

# Australian Open

Friday, 12 January 2024

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

## Naomi Osaka

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Naomi, welcome back to Melbourne Park, a place with a lot of great memories for you. Talk about how it's been here so far for you.

NAOMI OSAKA: Yeah, I mean, it's been really good. I've been able to hit with a couple players and kind of, I guess, feel the nostalgia again.

But super excited to be back. It's been really fun so far.

THE MODERATOR: Who would like to get started with the first question?

**Q. Naomi, you mentioned 'feel the nostalgia'. Can you talk about a couple of thoughts that have come in your head since you came back?**

NAOMI OSAKA: One thing, it's kind of minor, but I love the comfort of it. I guess just going into the locker room and having the same locker as before. I think little things like that really make me happy. Just being able to hit on Rod Laver, I guess look up at the sky and kind of just realize, like, I've been able to win twice here. I would love to do it again.

But, yeah, I feel like this tournament or this slam is the one that changes the most, but there are some things that stay the same. Those are the things that I think give me the most nostalgia.

**Q. In terms of getting to hit, you were hitting with Ons today, getting to get more reps against other WTA players over the last couple weeks, how have you been feeling in those sessions with your level, getting a sense as to where you're at?**

NAOMI OSAKA: Yeah, I mean, I think for me playing in Brisbane was a really good test. I honestly think that both of my matches were a higher level than the rankings indicate. I definitely think my match against Pliskova was a really high level. I feel like whenever I play her, it's always about the serve. I don't really consider her ranking when I play her. She's a former No. 1. There's a level that she can play that I don't really think indicates with her ranking.

I've hit with Amanda here. You know how she is. We were kind of trading returns and serves. Ons, of course,

makes me feel embarrassed because of the shots she can play. I'm like, Wow, I wish I could do all those things (smiling).

Yeah, it was really fun to hit against them. Super happy they let me hit with them, too. Yeah, it's been a learning experience, but I also think I'm pretty confident with where I'm at right now.

**Q. You've been away for almost three weeks now. How has it been? Has it been hard?**

NAOMI OSAKA: Oh, from Shai?

**Q. Yes.**

NAOMI OSAKA: It's definitely been really hard. She's learning things while I'm gone. I'm hoping she doesn't learn how to crawl before I come back. She's doing her little plank thing and scooting forward and back. I think it might be a little inevitable.

I'm definitely sad, but I feel like it's a selfish sad because I want her to be here. But I think for her health and like her whole environment is at home - you know what I mean? I don't want to put her out of that while she's still so young.

I FaceTime her often, so...

**Q. How did you feel after playing those matches in Brisbane and being back in a match environment for the first time in 15 months? Has there been a bit of stiffness and soreness? Have you had to be careful about the training sessions that you organize?**

NAOMI OSAKA: There has been stiffness and soreness. But honestly not as bad as I was expecting. Usually, even without having gone through, like, postpregnancy, I'm normally very sore on the first tournament back.

I thought it would be one of those things where after I played my first match in Brisbane, I would have to, like, call my team and be like, Hey, I cannot practice today (smiling).

But, no, it ended up really fine. I think my body's quite adaptable. I think I've been doing pretty well.



**Q. A lot of players have been coming back this year and also last year. A lot of them say that they're feeling refreshed, more relaxed on court. From your perspective, how does being away from the tour make you feel better on the court?**

NAOMI OSAKA: I mean, you know me, I've taken a lot of breaks throughout the years. I feel like for me, I think this one was the one that finally clicked in my head. I think I realized, like, being an athlete, that time is really precious. I never, like, took that for granted before. If that makes sense. I was young and I felt like I could kind of roll back into it whenever I needed to.

I guess like after having Shai, kind of going through the struggle of trying to get myself back to where I want to be, it was incredibly tough.

I have, like, a much more positive mindset and a much more grateful mindset. I think overall I'm just happy to be here because I remember last year I was watching people playing Australian Open, and I couldn't participate myself.

Yeah, it was funny. I'm talking a lot, but... I was sitting with Ons today and I was thinking in my head, like, we've come a long way from Singapore (smiling).

**Q. You said you're happy to be here, but at the same time you've achieved so much here and in other places, is it hard at all to give yourself time to not expect too much of yourself once you get back on the court and those old feelings come back?**

NAOMI OSAKA: Yeah, I mean, definitely it is hard because I do think of, like, all the amazing memories that I've had. I also think in my head like who am I to just come back in the second tournament and expect so much from myself, especially against the best players in the world.

Even hitting today with Ons, I caught myself getting a little disappointed in myself when I would make some mistakes. But I'm hitting against Ons... I think it's just one of those things where I now think to myself that I have to give myself a lot of time and patience.

**Q. Speaking of a long way since Singapore, Caroline Garcia in the first round, can you talk about what your reaction was seeing that was your first round? Did you not know?**

NAOMI OSAKA: No, I knew. Just that transition (laughter). What a Courtney transition.

**Q. What was your reaction to drawing her? What do you think of that as a first-rounder for you?**

NAOMI OSAKA: Yeah, I think it's definitely tough, of

course. She's seeded. Whenever I play her, I always think she's an incredible player. She has every shot that a top-five player needs.

I don't know. Like my immediate thought was, Okay, this is tough, but I definitely think I can achieve what I want to achieve. Hopefully during the match I'm able to, I guess, have things go my way.

Yeah, in a weird way I'm glad I'm playing a seed so that hopefully, if I get through that, the next match won't be as difficult.

(Naomi's answers to questions in Japanese.)

NAOMI OSAKA: Yeah, I mean, I guess I did see that poster when I was coming into Melbourne. I was also a little embarrassed, so I tried to walk fast away from it (smiling).

But yeah, I think while I've been in Australia, a lot of people have been telling me that they're really happy that I'm back. It feels really nice because I can truly feel they're saying that from the heart.

I think Australia's a place that I have so many great memories. It's also the place that has the most, like, I see the most Japan flags. It's really cool to be back here and kind of feel appreciated, yeah.

Yeah, I think my body definitely wasn't ready for the XO match. I think now I'm pretty good where I am. I definitely want to be stronger in the future. But I think this is something that I have to build towards. I can't really expect, like, at the six-month mark to just be how I was before.

Definitely I feel a lot of improvements since I guess Brisbane, yeah.

Yeah, I think I've had a lot of things that I've definitely wanted to improve. One of them - I'm trying to figure out if I should tell you, so it's not a secret - one of them is my return, for sure. I think my match against Pliskova kind of showed me that I have a really good serve, but if my return can just be, like, 10% better. I think I had a lot of break points. Just to convert, like, three of them would have made the match a whole lot different.

I really tried to focus on my return. I tried to focus on my backhand a lot now, hitting with Anisimova and trading backhands was really fun. Yeah, honestly I can go on and on about stuff that I want to, I guess, perfect. I can almost say like it's everything. But those are probably the two things right now.

I'm definitely thinking this year that I want to play a lot of tournaments. I might go back to the schedule I had when I was, like, 18 or something. I think right now I really

need to play a lot of matches and it will probably condition me to at least have a really good end of the year.

For me right now, my schedule's kind of packed with the tournaments that I want to play.

I mean, definitely my body's a lot different from I guess before Shai. I think I also had to adjust my play style a lot. How do I describe it? You know what, Flo says it's not that off. I think this is a fitness trainer question. If you bump into Flo in the hallway, you can ask him exactly like that, what he thinks is different and/or what has changed and what has gotten better (smiling).

No, I definitely don't think it's the same. Also, like, I've been hitting with Ons, Pliskova, and Amanda. Those are the only girls that I practiced/hit with. Of course, my first match. But they all hit pretty flat. The rallies aren't that long. I've gotten to balls that I'm pretty impressed with getting, but the next shot, it's over for sure.

I think I'm just going to have to play against more people and see, like, what happens.

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