

Aramco Saudi Ladies International Presented by Public Investment Fund

Tuesday, 15 March, 2022

King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia
Royal Greens Golf & Country Club

Maha Haddioui Ines Laklalech Lina Belmati

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for joining us today for our preview press conferences ahead of this week's Aramco Saudi Ladies International presented by Public Investment Fund.

Today we are treated to a press conference from our three Arabic players in the field, three Moroccans: Ines Laklalech, Maha Haddioui, and Lina Belmati over on the far end.

Maha, we'll start with you. Welcome back to Saudi Arabia. How pleased are you to be back at the Aramco Saudi Ladies International?

MAHA HADDIOUI: As always, I'm really happy to be here. I was here on the course four years ago, and to see the shape it is in today, it is something really amazing the work they've done. Even the tournament, the way it's evolved every year, really happy to be here, and I'm sure I can speak on behalf of all the players, it's a great tournament. We're all really excited to play it.

THE MODERATOR: Ines, you are here for your second Aramco Saudi Ladies International, but this will be your first as an LET professional and what will be your first event as an LET professional. How excited are you for this week?

INES LAKLALECH: I'm obviously very excited to play this week. Like you said, it was my first LET event here in 2020 and amazing experience. To be able to play this course as a first experience, it was great. I'm very happy to be here, especially in an Arab country like Saudi Arabia. Yeah, looking forward to this week.

The course is in great shape. Very excited to start the week.

THE MODERATOR: Awesome. Lina, we'll come to you

for the same thing. This is also your first event as an LET professional. How excited are you for this week?

LINA BELMATI: I'll say the same thing. I'm really excited. I would like to thank Aramco for giving me this opportunity to start my career in here. It's a really nice course, really nice event, and I'm really happy to be here.

THE MODERATOR: You've been on the course today. How do you feel you'll cope with the wind? It does get quite windy here.

LINA BELMATI: I was going to say there's a lot of wind, but it's for everyone the same. I'll do my best and try to make a great tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Maha, when you were first here at the 2020 event, which was a couple years ago, the debut Aramco Saudi Ladies International, you spoke so eloquently about how you hoped the event would inspire more women, more Arabic women especially. Now here you get your fellow countrywomen here, a field with three Arabic players, which I think is the most of any LET field in history. How does that make you feel?

MAHA HADDIOUI: As a professional golfer, we travel the world, and the LET is also there to inspire the people of the countries we go to to take up the game and to look at golf as something they could take on or a sport they could play.

For me, three years ago, I didn't think I'd be sitting here with two Moroccan other professionals and playing this event. I think it's a great thing, and it's really small steps that make things like this happen. I mean, having tournaments, having opportunities to play in tournaments like these, and also having tournaments -- the tournaments we had in Morocco, it's inspired me.

And I know today having fields like this and looking at the field and seeing there's three Moroccan girls playing in it, I'm sure it will inspire Tunisian girls or other places in the Arab world to say, well, three of them made it, so I'm sure I can make it.

THE MODERATOR: Ines, I mentioned -- when I spoke to Maha before, she mentioned you and Lina as young women that were coming through in the game. Maha has been around for a while playing at the top level of

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golf. I'm sure she's a player that's really inspired you.

INES LAKLALECH: Definitely. She's the first to ever make it in Morocco, both men and women. She showed us the way. She clearly showed us that it was possible to make it. When you have someone from your country that is on a major Tour such as the LET, it's just you relate more when it's someone from your country that has the same resources than where you're trained. What she did is big. Hopefully, a lot more of us will follow on on this path.

THE MODERATOR: We could massage her ego a little bit more. Lina, would you say the same about Maha? Has she inspired you?

LINA BELMATI: Yeah, I would say the same. Everyone in Morocco knows Maha. She made it possible. She showed us what was possible, and we followed her footsteps. We're really glad to be here, thanks to her.

MAHA HADDIOU: Enough. I'm going to cry (Laughter).

THE MODERATOR: Maha, this is the second event of what's going to be a record breaking year in the LET. I think there's nearly \$30 million in prize money available across the season. I think that's more than double what it was in 2019. From a player's perspective, how does that feel?

MAHA HADDIOU: To be fair, it's a big relief. I've been on the LET, this is my tenth year now, and we've seen it evolve. We've seen a lot of work being done by the LET staff. We're really grateful to have such good staff, and they're really doing the best for the players, but also having partners like Aramco that are holding so many events and that are putting women's golf at the top level and at the front of the scene, and this is what we need.

We need to believe in ourselves as a Tour, which we do, but we also need partners that believe in women, and this is what's happening today. The more people believe in women, the bigger it is, and the bigger it will get. I believe there's everything to be done in women's golf. I mean, men's golf has gone so far, and it can only get to a certain extent, but women's golf there's a lot more that can be done. There's a lot more that can be made bigger.

The prize funds have gone up. The number of tournaments have gone up. It can only go towards getting more -- towards like equality with the men, and this is the way we want it to go. Having Saudi putting up a prize fund as big as this week is a big statement.

THE MODERATOR: Yeah, that leads into my last question as well. Last season there was four new ATS events. I think there's going to be six total Aramco and Golf Saudi backed events on the calendar this year.

How much do you look forward to these events? I've heard a lot of the players say they really do -- the events are put on spectacularly. They really do add an extra element. Is that how you feel coming to play these events?

MAHA HADDIOU: I played two Team Series last year, and it's something very different. To be fair, I'll be honest, I was quite skeptical about it at the start, and I've played in two. I was like, okay, well -- I used to think I'm in golf because it's an individual sport and I like to play for myself and on my own kind of thing.

Then two years ago I actually played with Ines, and I had a lot of fun. I was like, okay, I can play for myself but also as part of a team. I think it's something new. It's something that definitely excites the players, and I know I had a blast playing them this year.

Yeah, I'm really excited about those, and I think they add a good touch to the Tour and a good difference.

Q. Good afternoon. First of all, I wish best of luck for all ladies. (In Arabic)?

MAHA HADDIOU: Having Lydia Ko last year was great. She's one of the top players, and she's obviously had a great performance. It's really important to have a field that strong, and the field this year is also really strong. It's great for the whole field because it puts the ranking, world ranking points of the tournament up as well.

I think this year is going to be quite different. It's more windy. The course is in different conditions, so anything can happen. There's obviously a lot of strong players, and it's going to be a good test of golf.

Q. (In Arabic)?

MAHA HADDIOU: It is possible, but golf takes time, the same way it took time in Morocco. We've had a tournament in Morocco for a long time before there was actually someone on Tour, like full-time player on Tour. I don't think it's impossible.

There's a great initiative. I was lucky actually, the first year I came here to give a clinic to a few girls, I think it was in 2019 during the opening of Royal Greens, and I gave the clinic. Two years later some of the girls I gave the first club to actually played in the Pro-Am with me. This is how it starts.

Obviously, they're not going to be able to play on Tour in one year, probably not in two or three years, but in less than a decade, it's definitely something that's possible. You've got great facilities, great courses, good coaches. I mean, anything is possible. We've done it in Morocco, so there's no reason why it wouldn't be a Saudi girl next.

Q. (No microphone)?

MAHA HADDIOUI: No, that's the good part. You don't have to be a certain age. The ball doesn't know your age. You can play golf until you're quite old, so yeah, there's time.

Q. I will ask in Arabic because we are Arabic first. (In Arabic)?

MAHA HADDIOUI: So for me there's no age to start. There's no age to get interested in golf. When it comes to growing the game from a promoter's perspective, it doesn't matter what age the people come because, if it's a 40-year-old who starts golf, well, maybe if she likes it, in three years she's going to bring her kids. So it doesn't matter.

You can get interested in the game when you're young, when you're older, and it's a game you can play until -- well, unless you can't walk, then you can play golf. So, yeah, it's really important to get everybody to try and come and watch, and it's really a sport that like you maybe won't be interested in if you don't try it.

As a personal joke, I tried curling like two weeks ago, and it's a sport I had no interest in, and now I really like it. It could be the same for golf. Who would think I would get into curling? But it's the exact same for anything. You've got to try it. You've got to give it a chance to maybe try it and enjoy it. If we get people that are really young into the game, maybe that's future champions. If we get older people, maybe it's the parents of future champions.

So there's no age, there's no best audience for golf.

Q. (No microphone)?

MAHA HADDIOUI: It's very important to have a coach, to have good basics. It's a very technical sport, and to be able to enjoy it, you need decent technique, and you need time. Golf takes time. So yeah, it's definitely something that you need to do in a consistent way, and that's why the younger you start with good basics, good coaching, the better you can be.

THE MODERATOR: Maha, I don't want to put you on the spot there, but could you maybe say something in Arabic as well.

MAHA HADDIOUI: I'll try. Maybe you guys can do it.

THE MODERATOR: Can you say something in Arabic, Lina?

LINA BELMATI: There was no question for me.

Q. The inspiration behind you starting golf and picking up golf, who was that?

INES LAKLALECH: Actually, we moved near a golf club in Casablanca, and my dad just decided to go. It was during the summer. Just like this, I was like where are you going? He told me to the golf course, and I went with him. He was taking a lesson, and I was just sitting next to him watching.

It was a huge field, green field, amazing, amazing trees. It was incredible to have this in the middle of the town, in the middle of Casablanca. So it was heaven in Casablanca. Yeah, I went every day during the summer, and like Maha said, it's a sport that takes time, and I was fortunate to have time when I started. I was 10, and during the summer the only thing I had to do was golf.

So that's how I really got better at it. It was by going every single day for three months. My goal was to beat the golf boys that were older than me over there. Yeah, I started, after three months, started to get better. That competition is really what wanted me to stick to the sport.

Q. Just a couple of quick questions. Do you know whether you're going to be playing together for the first couple of rounds? Secondly, to Maha, I've really loved the Adidas fairway campaign launch last week. I just wanted to get a brief thing from you about how you felt with regards to the other women you were with and it was obviously an all female production as well. Just a bit of feedback on that and whether you guys know you're playing together the first two rounds.

MAHA HADDIOUI: Tomorrow I'm in the Pro-Am. I don't know. Are you in the Pro-Am?

INES LAKLALECH: No.

MAHA HADDIOUI: So unless they pair us together, which I don't think they will, but I wish. Hint, hint, LET, maybe they can make that happen. I don't think we'll play together this week, at least not the first two rounds. But maybe we can get paired together afterwards. But it's definitely something we should do in the future. We're in the same country, and we can maybe get some practice done together.

When it comes to the Adidas campaign, I actually really loved being part of that and being the only Arab part of that campaign. Yeah, the outfits were amazing, and it was really fun to film. Yeah, hopefully there's more to come.

THE MODERATOR: I think Emma asked specifically if it was an all female production.

MAHA HADDIOUI: Yes, the whole theme was Our [Fair]way and basically putting women's sport to the front of the scene. Yeah, it was an all women campaign, and

basically people from different areas, different levels in golf, and the whole purpose was telling that women can have success stories through sports in general and for our case, through golf.

THE MODERATOR: Yeah, it was a very, very cool campaign for anyone that's not seen it.

Q. I just wanted to ask you to explain some of the obstacles that you find being Arab women going into golf. What are the major ones for future girls who want to go into that? What are the major obstacles?

MAHA HADDIOUI: I'll be very honest and say no. I signed up at the golf course where I played. It was quite nice hearing Ines say her goal was to beat the boys. That's exactly how it was when I started, it was like no, I've got to beat them. Yeah, I felt no difference when it comes to getting in golf and getting a career in golf.

Maybe sometimes I had to explain it a bit more to people who thought that's not a job, that's not a proper job, when are you going to get a real job. When you explain it to people and you're like, well, football players, would you tell a football player the same thing? When is he going to get a job? And when you say that, people are like, huh, makes sense.

I never felt like, because I was a woman, that I wasn't given a chance back home to pursue a career in golf or anything. The only problem I had at the time was that I was really the only one. I couldn't go and play the World Championships as an amateur because I wouldn't go on my own, or any team events. I never got that proper amateur career that most of the LET or LPGA players have because I was on my own. But other than that, I was given the same chance as the men.

That's probably not the answer like people would think because they're like, oh, she's from an Arab country, she wasn't given a chance. Yes, I was given the same chance, and I'm pretty sure Ines and Lina felt the same.

THE MODERATOR: Ines, we've spoken before. We'd done a little preview piece for the tournament. I think you said one summer your goal was to beat all the boys.

INES LAKLALECH: Exactly. That's what I explained. That was my motivation. Really never felt the difference of being a girl and having obstacles about playing the game.

Yes, it's true I was one of the only girls in my golf club, and most of the time I played with the boys, with the guys. There was no category, like a women or girls category because there were not enough girls. I think it's a good thing. It opened my mind. We're playing the same sport. The only difference is maybe the distance, and girls and boys have their own tee box.

For me, it's the only difference. We have this, and this is adjusted. So just the same.

Q. My question is for Maha. I was just wondering, is there a women's golf association in the Arab world? And what is the financial demographic like of the women who play golf in the Arab world?

MAHA HADDIOUI: I don't think there is an Arab women's association. I don't know of it. If there is, maybe they can drop us a little message (Laughter). But no, not that I know of. And the second question?

THE MODERATOR: I think just women's opportunities for women playing golf, tournaments available, like on the route to maybe reach the LET.

MAHA HADDIOUI: Yes, there are tournaments. There's not a lot of amateur tournaments in the Arab world, if I'm not wrong. There is the Arab Championships, but I think that's about it. Then it's really local tournaments.

Back home in Morocco, we used to just play the tournaments with the men from different tees. I don't know if that's something that's done in the other Arab countries. That's a good question actually. I have no idea. But I know there's quite a decent growing women's section in the UAE. There's some good players in Tunisia as well.

I know one of them actually was here in Royal Greens last year, and she approached me and asked how it works to play LET Q-School, and she went and played Q-School.

So there's definitely some interest, and there are paths that can be taken to turn professional and become an elite golf player. The courses are available. I know there's a lot of programs that make golf free in the Arab world for women, like it is here in Saudi. I know it's the same in the UAE. There's a lot of opportunities in Morocco. So it's definitely something that I think will grow in the future.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you all very much. We've run over a bit. We'll get the other press conference with Anna Nordqvist and Georgia Hall in just a bit.

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