

WTA Finals

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Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Aryna Sabalenka

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: How have you enjoyed your time so far in Riyadh?

ARYNA SABALENKA: I'm really happy to be here. Such a beautiful place. Everything looks really good. I really enjoy my time here practicing with all the girls, having some fun with girls. Had dinner last night. Official photo shoot.

So we're having a really great time here and I'm happy to be here. Really excited to start.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. You obviously come here as the world No. 1. How determined are you to finish the year as world No. 1?

ARYNA SABALENKA: I mean, yeah, that's definitely one of the goals. I always been saying that for me it's about to finish the year as world No. 1. That's definitely one of my goals. I'll do everything I can to finish the year as world No. 1.

Q. You talk about being here in Riyadh. You say you've had a good time. I wonder, do you personally have any reservations or concerns about playing in Saudi Arabia, given the human rights record, particularly around women's rights and the LGBTQ+ community?

ARYNA SABALENKA: I've been here with exhibition match with Ons. I saw everything here is quite chill.

Me personally, I don't have any issues playing here. I think it's really important to bring tennis all around the world and to inspire young generation.

The effort they put into women's sport here is incredible. I'm really impressed. I'm really happy to be here and to be part of I would say some sort of history here.

Q. Your first match is against Qinwen. You recently faced each other in Wuhan. She just won the Tokyo tournament. What are your expectations for your match tomorrow?

ARYNA SABALENKA: Yeah, I mean, it's top eight players here, so every match going to be high-level match. I'm expecting, like, really great level of tennis. It's going to be great battle, as we always had before.

I'm really excited to face her here.

Q. You mentioned you want to finish the year as No. 1. Have you checked what you need to do, gone on the WTA website and seen that, or are you just going to wing it?

ARYNA SABALENKA: No, anyway anytime we come to the tournament, we want to win. That's the first goal. I'm trying to be focused on the first part. Then if I'll be able to finish the year as world No. 1, then it's amazing and I'll be super happy.

But I prefer to focus step by step. Let's just start, like, slowly (smiling).

Q. Could you talk to us about the beautiful tiger that you have hanging from your neck.

ARYNA SABALENKA: I mean, actually it's came as a surprise from Nike. I received a package for the Finals. I open it. The first thing I saw was this beautiful jacket made for me - I believe, I hope. That's what I've been told (laughter).

Yeah, when I saw that, I was super happy. Then there's like little small (indiscernible) on my shoes. I was super happy. I wrote appreciation messages to the Nike team.

I think that's cool, isn't it? I hope I'm not going to lose it because it's quite heavy.

Q. Is it one of a kind or can your fans buy it? Will you fans be able to buy it?

ARYNA SABALENKA: Now it's only one, so... I will talk to them, okay? I promise (laughter).

Q. I want to ask you about the dropshot. Do you enjoy

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playing that? How do you feel it's gone, bringing it more into your game? Is it player-specific for when you bring it in or do you just do it when you want to have fun?

ARYNA SABALENKA: I mean, first of all, that's quite fun I making dropshots. Five years ago if someone will tell me I will finally learn how to do this shot, I'll be like laughing. I don't have touch. I'm so bad at it. Now I have this shot in my pocket.

I think it's bring a lot of pressure on the opponent because now they know they have even more variation, that sometimes I just can use my touch and not over-hit the ball. I always make them guess what I'm going to do.

It's not, like, special tactic. It's when I feel like going for it. When I see the opponent is really way far behind, I'm like, Okay, I'll just make them move.

So yeah, I'm really happy that finally, finally I learned this shot. I kind of have control, which is crazy to say, to be honest. Yeah, that's just good to have, isn't it for me? For me, not for my opponent (laughter).

Q. How are you finding the conditions on the court? How would you rate it speed-wise? A question about just round-robin. Obviously if all goes well, you don't have to worry about it, you just go 5-0. In terms of bouncing back, losing a match, can you talk about how different that feels than a regular tournament.

ARYNA SABALENKA: Well, first of all about conditions. It definitely much faster than it was in China. I probably like it more than there because China was so heavy on the legs, on the body. Here it's not like the fastest surface, but still it's a bit faster than it was in China.

The ball is a bit lighter because China was heavy, heavy on the body. Overall was tough. I would say I like conditions here. We'll see as we start how it goes.

About the round-robin, yeah, I mean, it's going to be tricky. If you lose in the first round, then you kind of like guessing - well, not guessing, but you're overthinking. You're following the others playing hoping whoever you need to lose. I'm sorry, but I'm against you right now, cheering for someone. It's going to be tricky.

I prefer to win it all. Like, if win, win it all. I don't want to face this feeling of not be sure, then you go in the match, you know the chances are very low, but you still have to win the match. You still have this low percentage of chance to qualify.

Yeah, that's tricky, you know? It's became mental if you lose the first match or second. Doesn't matter. It's became mental. I really hope I'm not going to face it and I'm going to do my best.

Q. When you went back to No. 1 the other day, some people were surprised because the mathematics were so complicated. When did you find out about it? What was your reaction?

ARYNA SABALENKA: Yeah, I actually didn't know that's what's going to happen. I was like, How? What happened? Where she lost this hundred points or whenever? It's tricky. I didn't expect that.

I just woke up another morning. My boyfriend actually told me like, Oh, congrats, you became world No. 1.

I'm like, What?

I didn't know anything in that moment. Whatever, I'll take it. As I always say, I want to finish the year as world No. 1, then I'll be like okay, I'll be more confident on saying I'm world No. 1, not because someone lost hundred points and that's how I became world No. 1.

I know throughout the year I was pushing, winning a lot. It's kind of not like I didn't do anything. I was quite good, quite decent this year.

But still for me, for my crazy mind, it would be better to finish the year as world No. 1.

Q. You won two majors.

ARYNA SABALENKA: Quite big, right (smiling)?

Q. You missed Wimbledon with a rare injury. Your private life, there was a tragedy in March. How do you sum up a year with everything that's happened to you this year?

ARYNA SABALENKA: Crazy, isn't it? There must be something wrong with me (smiling).

I would say this year was definitely up and down, sometimes really downs. Was tricky. Yeah, that was tough, tough year. A lot of crazy stuff happened to me.

As I always say, there's always reason behind. Sometimes we cannot control others. Sometimes whatever happen to you is not under my control.

I just have to move forward and I have to do what I love, make sure that I have a lot of positive moments with my

friends, family, with my team. That's all about it.

Q. I think there are some fans maybe with concerns about the event here, women, LGBT. Do you have a message to them to reassure them about how they feel?

ARYNA SABALENKA: Fans like all around the world?

Q. Yeah. Some of your fans, as well.

ARYNA SABALENKA: I would say this country put huge effort on bringing sport events here. Overall I would say improving quality of woman life here. I'm really happy we're part of it. I think that's really great that we are here and we inspiring young generation here.

I mean, we are safe. We're having great time. It's beautiful city. Yeah, that's basically my message.

Q. On what you said earlier about finally learning how to hit a dropshot. Can you break that down technically? Was it approaching the ball differently, learning to have a softer hand? How does one figure it out one day?

ARYNA SABALENKA: Honestly on the practice, I always could do it without any problems, but I wasn't sure really how and when to use it on the match.

I remember playing against Svitolina in Rome. I'm like, Okay, I'm injured, I don't know what to do. I'll just go for dropshot. I don't know why. I don't know why it's came to my head. I'll just do it.

I think after that match, I gained so much confidence on that shot. I was like, You know what, that's probably working. I probably should use it more often. That's how it's became like more natural shot for me to use.

Q. It was psychological?

ARYNA SABALENKA: I would say kind of like yeah.

Q. On the court, are the lights any problems for you here? There's four bright lights.

ARYNA SABALENKA: It was practice court. On the center court is totally fine. It's good. It's just like the practice court. It's a bit awkward.

Q. I saw your biomechanic coach is here with you. Is the serve still a work in progress or is the serve something that you don't really think about technically, the toss especially?

ARYNA SABALENKA: Well, I think you always have to look for something to improve. I think I will never stop working on my serve and improving this shot. There is some gap for improvement.

Yeah, basically it's not like the best shot for me. I mean, I'm confident in my serve. It's working really well for me. But I still think I can do better. That's why we're still working.

It's not only serve he's helping me with. He's an important guy in our team. He help me once. I really appreciate that. I think I have to keep working on my serve to make it even better. Some of my baseline shots also need some little improvements, yeah.

I think we always have to look for something to improve.

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