

New LPGA major champion Sophia Popov has a story of perseverance with Massachusetts roots

By **Steve Marantz** Globe correspondent, Updated September 22, 2020, 12:36 p.m.



Sophia Popov, seen competing in the LPGA Marathon Classic, was ranked 304th when she won her major championship, the women's British Open, last month. GENE J. PUSKAR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Cinderella story of Sophia Popov climaxed on the fourth Sunday in August when she won the AIG Women's Open, one of the major championships on the LPGA Tour.

The 27-year old Popov claimed her first tour victory after nearly six years of struggle and perseverance. She was ranked 304th and did not hold LPGA status when she won. Her purse of \$675,000 was more than six times her career earnings.

"Any week can be anyone's week," Popov told an interviewer. "You never know. No

matter if it's golf or regular work, any week something can change and your whole life can turn upside-down.”

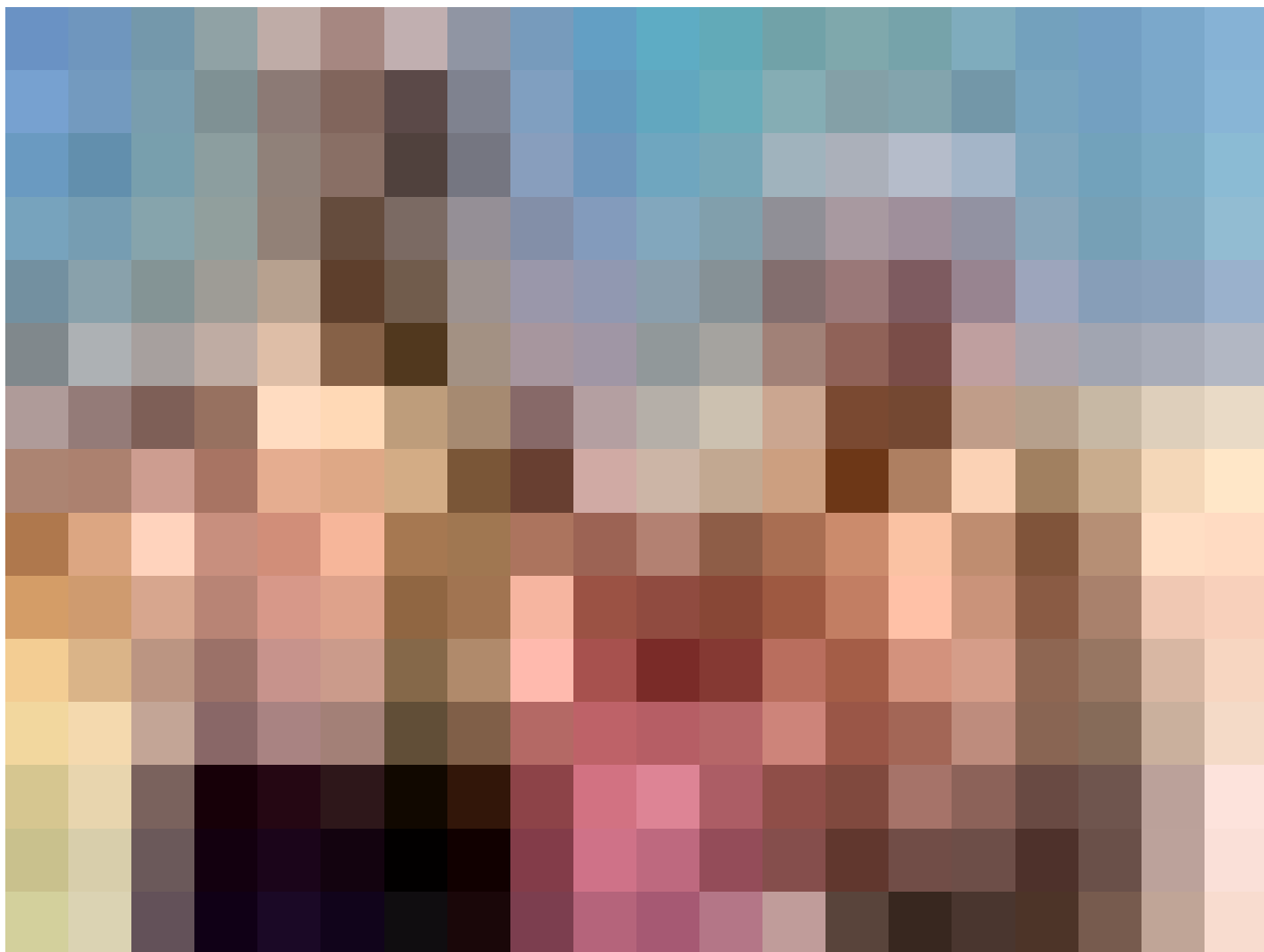
Golf's glass slipper, in the form of a venerable trophy, found Popov at Royal Troon in Scotland. Her unexpected victory was celebrated in Germany, where she lives. It also was celebrated in a Massachusetts locale where Popov has roots: Nantucket.

“I've spent a lot of time there in the summer,” Popov told the Globe. “It's pretty close to my heart.”

Popov holds dual citizenship in Germany and the US. Her American story line traces back through Nantucket, where her grandmother, Sabine Schwarzer, has a summer home, and where Popov has visited since childhood. Her visits often include a round at Miacomet Golf Club, one of the two public tracks among the island's four courses.

“Everybody here is just delighted for Sophia,” said Alan Costa, course manager at Miacomet. “We built a new clubhouse last fall and don't have any photos on the wall. We need a photo of her.”

Further back in Popov's history is Framingham, where she was born in 1992, the third child of Philipp and Claudia Popov. Philipp was an engineer at Bose who is native to Germany. Claudia, nee Schwarzer, was a Globe All-Scholastic swimmer at Framingham North ('81), and went on to swim for Stanford.



Popov with her brothers in childhood days on Nantucket. COURTESY/POPOV FAMILY

Popov's Bay State roots extend to Watertown, where her maternal grandfather, Dieter Schwarzer, arrived from Germany in 1957. Schwarzer's life of struggle and perseverance was something like Popov's. And Schwarzer, who died in 2009, most certainly would have appreciated her triumph in the Open.

"Out of all Sophia's grandparents, he would have been most over the moon," said Claudia, the only child of Dieter and Sabine Schwarzer. "He was the most passionate about sports. As a child, he had me in front of the TV watching Bobby Orr or watching the Celtics. I hope he watched Sophia from above."

Learning the hard way

As a little girl in Framingham, Popov wanted desperately to keep up with her two older brothers, Alex and Nicholas, both good athletes.

At their Salmi Road home on Lake Cochituate, the two brothers would set up for hockey in a large playroom. Popov, just 4 years old, pleaded and cried to be included, so they put her in goal. Then they peppered her with plastic pucks. “If you cry,” they told her, “you can’t play with us.” So she gritted her teeth and absorbed their hardest shots.

“That’s the root of her killer instinct,” said Claudia. “I’m taking whatever abuse I have to take if it gets me where I want to go.”



Popov (right) suited up for hockey with her older brothers. COURTESY/POPOV FAMILY

Just before Popov turned 5, her family moved to Weingarten, Germany, after her father

accepted an executive position with Harman/Becker, a subsidiary of Samsung. She

excelled at several sports, including golf, after Alex taught her. By age 7, she was riding the bus or train to school, on her own. By 9, on days when her mother drove her two brothers to hockey practice in Mannheim, Popov was on her own to get from school in Karlsruhe to the St. Leon-Rot golf course.

“She would walk from school to the train station with her clubs, and ride the train to get to practice,” Claudia recalled.

One day, during a snowstorm, Popov decided she needed to practice. She asked her mother to take her to St. Leon-Rot’s covered bays.

“Let’s take the day off,” Claudia said.

“No, I need to hit balls.”

So her mother gave in, and Popov hit golf balls into the snow.

Then there was the golf trip to Ireland with her father, seven courses in seven days. Except that one day was rainy, windy, and chilly.

“C’mon, it’s raining sideways, let’s take a day off,” said her father.

“No, let’s go out and shoot our best,” said Popov. “If we keep it under 80, it’s amazing.”

With a silent curse, her father gave in.

Popov built a stellar amateur golf résumé in Germany, which included the 2008 German championship for girls 16 and under, and the 2010 International European Ladies Amateur Championship. She returned to America for college, [helped the Southern Cal Trojans](#) to a national championship in 2013, and was a four-time All-American.



Popov competing in NCAA play for USC. COURTESY/POPOV FAMILY

Turning pro in 2015, Popov had high expectations. That summer, she visited Miacomet and played with Costa and a teenager who golfed on the local high school team.

“This young girl was in a bunker and couldn’t get out of the sand,” Costa recalled. “So she picked her ball up and threw it out. Sophia got in front of her and said, ‘Get back in that bunker. Slow down and think about what you’re doing. Get it out of there if you want to get good at golf.’ ”

Her diligence matched her expectations. But then Cinderella’s evil stepsisters — in the form of extreme fatigue and digestive issues — asserted themselves. She couldn’t keep

food down and lost 25 pounds. Two surgeries in 2015 preceded another in 2017. She endured tingling in her hands and feet, and struggled to get an adequate grip on her clubs. Intense headaches came and went. Finally, near the end of 2017, she was diagnosed with Lyme disease, which she chose not to make public, even though it helped explain her lack of success.

Popov researched remedies, committed to a special diet that limits sugar, and undertook rigorous training to regain her weight and strength. She also began to revive her career after spending all of 2017 on the minor league Symetra tour.

“She never took medication that could harm her,” said Alex. “She took the harder route but the right route. It’s a testament to her resilience.”

Her ascent never was assured. In 2018, she made the cut in six of 12 LPGA events. In 2019, she made one cut in eight events. After failing, by a single stroke, to obtain her tour status for 2020, she almost quit golf to get on with life — cognizant of her “biological clock” — but was talked out of it by her mother. Keep the faith, was the message. Be resilient.

A dark family chapter

Resilience might fairly describe Popov’s late grandfather, Dieter Schwarzer. Redemption and reinvention, too.

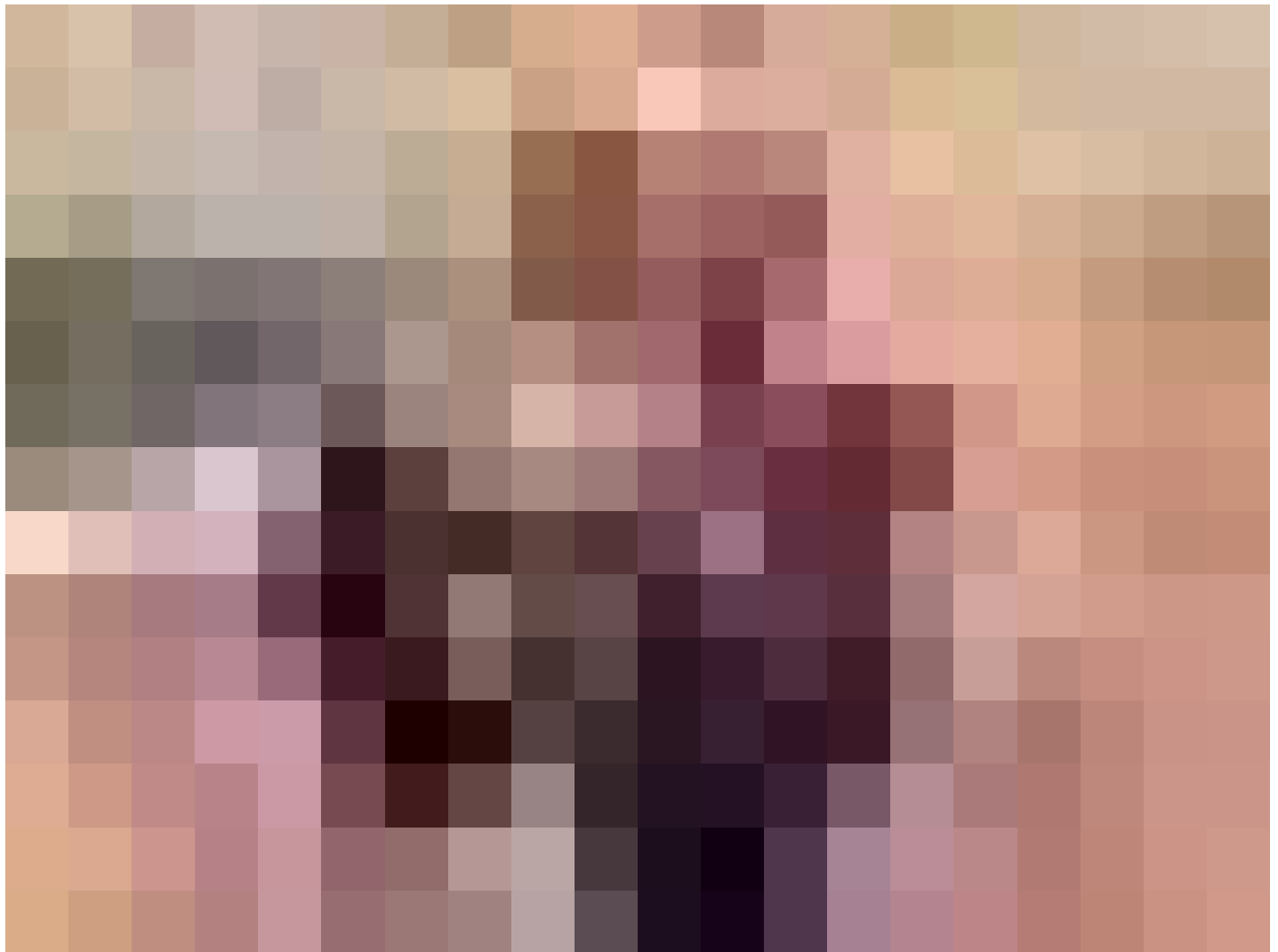
Here is where Popov’s family story becomes delicate, as recounted by Dieter’s daughter Claudia.

Dieter Schwarzer was conscripted into the German Army as a 15-year-old in 1943 and went to the front. In 1945, as the war wound down, he was captured by the Russians, but jumped off a POW train as it rumbled past Berlin and made his way home to his mother. Soon enough, the Americans captured him.

As Claudia tells it, Dieter wore the uniform of the Nazis, but he wasn't one.

"I talked to him about it when I was young," Claudia recalled. "My father was not cut out for the military. He had a huge heart and a soft personality. It was not easy for him to talk about what happened.

"I asked him why did this happen to Germany. He said he knew something was off, something was wrong. But you had no choice, you had no way to not do what you were told, you just had to try to escape your situation. He was too young to try to stand up and do anything."



Popov's grandparents on Nantucket in an undated photo. COURTESY/POPOV FAMILY

After the war, Dieter went to work for his father, who was an inventor, and had fashioned an early EKG machine, with ink and paper. Dieter sold his father's machines while indulging his athletic ability as an elite pole vaulter. Eventually he transitioned into

marketing his athletic ability as an elite pole vaulter. Eventually he transitioned into

coaching for the West German national team, where he met Sabine, an elite high jumper 10 years his junior. They fell in love at about the time Dieter decided to move to America.

“He thought his father wasn’t being fair to him and he didn’t want to work for him anymore,” Claudia said. “So he decided to sell my grandfather’s instruments in America and set up his own company.”

Dieter came to Watertown in 1957, sold his wares while crisscrossing the US in his car, and brought over Sabine in 1959. Sabine qualified for the 1960 Olympics for West Germany, but couldn’t compete after her ankle was broken when a truck ran into her while bicycling. Sabine and Dieter attended the Rome Olympics as spectators, on their honeymoon.

After marriage, the Schwarzers moved to Framingham, where they raised Claudia. In time, technology eclipsed Dieter’s EKG machine, and he transitioned into real estate. He played tennis at Sudbury River Tennis Club, and summered with Sabine in Nantucket. In retirement, they wintered in Naples, Fla.

As he aged, he grew less inclined to talk about the darkness of the Third Reich.

“It was not easy for him to talk about; he didn’t really want to remember,” said Claudia.

“As a family, we like to focus on the future instead of the past.”

A burst of creativity

The Brothers Grimm resurrected ancient folklore to write a popular version of Cinderella (“Aschenputtel”) in 1812. The brothers were German scholars who crafted their work about 200 miles from where Popov went to school and honed her game.

Cinderella’s German roots fit Popov, because while she has dual American-German citizenship, she identifies as German, according to her brother.

“She was 4 when we moved, so she spent a lot more time in Germany than America,” said Alex. “That’s why she always identified more as German; her heart is a little more in Germany. You can tell when we watch the Ryder Cup. She roots for the Europeans, whereas I root for the Americans.”

Popov recently told Barstool Sports that she thinks and dreams in both English and German, and talks with a close friend in a hybrid language they call “Genglish.” When angry on the course, she swears in German, to avoid being fined by the tour.

“If you’re on camera and they catch you throwing a couple of f-bombs, it’s not great for your image or bank account,” said Popov. “So I’m glad I default to German; I can get away with it.”



Popov playing for the German national team. COURTESY/STEBL

Popov is proud to be German, believes German culture has transcended its darkest past, and is “protective” that it not be misunderstood, according to her mother.

“Sophia has a wide horizon from living in two different cultures,” said Claudia. “Germans

have a lot of strengths maybe lacking in America, and vice versa. Having to experience both worlds makes her have a perspective that is — how can I say this? — not too egocentric. By that I mean that she knows it's good to see things from the outside looking in. For both worlds.”

Not too egocentric. Translated to golf, it meant that Popov chose the LPGA over the European Tour after her first year pro, when she straddled both tours. It meant that when LPGA and Symetra shut down for the pandemic, she went to the mini Cactus Tour, in Arizona, silenced the negativity that had crept into her game, and notched her first three pro wins.

It meant that when the LPGA resumed with the Drive On Championship at Toledo, Ohio, three weeks before the Open, Popov agreed to caddie for her friend, Anne van Dam. She had never caddied, but she had a week off, and van Dam needed a caddie.

“So much I learned that week, about how to look at a course from a caddie perspective instead of a player perspective,” Popov said. “I kept telling Ann all day, ‘Hit it to 15 feet and give yourself chances and you’ll make some putts.’ But I would never say that to myself. To myself, I would say, ‘Go at it, hit it close; if you don’t hit it close, game over.’ ”

“So I said, ‘Why do I treat her differently when I caddie for her as opposed to myself when I’m playing?’ ”

A week later, Popov tested her new approach at the Marathon Classic, which gave her a slot because the pandemic prevented it from filling its field. She finished T-9 at Inverness and earned her way into the Open.

Not too egocentric.

It meant that when Popov got to Royal Troon, she tapped into her considerable amateur experience with links golf. On the first day of the Open, with gusts up to 45 m.p.h., and the air chilly enough for a woolen cap, Popov sized up her approach to the first green.



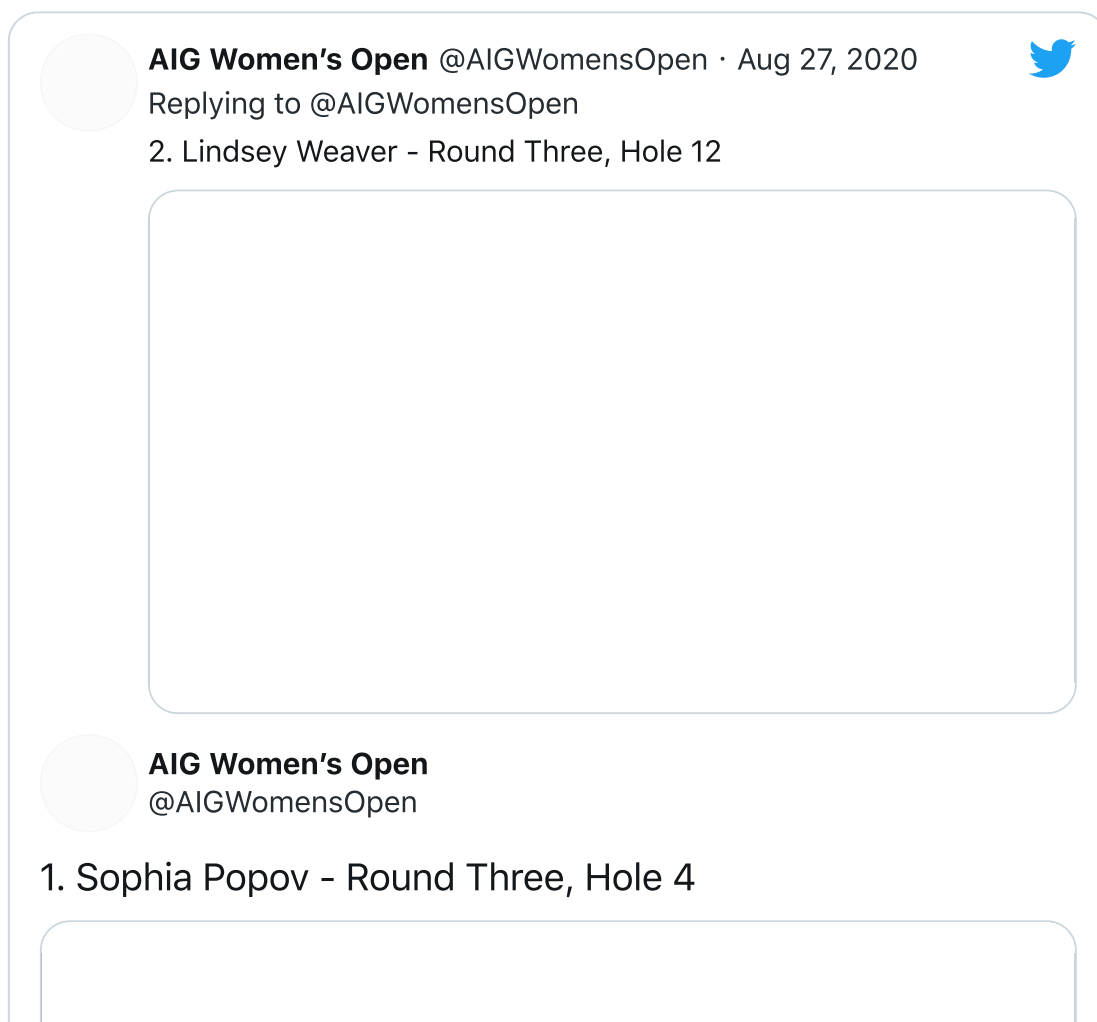
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“I had 126 yards to the pin,” she said. “And I hit a low 4-iron. Normally I hit a 4-iron 195 yards. So it was a good five-club wind. Pretty crazy.”

She told the No Laying Up podcast: “I love that kind of golf. Love being able to putt from 15 yards off the green, to be super creative, chip with 8-irons, 6-irons, your hybrids. I was so excited to be creative on a golf course.”

How creative? In the third round, she hit driver off the fairway of the par-5 fourth hole. Her 260-yard shot cut under the wind onto the green, where she nailed a 12-foot putt for eagle, to take a lead she never relinquished.

Driver off the fairway, that’s how creative. Egocentric or not too, it was her signature shot.





Popov’s only start since the Open was the Cambia Portland (Ore.) Classic last weekend, in which she finished T-24. On Monday, she flew to Nantucket for a reunion with her immediate family.

Her German boyfriend, Max Mehles, who golfed for the University of Kentucky and is her caddie this season, is with her. Her parents came from their home in Phoenix. Her brother Alex and his wife and three children, including newborn Corinne, came from Tucson, along with his mother-in-law. Brother Nick is expected in from Los Angeles. Her grandmother, Sabine, welcomed her to the island, hugged her and told her how proud she is.

Sometime this week Popov may sneak out to Miacomet for a friendly round. Costa has invited her for dinner.

“We’ve hosted some LPGA legends in the past — Laura Davies, Jane Blalock, Nancy Lopez,” said Costa. “Now that Sophia is a champion, we’ll see how much time she has. We hope she stops by.”

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