

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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Karen Stupples

Kay Cockerill

Morgan Pressel

Tom Abbott

Jerry Foltz

Press Conference



Pine Needles, the first place I played a professional event when I qualified as a 12 year old back in 2001; played again in the final group in 2007. It's just such an incredible test of golf. I actually also covered the U.S. Women's Senior Open there. I believe that was in '19.

So just a lot of history; all Hall-of-Famers who have won there in the past, the three times previously that we've played. It just is an incredible test of golf.

Women's Open is always my favorite event, was always the biggest event on my schedule, and I'm excited to be calling the action this year.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, Morgan. We'll go next over to Tom Abbott. Go ahead, Tom.

TOM ABBOTT: Good to be with you. Looking forward to it. It's going to be my 48th women's major that I'm going to work for Golf Channel and NBC, so ticking close to 50, which should happen at the Amundi Evian Championship. It's been an incredible run, and I'm really looking forward to seeing how this plays out.

I think there's a number of different storylines if you look at the top players from the U.S.; we've got some question marks about a couple of players in terms of Danielle Kang and Nelly Korda. Danielle struggling a little bit with her form, Nelly obviously with her fitness, but looking to return for the U.S. Women's Open.

So I think it's going to be very exciting. You look at the amateur contingent in the field, it's extensive, and I think that's going to be a fascinating story. Wouldn't surprise me if an amateur player challenges next week maybe all the way until the end. We've seen that before at the U.S. Women's Open.

And then of course Michelle Wie West. Was with her here in Las Vegas last week for a corporate event, and she was very keen to play next week. But obviously the recent news that she's going to scale back her career after next week's U.S. Women's Open, so that's obviously going to be a big story. She's been a huge character in the game, so I think she'll get a lot of attention.

Really looking forward to it. I think it's going to be a really big week for NBC Sports.

THE MODERATOR: Hello, everybody. Thanks for joining today's NBC Sports U.S. Women's Open media conference call.

In a moment we're going to be joined by a number of our commentators from our broadcast team, including Morgan Pressel, Tom Abbott, Jerry Foltz, Karen Stupples, and Kay Cockerill.

NBC Sports is going to surround the U.S. Women's Open with more than 25 hours of live coverage on NBC, USA Network, and Peacock next week.

It marks USA Network's return to golf a little bit having hosted golf coverage of events such as the Masters, the Ryder Cup, and events from the PGA TOUR in the past.

So USA Network is certainly no stranger to golf. We'll also have some exclusive windows on Peacock and we'll have featured groups coverage on Peacock each day, as well as live from the U.S. Women's Open which is going to be on-site providing studio coverage leading into and following each round on Golf Channel.

MORGAN PRESSEL: Thanks, Jamie. I'm certainly super excited to go back to Pine Needles. It is a special place for me personally, a special place certainly for the women's game.

I guess the story this year probably being the \$10 million purse, largest purse ever, and the partnership of the USGA and ProMedica jumping on board really trying to draw attention to the pay gap and helping us continue to get closer there.



THE MODERATOR: Next we'll go to Jerry Foltz.

JERRY FOLTZ: I've never been to the course, but I am looking forward to it. Never been to Pinehurst, that entire area. So being kind of the cradle of golf -- not really history, I guess, but so coveted amongst golf purists, I'm looking forward to seeing it, visiting it, watching the ladies play, and I'm looking for some of the storylines that could play out.

Tom mentioned, hinted at a couple, but Nelly Korda, her family has been so guarded with information about her recovery from the blood clot, understandably, too, because one Tweet and you get people saying crazy things to you.

But the one thing her dad did tell me was you have no idea how much it hurts her to be watching this today, and that was on Thursday of the Chevron Championship.

I think she would love to make a big splash and return in a big way, if indeed she is fit and healthy to play. I know she has a press conference scheduled early in the week.

Lexi Thompson who's playing great coming in, and the U.S. Open is always about ball-striking and nobody is better; maybe statistically not as good, but statistics can lie sometimes, and I think she's definitely on the very short list of favorites.

Jin Young Ko doesn't seem to be at the top of her game right now or she would definitely be No. 1 favorite on most experts' opinion.

And Danielle Kang is a question mark. She's not seemingly playing her best right now. Didn't play well yesterday in her first match at Bank of Hope Match-Play here in Vegas.

A lot of great storylines to look forward to, and it's just something really special with what Mike Whan has done in his new leadership at the USGA to bring the purse to \$10 million and really help narrow that pay gap that Morgan mentioned.

KAY COCKERILL: Well, there's not too much more to cover than we've heard already, but I am really happy to be here or be there next week. It will be my 21st U.S. Women's Open that I've covered, and fortunate enough to have played in five early on in my career as I was an amateur transitioning into professional golf before I hit the big brick wall and moved into the media side of things.

My first U.S. Women's Open was in '95 at the Broadmoor watching Annika win there, and she was obviously

well-known in college and had a good amateur career, but she was not really on anyone's radar.

She kind of came from behind and beat Meg Mallon and Pat Bradley, some of the big names in the game, and then pretty cool that we'll be there. I was there in '96 when she won again back-to-back.

And then think about Karrie Webb, who also played in the 2001 U.S. Women's Open at Pine Needles, and she would win back-to-back, as well. She had won the previous year. So kind of a neat connection there.

And also seeing Annika tee it up again this year will be very interesting by virtue of her easily winning the U.S. Senior Women's Open last year.

I actually played in the U.S. Senior Women's Open at Pine Needles, and even though I had covered two previous Women's Opens there, until you play the course and you realize just how diabolical those greens are and you almost have to find a 15- or 20-foot center of every green no matter where the hole is located otherwise your ball is rolling off the sides of the green, until you play it, it's remarkable how challenging the course is.

I look forward to watching the best in the game try to tackle it this year.

THE MODERATOR: Go ahead, Karen.

KAREN STUPPLES: It's awesome being in last place because everyone said everything already that can possibly be said.

Putting my own little spin on things, obviously the storylines have been covered, the players, everything, everything that's going on there with those.

For me, what I'm going to find most fascinating about going there, like Jerry, I've never been there, so this will be my first trip to Pine Needles. I have been to Pinehurst but not Pine Needles.

What I'm really looking forward to and having read through what a number of players have said about it, particularly the past champions, Sorenstam, Webb, and Kerr, Webb says knowing where the slopes are on the greens and knowing where the ball will feed off means precision iron play.

Kerr won by making a ton of saves.

And Annika played very much precision golf, as well. But all three of them went into that tournament knowing -- into

the championship knowing that they were in good form, that they were playing well, that they had what it was going to take to win that week.

When I look through players that have been playing well, players that are ready to be tried and tested this week, Lexi Thompson has been on the verge of playing well, Hannah Green there or thereabouts, Jin Young Ko, as Jerry was saying, has yet to find some form. She hasn't been hitting as many greens as she normally does, and that's going to be a big factor around Pine Needles.

A player that nobody has mentioned yet is Brooke Henderson. She's taken some time off, so hopefully she can come in being pretty fresh.

But for me the interesting thing is how these players, this course, it's incredibly tricky, how they're going to handle those runoff areas and the slopes in the green, what's going to challenge them short game wise.

And the other thing, will Yuka Saso be another player to go ahead and back up the victory with another one. Webb was the last person to do it in '01; Annika did in '96. Can Saso did it this year? It's been 20 years, so it could be time.

Q. There's been a lot of discussion already about the purse at the Women's Open next week, and I know that's going to be a really big storyline heading into the tournament week. But I'm kind of curious, looking at the sort of light of women's sports in a different light, I'm wondering what responsibility do you guys feel as the people covering the women's game to showcase the sport sort of in its most entertaining light?

KAREN STUPPLES: I think we all feel a tremendous responsibility to cover women's golf in the best light possible. Obviously you want to watch golf for entertainment fact, but I think a lot of the entertainment comes from the competition, and it comes from the play that the players are displaying, and how we describe their play and their shots and what they're actually doing on the golf course.

(Indiscernible) perhaps it should be about the competition. It should be about the matchups that you're seeing and who's going to prevail and who's got the game that's going to win on certain golf courses at certain times, and what have they been doing to make that an opportunity for them to win.

So for me it's about us talking about the competition, and I think we all feel very passionately about it. Every single one of us, on all of our careers and our teams that cover

women's golf, whether it's -- I've just come from the NCAA Women's Amateur Championship -- to amateur tournaments, Curtis Cups, whatever it is, so professional events, the women's game in general, we all feel a huge responsibility to help promote them, but promote them in a manner that (indiscernible) appreciate their skill and their talents as much as anything else.

JERRY FOLTZ: I'd like to piggy-back on Karen's comments really quick. Not only do I agree with them, it's one thing to want to present it in the most fresh and entertaining fashion, but in doing so, not to take away from the competition, not to take away from describing the golf the way it should be described.

Because the credibility doesn't come from us telling you how great they are. The credibility comes from them showing you how great they are, and all we can do is set it up and describe the action.

They should be appreciated for their skill more than anything else, for how incredible they are, how tough they are down the stretch, so many of them. If we become cheerleaders for women's sports and women's golf, that becomes quite transparent.

I think the actual -- the growth of the fan base comes from people appreciating the quality of play, and we can sit here -- because each one of us will tell you how great the quality of play is until we're blue in the face, but until you understand what goes into these shots, what goes into their emotions, what goes into winning a major championship against probably the deepest pool of talent women's golf has ever seen, that's where you become a fan.

That's where you fall in love with the players and the women's game. Because it's a different game than the men's, but in many, many aspects they play a far better game than the men because they have to.

I think that comes through in our broadcast as much as anything else, and I think that's why year over year for the last 12 years the ratings have continually ticked up for LPGA Tour on Golf Channel and NBC and on the other various platforms.

TOM ABBOTT: I think when you look at sports broadcasting in general, it's very rare that one network or broadcast partner has exclusive access and rights to every event.

That's kind of the case for NBC Sports Group with the LPGA. As a group, we do pretty much everything single event that there is, especially from the U.S.



As a group we don't tend to do the events in Asia, but they air on our network, but all of the domestic events and those in Europe we are part of.

And so I think you do have a connection with the product maybe more so than some other groups who don't do every event, and I think in terms of taking responsibility, I don't think it's necessarily our responsibility to push up the purses.

I think we need to concentrate on what we're doing as broadcasters, but I think we certainly feel a responsibility in entertaining the audience and producing a great product, and I feel like as a group we do that.

I think we do have a pretty strong connection to this Tour, and I think when you look at some of the opportunities that the players have on the women's side compared to the men's, it does trouble you a little bit.

I think this week is very important in terms of purse equality and the players earning a lot of money like the men do.

I think there is a sense of -- I think we're happy that this is moving in the right direction, and I don't think we can take credit for that in any way, but I think it certainly is a nice -- it's nice to know that we're involved in this movement as the purses begin to tick up.

I think it's going to be a very important week, and I know as a group we're going to be very excited to see how that affects the play. This is going to be a huge amount of money for players coming down the stretch.

The majority of the top players, I'm not sure that will change their mindset, but there are definitely going to be players competing on Sunday who this is going to be kind of a life-changing day for them, so I think that'll be very interesting as part of the storyline.

Q. I have an Annika question. I was just hoping one or several of you could put in perspective how difficult it is to come back to a major after such a long layoff, and then maybe weigh in on what you expect from Annika next week. Thank you.

KAREN STUPPLES: For me with Annika, I've had a lot of time off away from golf, as well, and so for me, to mentally prepare myself if I was to go and try and do something like Annika is doing now, it would be almost -- like the mountain would almost seem a little too high.

I watch the women play week in, week out now and their golf games are just ridiculously good. The increase in

talent level and depth on Tour has exponentially grown since Annika stepped away and since I stepped away. It just continues year in, year out to get better.

With that in mind, knowing that you're up against competition that's deeper than you've ever competed against. I'm not taking away from her competitors in their prime. You think of the Se Ri Paks and the Karrie Webbs, and we can't take anything away from them.

But in terms of depth of competition, it's not really much of a comparison. It's just so deep right now.

I do think that she is super competitive and always has been, and she throws herself at it like nobody else would, but you cannot escape Mother Nature and age, and she knows she's at a disadvantage now.

She doesn't hit it as she used to hit it distance-wise. She's going to be behind a lot. It's going to be a little tougher for her in terms of putting that scoring in. She's a full-time mom and she's a businesswoman and she's got everything else going on, as well.

She's not only trying to compete against players that all do is just play golf, but she has a whole 'nother life away from golf, as well. So she's going to try and channel that to try and compete, to try and play.

And she's been very good recently about keeping everything in perspective and about how she goes about it, and I think people genuinely are curious and interested in how she does it.

But to me, the fact that she's trying and that she wants to do this speaks a testament to her competitive nature and how much she wants to do this for her kids and for her family, just to prove to them, again, look, you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it.

It's a pretty big deal what she's doing right now.

KAY COCKERILL: Well, I think about Helen Alfredsson who won the Senior Women's Open at Pine Needles, and she did not take the opportunity to play in the Women's Open after that, although she had a spot. That's an example of just knowing her own parameters.

You know how much more difficult it is to try to go out and compete with 20-year olds and teens on a golf course that's several hundred yards longer than you're playing in the Senior Women's Open.

But Annika always has a game plan and a strategy for whatever she does. She is the best at preparing for things.



I think she's going to prepare the best she can. She's played a few events, few LPGA events and celebrity events and gotten a little bit of competition under her belt. I think it's very brave of her to tee it up, but I admire her for doing it.

MORGAN PRESSEL: Yeah, I agree. Just even seeing what she did after 13 years off from competitive golf, to come back and win the Women's Senior Open last year, it's truly incredible.

Annika has (indiscernible) so hard. She was working hard to get to that point of teeing up there; that was a huge goal for her. Don't doubt her in any fashion. She has really been working hard leading up to this, like Kay said, getting some (indiscernible) under her belt, and I'm sure there's a bit of nostalgia (indiscernible); special place. Maybe if it was at a different venue she would potentially feel differently.

But I think it's really neat, especially for her kids, Will and Ava, to watch her compete on the biggest stage again, and I think it's going to be fun to watch.

Her making the cut at Lake Nona, was it January, February? Was just a really impressive feat. She definitely does not hit it as far as she did when she was on top of her game.

So the length, I think, will be a bit of a struggle. But she is a competitor like maybe nobody we've ever seen in the women's game, so it'll be fun to watch her compete again.

JERRY FOLTZ: I'll add just a really quick comment for you. Annika to me is one of the most impressive athletes I've ever been around on and off the sporting field.

The curiosity for me is how she's going to make the cut this week, because she is going to make the cut. She doesn't know how not to. Unlike my playing career, Annika doesn't make plane reservations on Saturday morning in advance. She will find a way to be there and make her family proud, and you never know, she might make a little noise -- not a lot I don't think, but she'll figure out a way to get it done, play the weekend, and prove to us once again, like Morgan said, how competitive and determined she is and how when she sets her mind to something she does it.

This is a huge goal for her, and I'm so happy that she's playing.

Q. For the players on Tour this year who haven't played well up until now, haven't made much money but qualified their way into the U.S. Women's Open,

how valuable of an opportunity does this major and its \$10 million purse present to turn their season around not just for CME points and status but just economically, as well?

KAY COCKERILL: Yeah, I'll start. Yeah, it's huge. You look back, and when this championship -- when I first started working it in '95 or '96 when it was here, what, the purse was \$1.2 million, winner's share \$212. Now \$10 million purse, \$1.8 to the winner.

I think Tom said it earlier, it's going to be interesting to see how these women handle it down the stretch. Even if you're not going to win the tournament, finishing top 20, finishing -- just making the cut and having that amount of money in your bank account is going to be huge, life-changing, like Tom said.

But what I've noticed is these women, when you give them the stage, a grand stage to compete on, a great golf course, and you put cameras on and then you boost the purse, they rise to the occasion.

In the U.S. Open, the USGA events, always there's this feeling of it's very democratic; everyone earned a way to get in there and everyone is deserving of that spot. It's almost like you can come into it as someone who's a, quote, no-name and feel like I'm on equal ground; anything is possible this week; let's start from ground zero here and see who can come out the best.

I think for a lot of these players who haven't done anything, shoot, a top 25, top-10 finish would be like winning.

MORGAN PRESSEL: Yeah, Kay, I agree with that. It's truly life-changing. I think about it even more so than players with LPGA (indiscernible) on mini-Tours or on the Epon Tour certainly specifically who have never had the opportunity to play for any kind of a large purse, let alone this kind of money.

And it's a hard life playing the mini-Tours, especially in the women's game. There's not very much money, often driving to events, often wondering where their next paycheck is going to come from.

To think that they have the opportunity this week or next week to post a top 20 and just really make life a little bit easier for themselves while they are grinding to make it to the LPGA Tour, because obviously they have the talent to do it -- I mean, I watched certainly my sister play on the Epon Tour for many years, and it's a tough life, and with it, like Kay said, the qualification process, these women earn their spot.

Now they have the opportunity of a lifetime.

KAREN STUPPLES: Well, honestly, the thought of a \$10 million purse just absolutely blows my mind, to be perfectly honest. I don't even know how to think about money in those terms and how -- and what it means going into your bank account, what the potential is there in one big chunk, even for like a 30th place or a 40th place.

I mean, that's just -- I can't even conceptualize it in my own mind. To me, this is just such a big step. I mean, I can't even wrap my head around it.

But I will tell you this: When I was in my first year on Tour and I was just trying to keep my Tour card, I was trying to just do well, I had my first ever top 10 in Springfield at the State Farm Classic it was, and I earned \$22,000.

I felt like I had won the jackpot lottery. Literally I felt like I was the richest person alive because I had never seen that kind of money going into my bank account ever.

With the potential -- and the total purse at Springfield was \$750,000.

So to think about the total purse being \$10 million, I just can't wrap my head around what a difference this could possibly make for somebody. I can't even properly speak about it because it's just -- I mean, my goodness, what a move this is.

Q. Morgan, just wanted to know what stands out the most when you think about your experiences at Pine Needles, particularly competing so young in 2001 and then being in contention Sunday in '07.

MORGAN PRESSEL: Yeah, I mean, they were both very special experiences for me, playing in 2001, that was really my first opportunity. I had only been playing golf for four years. I had watched certainly my idols on TV.

I think actually one of the first events I really remember watching was the Women's Open when Se Ri Pak won at Black Wolf Run against Jenny Chuasiriporn in a playoff. I just remember being glued to the television for that.

So to be out there as a young kid, and I remember there being rain delays and I didn't want to leave the locker room because I was just so star struck being just even in the same room as all of these people that I had watched on TV.

And for me that was life changing because that was the moment where I decided that this is what I wanted to do. I'm going to do everything that I can to play golf for a living,

and that really was -- that's the most where it really became my dream to play on the LPGA Tour.

Then in 2007 I was right there in contention coming down the stretch. To watch my friend Cristie win, Lorena, of course, just doing Lorena things, playing incredible golf. Definitely disappointing for me. I'd say it took me a little bit of time to kind of collect myself and get over that one.

But two completely different experiences in my two times competing at Pine Needles, but it's just a really special place and I'm excited to go back.

Q. This is a question for the group. What kind of test do you think Pine Needles will provide for these players, and does the course favor any type of specific skill set over another?

KAY COCKERILL: I think ball-striking first and foremost because the greens are so severe. It's not that demanding off the tee. Some holes -- there's some tight holes, but you have a little bit of leeway off the tee, but it's about iron play and being really precise on your approaches, otherwise you've got these edges of the greens that just melt off.

Your ball doesn't just go off the edge of the green, it gets taken 20, 30 yards away. Someone that's struggling with ball-striking is going to have to have a really great short game, and we're talking total creativity, being able to putt off the greens, hybrid off the greens, hit lob shots off of tight lies.

I just think ball-striking is number one first and foremost and a great short game. Usually, like most USGA championship courses, they demand everything out of your game. But if you're striking it well, you're going to have a good chance to win.

MORGAN PRESSEL: Yeah, I would definitely echo that. I mean, like you said, a USGA championship, it demands literally everything. You can't be weak really in any aspect of your game that week.

But I think the number one thing that comes to my mind when I think about Pine Needles is creativity. Creativity around the greens, creativity to hit different types of shots into the greens to be able to hold the greens wherever the hole location may be.

And I just think somebody, as usual, with a hot putter is going to do very well, because the greens are very severe and you have to -- even be creative on the putting surface to see the lines properly, to see the speed.

I feel like U.S. Opens more than any event demand a good



five-foot putter, somebody who's really making those clutch par saves coming down the stretch. Those are kind of the things that I really think about when I think about Pine Needles.

KAREN STUPPLES: Jumping off of Morgan there, Cristie Kerr says that she did it by making a ton of putts, and she was making 30-footer par saves. So just to add a little bit of context to Morgan's comment there.

I would also say that you definitely need an ability to hit your targets with distance control. Everything has to be so precise there. You've got to really be disciplined with your targets, and you've got to have the ability to produce the shot when you need to.

With regards to the short game, I go back -- obviously I've not been to Pine Needles -- but I go back to Pinehurst, and I remember watching Martin Kaymer win the U.S. Open at Pinehurst.

He didn't do anything but take a putter from around the greens. He had one shot and he had practiced it all week, and he used it every single chance he had an opportunity. He didn't try and play 15 different shots or try and practice 15 different shots. He perfected the one shot, so every time he was in that position he knew what he had to do and he did it.

Sometimes he had to play away from the flags because of it, but the overall was that he was able to achieve doing that.

I think players need to go into this week with a game plan. They need to be very strategic, and they need to be not emotionally connected to the outcome. They've got to be somewhat detached from a bad bounce or a bad break or a tough spot. That comes down to that mental discipline that you expect from a U.S. Open.

All these qualities when you think about the winners here, Annika, Karrie Webb, Cristie Kerr, yeah, they check every single box that the three of us have just talked about.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everybody, for joining, both in the media and to our commentators.

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