

FORT LAUDERDALE – Alexa Pano is looking to add yet another accomplishment to her impressive golfing resumé at the 86th Ione D. Jones/Doherty Women’s Amateur Championship.

The 13-year-old from Lake Worth is seeking to become the first Amateur Championship division winner to successfully defend her title in the storied tournament since Lexi Thompson, who won the Doherty in 2009 and 2010 before turning pro at the age of 15.

Besides Thompson, now a star on the LPGA Tour, past Doherty champions include current pros Natalie Gulbis and Charley Hull as well as World Golf Hall of Famers Patty Berg, JoAnne Carner, Babe Zaharias, Louise Suggs, Carol Semple Thompson and Marlene Streit.

The tournament begins Monday at Coral Ridge Country Club with a stroke-play qualifying round to seed the 15 players in the amateur division and the 48 50-and-over golfers in the senior division. Match play is Tuesday through Friday.

“I love playing in the Doherty,” said Pano, who is the No. 1 seed as the defending champion and will use Monday’s qualifier as a practice round. “The course is gorgeous, the people who run the event are some of the nicest people I know and the tournament is one of the few match play events outside of USGA events.”

Pano defeated Claire Fitzgerald of Lake Mary on the 22<sup>nd</sup> hole to win last year’s championship at the age of 12 years, five months. That more than likely made her the youngest winner ever of the event, which is one of the country’s oldest women’s amateur tournaments: Player information from the tournament’s early years, aside from the winner’s name, is scarce.

She was definitely the youngest winner of a Doherty division in 2014 when the 9-year-old Pano won the Amateur First Flight title. After last year’s victory, Pano went on to win her second Drive, Chip & Putt title at Augusta National Golf Club. And she recently won the Girls 16-18 division of the Junior Honda Classic by six shots on the Champion course at PGA National Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens.

“Coming out of the Doherty last year, I wasn’t comfortable with my putting, but after a bumpy year I’m happy where it is right now,” said the home-

schooled eighth-grader. “I’ve been working with Spencer Graham on my swing and I have a little bit more distance. It wasn’t like a huge swing makeover, it was just different from what I was trying to do last year.”

Pano is joined in the amateur division by Fitzgerald; 2012 champion Meghan Stasi of Oakland Park; Boca Raton teenager Dana Williams, who qualified for last year’s U.S. Women’s Open; 2015 Florida Women’s Amateur of the Year Tara Joy Connelly of North Palm Beach; Georgia Oboh of Riviera Beach; and Makenna Rodriguez of Delray Beach.

Senior Championship division winner Lisa Schlesinger of Fort Myers also is back to defend her title and happy with her game.

Schlesinger, who turns 60 on Tuesday, played college basketball and then played a couple of years of pro ball. She also played softball on an elite touring team during the summers. She didn’t take up golf until her mid-30s.

“I was probably a 12 handicap when I started. I had good hand-eye coordination, but the game is so mental,” Schlesinger said. “I don’t feel like I became a good golfer until the last five years.

“It’s just a matter of getting out of your own way. I have allowed myself to get better. I have allowed myself to say, ‘OK, you made a bogey, you’ll make a birdie.’

“I’d hate to jinx myself, because this game bites you in the butt all the time, but I’m really feeling very good about my game.”

Schlesinger played in the Doherty’s amateur division for eight years and, like many senior golfers, was thrilled to turn 50 so she no longer had to compete against top junior, college and recently graduated college players.

“I had to play Morgan Pressel in the Doherty one year,” said Schlesinger. At the time, Pressel was a Boca Raton teenager who went on to win the U.S. Women’s Amateur and later became the youngest LPGA player, at the time, to win a major.

“I was like, ‘Please just let me be competitive, please just let me get to the back nine.’ Thank God I only lost 7 and 6. I out-drove her all day long, she

is not a long hitter, but her irons were just like lasers. She was putting for birdie every hole.

“I just wanted 50 to hurry up.”

Not long after turning 50, Schlesinger lost in the Doherty’s Senior Championship division final in 2010. She advanced to the semifinals several times before finally winning the title last year with a 2-and-1 victory over Terrill Samuel of Toronto.

The top-seeded senior, Schlesinger, like Pano, will use Monday’s qualifier to get her game ready to go against an exceptionally competitive field. Terrill is back, along with three-time senior champion Andrea Kraus of Baltimore and past senior winners Mary Jane Hiestand of Naples, Carolyn Creekmore of Dallas and Connie Shorb, of York, Pa.

Among the South Florida seniors are Carolyn Baumel and Karin-Joyce Tjon of Miami Beach; Alison Cress of Jupiter; Ann Fulginiti of Plantation; Arline Hoffman of Tequesta; Pat Hughes-Gelardi of Palm Beach Gardens; Diane Lang and Vilma Sapp of Weston; Reggie Parker of Hobe Sound; and Sara Jane Rose of Tamarac.

“It’s a great tournament,” Schlesinger said. “Other than the USGA Senior Women’s Amateur, I think it draws the best field.”