was quiet. It wasn't as loud as Stadium 2. Stadium 2 can sometimes be very loud because of the restaurants and everything.

I really enjoyed it. I mean, it was a good first experience. I'm looking forward to tomorrow.

**Q. You mentioned the nerves. Do you think you'll ever get to a point in your career where you don't feel nervous? Do you feel less nervous now than you used to or is it just part of the sport, life?**

MARIA SAKKARI: I might be wrong, but I believe -- I don't know, I'm going to name Rafa, Roger, they all get nervous. I mean, they're used to it a little bit more than us, not a little bit but a lot more than us (smiling).

I still think there are moments that they still get nervous and they still feel the pressure. I think it's part of the game. You just have to embrace it, just accept the fact going into a match like the one today or tomorrow, whenever, you might feel pressure, you might feel nerves. It's just part of the game.

**Q. Do you think you're better at dealing with a slow start like you had today, down 3-Love, 4-1, than you maybe would have been in years past? Would there have been a little bit of panic if you started off like that two years ago?**

MARIA SAKKARI: Yeah, for sure. I think I've improved in everything. I've also improved in that because I see that I'm actually very calm and very confident that it's only a break. Okay, if someone serves lights out, it's too good. I still have the first set, two more sets to go. That doesn't really matter.

I just accepted the fact I had a bad start, just tried to change things.

**Q. What do you consider the strongest part of your game? What are you most satisfied with, your really good results in the recent past?**

MARIA SAKKARI: I mean, my physicality is something that I think it's probably the strongest part of my game. But then again, I feel like I've improved on my serve, I've improved on my groundstrokes. I don't have a huge hole in

my game.

There are a lot of things that I can improve, which is something good. Especially mentally, sometimes I have to just be a little bit stronger. But I'm working on that and I think I'll get where I want to get.

**Q. What tools do you use when you do have the jitters? Do you talk to yourself? What is your technique?**

MARIA SAKKARI: Well, I'm not supposed to say what I do, you know, when I guess nerves.

Yeah, I talk a lot to myself. I just try to have a nice chat with myself. But sometimes, especially in the past, I would be very, very hard on myself. But now I'm very nice. I have a very nice and kind creature in my mind, in my body.

**Q. Paula is up a set and 5-2. I wanted to get your thoughts on facing her. I think last year WTA Finals, close match, but you struggled serving, faced quite a few break points. Is that going to be the key for you?**

MARIA SAKKARI: I haven't really thought about. I don't really remember how the match went in Mexico. Obviously she has been playing very good and she likes the conditions here. I mean, winning last year, making potentially the semis now, it's a lot of matches in a row winning in this tournament.

I'll just have to, you know, speak about it with Tom, see what's the best game plan to play against her. I'm confident that -- of course, I know I can beat her, but I can lose. She's a top-10 player for the last six or seven months.

I think it's going to be a very tough match for both of us.

**Q. Three straight semifinals now for you to start this season at big tournaments. What is your reaction to that? For you, does it take some of the load off of the mind knowing you're putting yourself in these positions so consistently that you're going to break through that you're going to get the big wins or does it create more pressure that you're still chasing that?**

MARIA SAKKARI: I'm actually at the point right now where I believe it's going to come no matter what because I put myself in these situations right now where I'm a thousand percent sure it's going to come. If it doesn't come, too bad. What can I say?

I really believe that it's going to come. Whether it's this week, next week, in two or three months, I don't really

know. It's just the way I'm playing right now, the way I'm feeling, the way I approach every match, is different to what it was last year.

Obviously it's ideal starting the year with three very good results. And it takes a lot of pressure out of you because especially now that I have points to defend. But that's not something I think about.

I just see when and how I can improve. I see myself improving every day, which is something I'm very proud of.

**Q. If it is Paula, you, Paula, Iga, Simona, at this stage of the tournament, a big tournament, when you're playing against what you consider the best, is it easier to play those matches because they're a little bit not coin flip but they're even, or is it more difficult, more of a challenge?**

MARIA SAKKARI: I think no matter who you're playing in the later stage of the tournament, your opponent is for a reason there, playing a semifinal match. Obviously all these players you named, they have been playing very good.

I mean, okay, Simona did not have the season she wanted last year, but she's coming back. She proved it this week. She's still in the tournament. She's still just showing that she has the level and she wants to come back to top.

It's not easy. It's not difficult. It's just that it's a challenge. I believe that no matter who you play in the semifinal or final, it's going to be a dogfight. It's the way it is because you can't expect you're going to win 6-1, 6-1 against these players.

**Q. You talked about talking to yourself, you had a nice, kind creature. What does that nice, kind voice tell you?**

MARIA SAKKARI: Well, that's something that I want to keep for myself. These are things and techniques that I've been working. I don't want to share with anyone else.

As I said, I'm just being very nice to myself, just supporting myself even if I'm behind in the score or even if I'm about to close the match and I get nervous.

There's certain things that I just don't want to mention, I don't want to share, because I think everyone has personal different things and different ways of talking to myself.

**Q. You mentioned Paula being very comfortable in these conditions. Kind of feels a little like Greece out there. Is this familiar to you, as well?**

MARIA SAKKARI: Of course, Greece is a little more humid. But definitely the heat, I really like playing in the heat. I know you probably are bored, I mentioned that like a thousand times already.

**Q. You liked Tokyo. You were crazy.**

MARIA SAKKARI: Tokyo was the worst conditions I've ever played in my life.

**Q. But you said, I like it here.**

MARIA SAKKARI: Yeah, because I know the opponent doesn't like it (smiling). I like it even more.

I know that Paula also likes to play in the heat. Yeah, it's over. I just feel better with my game. I hate the cold. I don't feel good with my tennis when it's cold.

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