

AIG Women's Open

Media Day Press Conference

Tuesday, 30 May 2023

Ashleigh Buhai

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Ashleigh, thank you so much for joining us. Please, can you tell us about how your year as the AIG Women's Open Champion has been so far.

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Good morning from our side, good afternoon to you guys. Obviously it's been a wonderful, what are we in, almost eight months, I guess, since winning the AIG Women's Open.

As you said in the beginning it was a bit of a whirlwind, a lot more adjusting to my time and people wanting a few more things from me at tournaments. Traveling around with the trophy has been a fun experience. Although as an extra piece of hand luggage, it is quite heavy, and that's been a good problem to have. It's been a really fun journey so far.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: So many of us in the room have had the pleasure of playing Watson Heath. From your side, do you know much about the course? Have you ever played before?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: No, I haven't ever played there. I've heard a lot of great things about it. I think with us being in the so-called greater London area, we've always had fantastic crowds. So I think we are going to look forward a great event being held at Walton Heath this year.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: The AIG Women's Open really marked a successful year for you. Can you talk to us about what that win at Muirfield did for your confidence?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Yeah, well, I think just gave me the belief, the extra belief in myself, that I needed to know that I could win in the biggest pressure situation and get the job done.

You know, I had won on the LET multiple times. I had not quite crossed the line on the LPGA. But then winning it in the fashion that I did kind of just sparked something in me, gave me that confidence.

So it's been the best, really, eight months of my career. Went down to Australia. Won the Australian Open; again, coming down the gun on the last few holes. Then went



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back to South Africa because my goal was then to hold three Open titles, National Open titles at the same time. I think that was the most pressure I put on myself being my home title and wanting to win really badly, and just managed to get the job done there.

In terms of my form and that, it's been a great eight months that I've never been able to have in my career, and it's been very exciting.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: What was it like for you to return home as a major champion?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: It was amazing. My home club there, Royal Johannesburg put on an evening where there were about 120 people that came, friends, family members. We did a whole, like, Q&A with people, and it was just so fun to be able to finally celebrate with the people that have really walked this journey with me since I was a kid and turned professional. They know the highs and lows that really go into being a professional golfer, so to finally get back to celebrate with them was truly special.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: When you reflect on Muirfield, what's the outstanding memory? What do you think of first?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: I still think the golf course. What an unbelievable golf course it was, and for us to be able to play there, and then to host the AIG Women's Open for the first time, what a great test it was. Everything ran so well that week from R&A side.

And I think obviously what comes into memory is the playoff; the fact how In Gee and I went head-to-head down the last, getting into the dark. We didn't know that that was going to be the last hole. I think also if we had known, that would have thrown another spin in the works but I think for our sakes, it was a good thing we didn't know the fourth was going to be the last playoff hole.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: This year at Walton Heath, the AIG Women's Open is introducing live music for the first time. We have Ellie Goulding joining us on the Saturday night. I guess one of the main goals for the R&A for doing that is trying to attract a new and diverse audience and to have large crowd supporting and out cheering you players on.



How important is it for you to be playing in front of big crowds and have that support?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: I think it's the best thing ever. We have always had really good crowds when we have come to Scotland and England. It's always been a really well supported championship obviously. The people in the U.K. are known for their golf etiquette, and everything about golf, they just love it.

But I think bringing in this different point of view into golf, trying to attract more people, maybe a younger generation to try and make it a bit more fun, I think is a fantastic way to attract new people to golf, and we got to experience that this year at the Hilton Tournament of Champions. They put on concerts every night. Ellie Goulding performed this year. She was amazing. We got to all go and watch. I think it's going to create some buzz around the tournament and some new excitement.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: That's great. My media colleagues have made me work hard up here but thankfully we have a question.

Q. I'd just like to cast your mind back to the final round, and it seemed like you had the tournament in the control and then later on there was a bit of a problem. How proud are you of how you sort of fought back from that and coped with it and forced the playoff?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Yeah, tremendously proud. I still say to this day, I feel like I hit one bad shot on the 15th hole which was the drive. Not many people saw, from what I heard, TV didn't quite show the lie I had in the bunker because it plugged up the face. I only had one way to go, which is the way I went. And before I knew it, obviously I made triple.

But the mental work I had done on my game stood me in good test for that moment, and again, it was really the first time I looked up at the leaderboard and I saw then I was tied for the lead.

I said to myself, well, I haven't lost the lead, which I think was a good point of view and my caddie said to me, all right, let's get back on it. And all I tried to do was what I had done that whole week was try and make one good swing and use my mental thought for my swing that week, and that's all I could try and do. You know, that got me in and obviously the rest is kind of history.

But I think very proud of myself to be able to fight back and finally come in and win the championship the way I did.

Q. The second question is a little bit of a wider one. Women's sport over the last sort of five or six years has had quite a revolution across all different sports. Golf's always been a bit more of an evolutionary sport but the increase in prize money has been a big change for women's major, especially. How do you think golf fits in that sort of wider sporting change that's happened with women's sport recently?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Yeah, I think we are right up there with it. Obviously the majors have taken on a step to bump all the purses up, and I think it's fantastic. Basically we are competing, the winner gets to take home almost \$1 million in all the majors now.

It's life-changing, especially for us, who average purses have probably been between 1.5 and 2 million every week. So to be able to have five majors and this opportunity to play for that amount of money, but at the same time all the other sponsors are finally starting to follow suit in every-week tournaments.

It is starting to increase, and I think it's fantastic with all women's sports that we are finally getting the recognition that we deserved.

Q. It's also just occurred to me that you've probably come up with the best major championship performance from a South African recently. Have you noticed that general golf in South Africa has reported your success more so than perhaps they would have done when the focus was more on the men's game prior to last year?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: I don't know, I think no matter who has been in the spotlight from the South African point of view, we are very passionate when it comes to all our sports. We've always got the recognition that we deserve when something does happen.

But I think me being female, again, having the long career, I was kind of touted to come out straight out the gates; the amateur who was going to be the next big thing. Won early on in my career and then as the game does, it ebbs and flows, and then finally reached a potential we all thought could happen.

But it was really exciting when I finally got to go home and experience that, like I said, at my home course, and then when I got to play the Investec South African Women's Open in March this year, to kind of feel that everybody was so appreciative that I had come back to play; a lot of the young girls that were excited to meet that I haven't met before because I've been out of the amateur game for 15 years. I'm hoping that will spark something particularly in

the women's game in South Africa.

Q. Given that you've not played here before, will you have any special preparation before you come over? Are you going to come earlier than you would normally come, given it's such a big tournament?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: No. With our schedule being the way it is, it's just not really possible. I'll be playing the two weeks before at the Evian Championship and the Women's Scottish Open the week before, so I'll be getting on site by Monday.

And I think you've got to treat every tournament the same. You've got to do the same preparation you do for every week, and you can't really put one on a bigger pedestal and than the other because I feel it creates more anxiety and more tension, and that's kind of what I've tried to do, whether it's, you know, this week we are playing in New York, or I rock up and I play any of the majors. Just try do the same preparation week-in and week-out to create consistency.

Q. You kind of hinted early on, you said the trophy had been on quite a tour. Any wild trophy stories from that?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: It's had a lot of alcohol drunk out by many, many people around the world. I went and played in Australia, and from there, I went back to South Africa, so it was fun to be able to -- we have plenty of friends in Australia. Went to South Africa, and it's been to Canada, all around the.

U.S. I've even got it here with me this week for the next four weeks because all the host families that I stayed with throughout the years in the US. They all want to see it, and mostly have a drink out of it.

It's been very special to share that with everybody, and it's kind of cool, though. It's been, I guess, now what I said, eight months or so. Every time somebody sees it, we get to relive what happened at Muirfield over again.

Yeah, it's been a very cool experience.

Q. And how many times have you watched back last year's performance?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Not many, to be honest. Kind of the first time I really watched it, and I fast-forwarded it, because everybody keeps speaking about Dave, my husband's reactions. So I wanted to see what he was going on about. Everybody said how funny it was.

Maybe I've watched the playoff about three times. While I was home in South Africa, they were playing it quite often, and we have a dedicated Golf Channel on Super Sports, and they were putting a rerun on. It was probably three times a day. One day we were at a house, at my parents house, a lot of friends were over and it came on, so we all sat down and watched it again, which was fun to do.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Heading into the championship this year, have you set any goals for your title defence?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: No, no goals yet. Obviously to rock up there and defend would be the ultimate goal.

But again, what I've learnt over past year and a half on the mental side is once you start setting outcome goals, that's where your mind kind of goes to and the way you achieve outcome goals is sticking to the processes.

I'll be just whatever state I'm in at that moment, wherever my game is at that time. Hopefully it will be going into good form so I can have a good week to try and defend. But the goal that week will be sticking to the processes and obviously I know there will be a little bit more hype around with me defending and I've just got to try and stay in my own bubble and do the best I can that week.

Q. I just wondered if you can describe how the ladies game has changed over the course of your career since your childhood.

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Yeah, if I just even look back, this is my 16th year as a professional. Obviously the money has changed tremendously in terms of what we are playing now from when I started.

I think the depth of the game is so much better. I think if you look back, every generation has had its greats, but I feel right now when you rock up to a tournament, I feel anybody can win, and I think it's starting to prove that. And if you even look at last year, how many of us in our 30s are starting to win that have won on the LPGA.

So obviously technology has helped. The way we train has helped, and I think the longevity is now becoming better for players that are more experienced and we are using that experience instead of our youth and strength to win golf tournaments.

But I think the depth of the game and how good it is right now, it's in such a good place at the moment.

Q. What would you like to see what happened next? What are the next steps for us?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Ultimately we want to be playing for more money every week. It still is a case of you look at, say, you look at the 20th person on the PGA TOUR where they finish on the Money List, they are still making easily over a million dollars. If you look at where 100 finishes on the LPGA, which is what keeps your card, you're looking at maybe \$250,000.

So the gap is still far too big, and unfortunately, with what it costs to travel these days, the experience, flights, caddies, accommodation, you're still just probably breaking even and coming out with a little bit of something, if you particularly don't have sponsors to start you off the next year.

It is very stressful from that point of view and I played like that for many, many years and only really in the last -- I said I've been pro 16 years now, probably only in the last six years, I wouldn't say I've had those stressors, making sure that I have to have X amount so that I can start off my next year. That's something that people don't really see from behind the scenes of what we have to go through.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: We have spoken a lot today about the growth of women's sport in general but also growth in participation for golf amongst women and girls. What would you say to any girls or women out there thinking about getting into the sport? What would your advice to them be?

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Well, you want to have to do it yourself. I feel a lot of parents unfortunately push their kid into any sport nowadays, not just golf, because they want them to be these superstars and obviously earn money and all that. But you have to have the love and passion for it, and I think that's why at 34 years old, I'm still doing this, because I was never pushed into it. My parents supported me, sure. My dad said, You need to practice, you need to do this if you want to be good. But he never said, You need to go do this.

So you need to have the love for it. You need to want to putt in the time, you have to have the patience and most of all, you just need to enjoy the journey of the whole process.

OLIVIA McMILLAN: Thank you so much for your time, and we really look forward to welcoming you Walton Heath as the AIG Women's Open Champion.

ASHLEIGH BUHAI: Thank you, really looking forward to it.

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