

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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Morgan Pressel
Kay Cockerill
Paige Mackenzie
Brandel Chamblee
Beth Hutter

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to our Golf Channel, NBC 2021 U.S. Women's Open media call. Today we're joined on the call by a number of members of our broadcast team, analysts Paige Mackenzie and Morgan Pressel; our on-course reporter, Kay Cockerill; lead studio analyst Brandel Chamblee; long-time Golf Channel producer Beth Hutter. Beth is producing the U.S. Women's Open coming up next week. And she'll make history as the first woman to produce the U.S. Women's Open.

We'll start with opening remarks.

BETH HUTTER: I just want to say that I'm really excited about this year's U.S. Women's Open. I know it's one of our oldest women's majors, our national championship. And what I know I'm looking forward to most is seeing them play Olympic Club, which is one of the most iconic clubs in our nation. We've seen the men play there numerous times.

And I know the women players are phenomenal. And I am really looking forward to seeing them bring their talents out to the Olympic Club.

THE MODERATOR: Speaking of Olympic Club, golfers are always looking for local knowledge. That's a nice segue into our on course reporter who certainly has local knowledge. We'll go to Kay next. Go ahead, Kay.

KAY COCKERILL: Definitely, thank you. I'm a Northern California product. I grew up about an hour south of San Francisco and just to have the U.S. Women's Open back in Northern California again, and then to have it at Olympic Club where I'm fortunate enough to be a member, I've been a member there since 2002, makes this upcoming

week incredibly special for me. I'm really proud of the fact that the Olympic Club is finally hosting their first national championship for women.

It's come a little bit too late, but at least it's happening. And I can't wait to watch all the women get a chance to walk the same fairways that the men have been able to walk for many years and create their own history. Everything that's going to happen next week is going to be a first.

It's going to be an inaugural, first round shot in the 60s, the first hole in run, the first string of birdies. These women are going to put everything down in history next week at the U.S. Women's Open. And I'm really happy to be a part of the group that's going to televise it.

MORGAN PRESSEL: I'm certainly excited to join the broadcast team for the Women's Open next week. It's a very special event for me, a lot of history that I've had in the championship and definitely my favorite event of the year -- like Kay and Beth both said, the biggest storyline is definitely Olympic.

We've seen -- really a lot of work has been done with the different organizations in golf and USGA certainly being one of them, trying to elevate the venues where we play. So to play at such a historic venue like Olympic Club where I've had the opportunity to play myself quite a few times, I think it's going to be a treat. It's going to be an incredible test of golf.

And obviously there's a lot of other storylines in terms of players looking for their first major, and certainly many past U.S. Women's Open champions that will be gunning for a repeat.

But I think Olympic Club is definitely the biggest storyline this week -- or next week, excuse me. And it's really tough. So I'm looking forward to seeing how the field takes it on.

PAIGE MACKENZIE: For me, this week is just so special. When I think about, as a child, growing up and wanting to play professional golf, this is the event that I pictured, playing for the national open championship. It was the biggest event on the schedule. It always created the greatest test for the players.

And it felt the most historic. It felt like you were a part of

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the history of golf, and not even just women's golf, just the history of golf. And I feel like it was a privilege to be able to call any of the U.S. Open action, because it really is just a really special week and a special event on the calendar.

And I echo what the other women on the call have said, which is anytime you get a chance to play a golf course that already has history and that you can become part of history, it makes it extra special.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I'm looking forward to being on site, sitting on the desk with Cara Robinson. I believe Paige Mackenzie is going to be up there as well. And to talk about, I think, some very interesting storylines that have materialized, with Lydia Ko's sort of re-emergence, and Inbee Park having played so beautifully in the U.S. Opens -- 14 times, she's got nine top-10s, she's got a couple of wins. If she were to win, she would join other three-time winners -- Babe Zaharias, Annika Sorenstam, Susie Berning and Hollis Stacy -- I think that's certainly a story I'll be having my eye on.

To echo Morgan Pressel's comments, it is a beast, Olympic. A U.S. Women's Open has been fortunate to be contested at some venerable venues like Oakmont, Winged Foot, Baltusrol, lower and upper. I think at least in terms of the golf courses I've played a U.S. Open on I've never played a tougher one than Olympic. I played there in '87 and '98.

If you look at the yardage of the golf course and you think about not only is it at sea level, just how typically chip heavy the wind is -- or, excuse me, the weather conditions are.

It's at least feasible to talk about this as a golf course that's going to play as the longest U.S. Open venue ever. We'll take Broadmoor aside because that's at altitude. But other than that you're talking about Blackwolf Run. But this golf course will effectively play as the longest U.S. Open women's golf course ever.

To that extent, how much will power play a role in the U.S. Open? It's become an increasing aspect of the U.S. Women's Open. The last three of four winners have finished eighth or better in driving distance. The one that didn't certainly is not short on power. That's Ariya Jutanugarn.

So, how much of a factor will power play in this? And the fairways at Olympic are notoriously hard to hit. I'm curious to see -- I've seen and watched all of Kay Cockerill's posts that she's been putting out about the -- Olympic's unique; it has a lot of doglegs. But the fairways will slope in the opposite direction of the doglegs. The over/under on us

hearing the phrase "reverse cambers" is like a thousand because it's a unique golf course in that regard. It's very hard to hit the fairway.

I'm curious to see and wanting to hear from Kay and Morgan about whether or not these fairways are playing firm, whether or not they're playing soft, because it will have a lot to do with the power, because most people will be -- they'll find it very difficult to find these fairways.

So, there's a lot to look forward to next week. Some great storylines. But of course at the top of everything is the golf course.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

Q. Brandel, who do you think this course favors?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Good question. If you look at players that have prevailed there in the past, they're certainly not the most powerful players. At least we're talking about the men's U.S. Open.

But again it will have a lot to do with how the golf course is set up. If the fairways are firm and fast as they were in 1987, it was almost impossible to find the fairways. Didn't matter how straight you were. You were still going to end up in the first cut of rough as they sort of slid down these canted fairways.

But, look, you can't get too far past Jin-young Ko or Inbee Park. I'm curious to see how Lydia Ko will play here. She's not the longest or straightest driver on the LPGA Tour. I'm curious to see how she'll work her way around the golf course.

Watching again to the degree that power has played into recent major championships, I can't wait to watch Patty Tavatanakit tee it up here. Brooke Henderson, I can't wait to watch her tee it up here. I'm curious to see if the lack of power will hurt Inbee Park. She has such a great U.S. Open record. But again I think this will be effectively the longest U.S. Open course ever. So will it tilt towards the power hitters? I think it will.

Q. Kay, curious about your thoughts on Paula Creamer coming back to the city where she was raised and first fell in love with the game. She's had some time off, but getting this opportunity on a special exemption to come back home, so to speak. I don't know if you've ever talked to her about her feelings about the Northern Cal Bay Area, but just curious what you think about her coming back to play Olympic?

KAY COCKERILL: I think her being given a special



exemption was an excellent decision. I can't think of too many that are more deserving of that. She's been such a big part of women's golf and Northern California golf. And this is really important to her.

She spoke a little bit about it last week at Kingsmill. She definitely still calls Pleasanton her home. She grew up playing Castlewood, which is about 45 minutes east. She's very much a Norcal gal, even though she's transplanted herself to Florida. I think it's appropriate that she's there. I'm excited for her.

I think it's going to be tough, really hard for her to manage and play all four days. What I saw out of her game at Kingsmill was a bit of rust. And unfortunately she was playing with A Lim Kim and Jessica Korda. And the difference in their distance off the tee was pretty significant at times, 25 to nearly 40 yards.

So Paula is striking the ball pretty solidly, but she's not a big hitter. And I think it's going to demand a lot from her off the fairways hitting longer shots in. But I'm glad that she's there. She brings a lot to the championship. She's a former champion.

She's played in numerous USGA events through the years as an amateur, junior amateur. So she's a big part of the championship this year, just being on site.

MORGAN PRESSEL: Yes, I certainly agree with just about everything that Kay said. Definitely giving her the special exemption in a situation where she wasn't, she didn't take advantage of her tenth exemption last year after winning at Oakmont in 2010. And being pretty much home for her I think she's certainly really excited about it.

But I do think it will be interesting to see the rough. I think getting a couple of rounds under her belt at Kingsmill was important towards shaking off the rust, and having another week here this week to work out some kinks. But having taken that much time off sometimes it's really challenging to throw yourself into arguably the most challenging test that any player will see all year. I think she's excited to have the opportunity and hopefully she plays well.

Q. Brandel, you mentioned playing at Olympic in '87 and '98, I hope you can elaborate on the challenges. What makes it so difficult. No player in '98 or 2012 finished below par for 72 holes. As you mentioned, the canted fairways are a big part of that. But here's a course with no water hazards. Only one fairway bunker, and it's historically tormented the top men's players. I'm curious if you can articulate sort of what makes it so difficult?

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: I'll give you an example. In '87, I tried to hit it up in the left-hand corner of the 17th fairway all four days. I hit what I thought were good tee shots. Excuse me, two days, because I missed the cut. But let's just say, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.

But we all stood on the tee, and we would all hit it in that left-hand corner of the fairway. We'd walk down there it would be in the first cut or in the rough. And you'd have a 1-iron back then. A 1-iron was an actual club. And you'd have some ridiculous long iron out of the rough to an uphill, very small target of a green.

It was almost impossible to hit that green in two. And that was to some degree true of even shorter holes than the 17, because the 17th was a converted par-5 that year. But that has a lot to do with it.

The thickness and the length of the rough was the worst I had ever seen. It was true that way in 1998 and the greens are notoriously slick. You can remember in 1998 Payne Stewart hitting a putt from pin high to the back, left pin. Hit a good putt, settled about a foot from the hole, and it rolled all the way to the front of the green.

I was first off Friday morning, I remember hitting a putt from the middle of the green on 18. It stopped by the hole and then rolled back to me 20 feet away or something.

So the greens were ridiculously slick, thick rough, lots of different, awkward lies. The ball above your feet, below your feet. It plays a little bit in terms of the awkward lies, like Augusta National, except it's chilly and the air is heavy and the ball just doesn't go very far.

You add all that up, and the greens are really small targets as well. So you add that all up -- I always found it to be the most difficult Open golf course that I've ever played.

Q. Morgan, I'm curious your take on Lucy Li, who is from here in the Bay Area. I don't know how much you've seen her play, because obviously she's not in the LPGA, she's been playing the Symetra. If you could speak about the challenges of bursting on to the scene young, as you did and as she has. She qualified for the Women's Open at age 11, as you probably recall, at Pinehurst. Now she's 18. What are sort of the challenges, and what do you think about her path -- turning pro at 17 and now being on the Symetra for a couple of years as she tries to make it to the LPGA?

MORGAN PRESSEL: I've not really watched Lucy play, so I'm looking forward to seeing it. My one real personal experience with Lucy was seeing her on the range at Pinehurst when she qualified. And I just remember looking

at her and thinking, oh, my gosh, was I that small when I was that young?

And it was cool to see her out there and her spunk and her passion and all of kind of the fun useful energy she brought to the Open then.

Yeah, it's tough when you're that young and thrown into a media spotlight. It takes a good team around you, great support from family to help you get through it all and manage it all.

Obviously she's got a lot of game to back it up. It's a little bit unfortunate with the situation regarding COVID and how it's just much more challenging this past year without the Q-Series and things like that to make it onto the LPGA Tour. But I have no doubt that she will at some point and the whole world will get to see her game week in, week out.

And I think she might be feeling a little bit of pressure playing at home. I would imagine hometown events like that and on such a big stage. But a little bit of youthful exuberance and kind of a rookie mentality sometimes does you well in those types of pressure situations.

Q. Beth, any unique or cool or high-end production elements that we can expect in terms of specialty cameras, graphics, anything of that nature? And as a follow-up to that, from your perspective, over the past year or two, whether it's more live aerials, more graphics, what are some things that have become a more common part of golf coverage that you feel have really added to your ability to tell the story of a live golf championship?

BETH HUTTER: So for this year at the Women's Open, I think the biggest thing this year is just the amount of hours we're on. Really excited to showcase basically as many players as we possibly can. We're on for 26 hours over four days. In addition to our broadcast, we also have featured groups that are on throughout the day all four days, which will be a separate production.

We have the use of drones this week at Olympic Club. I think they're going to be awesome showing a lot of the subtleties of the course that Kay and Brandel were talking about. We'll be able to see those a lot clearer.

The tracer, I think, is the thing that I think we've been seeing a lot more on our broadcasts. And I think for the women players, it showcases their strength and accuracy, which is the best part of their games. And I think that's what intrigued most people when they tune into the women's game is, A, how powerful they are. We watched

Patty Tavatanakit when she won her first major. And the amount of fairways hit -- how straight they hit a ball is really unbelievable. But if they need to cut it or fade it, they can absolutely do it.

So I think that tool on our broadcast is one of the neatest things to watch. And we're going to have a lot of them out at the Olympic Club.

Q. Paige, Kay, Morgan, what is it like working with Beth as a producer? And what does it mean to have her be the first woman to produce the first Women's Open?

PAIGE MACKENZIE: Beth's great. She's incredibly organized. She keeps it very fun, especially on weeks like this, where it's going to be a lot of long hours. She takes her job very seriously in making sure that the audience is getting the good storytelling of the players as well as highlighting the great golf.

I'm sure Beth can speak better to being a female in this role, but certainly being in the sports world where it has been so typically male dominated, it's obviously a big deal that she's been given this responsibility and she works week in, week out on the LPGA Tour. It's no surprise to us that know her. I don't think for us it feels as big of a deal, because she deserves to be put in this position.

KAY COCKERILL: Very well said, Paige. I've gotten to know Beth now for over 15 years or so. And she's become a very good friend of mine.

That said, I really admire her for her work ethic and her organization and just how she runs a telecast from top to bottom. And she does it in a very professional way. She gets the most out of those working for her. And everyone wants to do their best for Beth.

And Beth comes from an athletic background. She was a standout soccer player at UVA. And she played a multitude of sports. She's very competitive. She's taken to golf more recently in the last 10, 15 years, and has become quite a good golfer herself.

So she understands everything about the game and everything about competition and what it takes to win and lose. And really goes above and beyond in her preparation, thinking of other storylines and coming up with graphics and side stories. And she sometimes gets us to think outside the box, hey, what's happening with XYZ players.

Like Paige said, she has produced men's events as well. So she's very versed as a producer. And it's about time

that she does a U.S. Women's Open. It's hard to believe that this will be just her first one producing, because she'll slip right into the chair and it will be like she's done a dozen of them.

MORGAN PRESSEL: I agree with you, Kay and Paige. It's about time. And I have only worked with Beth, let's see, is this our third week, I think, now, Beth, it will be. She's had a lot of patience with me, which I really appreciate, too. But like Paige said, she keeps it light. There's a lot of laughs in your ear through the telecast, and keeping it fun.

Helping, she's especially helping me learn the ropes, understand my job, my role and how we can communicate better throughout the telecast to add more insight and to be the first woman to produce the Women's Open, there's nobody more deserving of that opportunity. And I definitely think it's about time.

KAY COCKERILL: By the way, she's also an out-of-town member at the Olympic Club, so has that connection as well.

Q. Kay and Paige, going back to, following up on the question about Lucy Li, just your own philosophy about a path like hers. And I don't know that you have to speak specifically to her, but incredibly talented at a young age, succeeds at a young age. And now she's chosen not to go to college. She's grinding on the Symetra. Her stats aren't that great. Her results are decent. Can you guys speak to your own thoughts about a person taking this path rather than a college path to get more experience and have that experience?

PAIGE MACKENZIE: I think when you are speaking with somebody, whether it's Lucy or any other, what I would call prodigy, certainly the average 11-year-old is not going to be qualifying for the U.S. Women's Open. So when you're talking about such a gifted player, I don't think there's a playbook. I don't think there's a path that is the right way to do it.

I feel, and I'm empathetic towards the parents who are trying to navigate how do you best allow your child to challenge themselves and to continue to get better and to provide those opportunities but still realize they're young. And so I don't have a strong opinion on a player that's just trying to figure that out.

I know there's been a lot of mistakes made and a lot of successes in young golfers who have been successful at a young age. My path, I went to college, but I certainly wasn't anywhere near the level to try to compete at the highest level at a young age. That was the path for me;

that's what I needed.

Other players that are young they need the challenge to stay competitive and motivated and all that. That's my general take on it. Unfortunately it's not real specific because I don't think you can have one way to do it right.

Q. Kay, do you know Lucy well, played with her much? And what are your thoughts about her path?

KAY COCKERILL: I haven't really played with her, but I know she was out at Olympic Club. I saw her out there several times. I think she played the course at least three, if not four, times in the last time. And I actually hooked her up with a member at Olympic Club, Daniel Connolly, who just played his last year at SMU. He was on the SMU team -- and I think he's pondering whether he's going to turn pro or not. He's going to caddy for her. He's a fine young man and a really good player.

I'm a big proponent of going to college and at least having a couple of years of college to learn how to become more independent and more well rounded and learn to be a little more on your own and separate yourself from your family and start like becoming that independent person that you hope to be for the rest of your life.

But Lucy is a very smart young woman. She's very intelligent. And I think she would have flourished in college. But I think she's also still working and always working on herself mentally to become even smarter and more educated.

It's a tough grind to jump into professional golf at a young age. And I think even those that have won everything around them and transition into professional golf, there's no guarantee that they're going to succeed.

Who knows? Maybe she peaked at 14, 15. Maybe her peak days are up ahead. Who knows? But she's a nice young kid. And she has a passion for the game. She's choosing to follow it. I wish her the best. But it's not going to be an easy road.

Q. Kay, you know the course as well as anybody on this call. How does the USGA handle all that we've talked about, all the challenges of Olympic? Because they've done a great job at Oakmont and Pinehurst of really kind of creating the same experience. And I know Shannon's trying to do the same there. How do you think she can accomplish that? How can the USGA accomplish kind of making it the same test and not overdoing it?

KAY COCKERILL: Shannon Rouillard is the lead setup

person, and she's been looking at all the information from the last years of the men's competition there. And she's been analyzing the fairways and how wide they were and what the percentage of fairways hit was.

And she also contacted quite a few players that played in various U.S. Opens and asked what clubs they hit in on certain holes, the average clubs they had in.

And she's trying to set the course up sort of relatively speaking that the women will have roughly the same clubs in. She's not doing an intermediate cut. She's doing fairway cut to rough, which is pretty, actually, severe, because when you do get the ball rolling and releasing on the side tilts, it's going to end up next to the three-and-a-half-plus-inch vertical cut of rough. And that's going to be very penalizing.

I thought that was pretty severe. And who knows, maybe she'll change. You never know; we have another week. They might come and decide they're going to rip through and put an intermediate cut in. She's doing three and a half inches of rough for nine feet and then four and a half, four-plus inches there on after.

It's pretty extreme. I don't know that the fairways are going to be as tight and as firm and fast as they were for the men's Open. And maybe that's the way they're going to widen the fairways just a tad, that they're not going to be running 13 on the Stimpmeter and ending up in the rough like they did the last couple of times.

And maybe the greens won't be as firm and fast. They might be a half a foot or a foot less speed. Those are things we're all going to see next week.

Even Shannon, I've known her for a long time, she doesn't give up everything. And she's analyzed the hole location. She knows all the hole locations and what's worked and what hasn't.

She's done a tremendous amount of in depth looking at the past. She was also out for several of the practice rounds early that I went out and played with some of the gals in town. She watched us. And she asked questions. And she'll talk to players, what do you think? What about this?

So she's very, very -- she brings in a lot of knowledge, and it's not just -- she's not just flying by the seat of her pants. There's a method to her madness, and we'll see what they end up coming up with come next Thursday.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Kay, did she say why she wasn't going to have an intermediate cut? Did she give a reason for that?

KAY COCKERILL: She felt like the fairways were plenty wide and that they've done this cut, this no intermediate cut. And there's been precedent for it in past championships. And she felt like the fairways were wide enough to not warrant having an intermediate cut.

I was like, well, they were kind of wide, but they're really half as wide because they're tilted. So there again I think, Brandel, I think if they're not as tight and firm and fast as they were the last few, maybe that is true.

BRANDEL CHAMBLEE: Gotcha. It just sounds like there's going to be a lot of people up against the three-and-a-half-inch cut because the ball rolls out sideways and that's --

KAY COCKERILL: She talked about cutting the rough with like a bezel -- I'm sorry, I can't remember if it was bevel or bezel cut -- which actually angles it a little bit, which would make it a little easier.

Q. Beth, because you can go commercial-free, how excited are you? And what opportunities does this present?

BETH HUTTER: Great question. I love commercial-free. I do the Evian Championship over in France for the world feed, and we do not take commercials. And I love it. I love not missing a single shot of action.

And that said, I mean it just opens the door to being able to show so much more; getting the shot slightly earlier, as opposed to waiting for a break, trying to time that out, and seeing all the interaction, player/caddie, as they get up to their ball, being able to maybe tell a few more stories.

You can hang on some players. And even just getting in more shots, I think that's the most exciting part. And like Kay and Brandel, everyone said, just like everyone said, this course is so neat and all the different nuances of this course, we're going to be able to tell those stories so much more.

Q. Kay, has your phone been ringing off the hook with players looking to play some practice rounds with you and try to gain some local knowledge? And then in general, how fast can somebody learn this golf course, or do you think whoever else thinks this may play into somebody who has had some experience there before?

KAY COCKERILL: I was home for about three weeks the week before last. And I played practice rounds with In-gee Chun and Austin Ernst, Gaby López, Sei-young Kim, Lydia

Ko. I had played with Yealimi -- Yealimi Noh had come in but I don't think she qualified for the Open. Yeah, it was interesting to see some of the players that came in early, either on their way to Asia or coming back or after the ANA.

Funny, though, they asked me a few questions and the tendency of the hole and where you don't want to miss it. But most of the time they're just kind of getting a general sense of the course and really the lines off the tee, where you want to hit it so that when they come back for real and they really dive into some of the more details, they've already got the kind of -- laid the ground work. They know the course, the routing, the general lines off the tee, then they can work on the detail work.

Last week in Kingsmill I had a lot of players come up to me and ask me about the course, what's it like, what do you need to do to play well. So I was answering them as best I could and encouraging them, just saying it was pretty traditional. Like, you can't go wrong if you end up in the middle of every green, because they're small.

If you were in the front, middle front of every green you'd be in great position to have a relatively shortish birdie putt or an easily 2-puttable putt. And I said work on your short games and bring extra layers, just pack layers, because you think you're going to California, it's going to be 72 degrees, 75 degrees. Not the case.

Q. Paige and Morgan, do you think this plays into those who have either come in early or have talked with Kay or have played with Kay, do you think there's any kind of advantage for those players?

PAIGE MACKENZIE: I've not been on property. I'm one of those players, asking Kay for all the information. We set up a time where I'm going to walk with her and pick her brain. So absolutely, Kay is the most valuable asset out there. But certainly there's the advantage to see the golf course ahead of time.

MORGAN PRESSEL: I mean, for me I always like to see the U.S. Open course early. I feel like it takes pressure off the week itself. You don't have to feel like you're playing 18, 18, 18 to learn a new golf course.

I would always try to get a local caddie to come with me or whatever it might be somebody who knows the golf course. But in this situation, who knows this golf course and how to play a U.S. Open more than Kay Cockerill.

So that's just any player who took advantage of that, and Kay was generous enough to help a lot of players and still continues to do so. And I think it's really smart and the

players will have a little bit more course knowledge and I think a little bit less pressure in their preparation going into the week.

Q. People talk about how familiarity with a course helps a player. How does familiarity with a course help a broadcaster?

KAY COCKERILL: That's good. Well, I don't have to go out early and really scout the course before the round because I know it so well. I will of course be paying attention to hole locations because the USGA may put, they'll put the holes in places we don't see day-to-day as members.

And the tee box locations will change. Shannon has it set up at the max distance, but they like to move the tee boxes around.

But, yeah, it makes my life a little bit easier in that regard, because when you first go to a course, sometimes you can't remember, what's the 15th hole, what's the 7th hole. I don't have to tax my brain too much about thinking which hole, that hole location, wow, that's going to be really brutal, that's going to be one to pay attention to. So those things will come very naturally for me.

And that gives me extra time to focus more on the players and what they think of the course and how they're attacking it and maybe their season leading up to this point.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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