

By Steve Waters

FORT LAUDERDALE – Meghan Stasi and Lisa Schlesinger are back to defend their respective titles this week in the 87th Ione D. Jones/Doherty Women’s Amateur Championship, and they both know it won’t be easy.

As usual, the annual tournament at Coral Ridge Country Club, which begins Monday with a stroke-play qualifier followed by four days of match play, features highly competitive fields in the Amateur division and in the Senior division for women over 50.

“It’s like going to a USGA senior tournament, that’s how many good players come to this thing. It’s a great match-play championship,” says Schlesinger, of Fort Myers, who won her second consecutive Senior Women’s Championship last year.

“I’m just going to go out and try to do the best I can. If your short game is on and you’re making some putts, you can do pretty well.”

Stasi, 40, of Oakland Park, won her second Doherty title last year, having first won in 2012. She made five birdies in 14 holes to defeat 2017 champion Alexa Pano 5 and 4 in the final.

The 14-year-old Pano, of Lake Worth, is back in the 16-player Amateur division. Also entered are Boca Raton teen-agers Dana Williams, who qualified for the last two U.S. Women’s Opens, and Elle Nachmann.

They’ll be joined by recent college graduates and American Heritage alums Marisa Messana of Plantation, the first four-year starter in Clemson women’s golf history, and Jamie Freedman of Miami Beach, who played four years for Nova Southeastern University.

“It’s a great field,” says Stasi, a four-time U.S. Women’s Mid-Amateur champion, who took a break from competitive golf at the end of 2018. “My game’s not too bad. I played last week at Harder Hall. It was my first tournament after not playing for a couple of months and I finished 12th. I played OK. I shot even the last day.

“Hopefully I’ll play here like I did last year. No three-putts and no 6s is pretty incredible for your scorecard.”

Schlesinger, who turned 61 on Wednesday, defeated Terrill Samuel of Toronto in the final match the past two years. Samuel is back this year, along with three-time Doherty Senior champion Andrea Kraus of Baltimore (2012, 2014, 2015), 2009 Senior champ Carolyn Creekmore of Dallas and 2011 winner Mary Jane Hiestand of Cape Coral.

As the No. 1 seeds, Schlesinger and Stasi do not have to qualify on Monday, but they can play. Stasi, who played two practice rounds at Coral Ridge last week, said she is not playing Monday. Schlesinger will play, just to get a feel for the typically firm, fast greens of the Robert Trent Jones course.

“In my opinion, it’s one of the best match-play courses I’ve ever played,” Schlesinger says. “The three, four holes coming down the stretch are really difficult. There are not a lot of pin placements that are attackable. You try to be smart and try not to make too many mistakes.”

That’s been a winning combination for Schlesinger the last two years.

“When I won the first one, it was a surprise,” says Schlesinger. “But it also was like, ‘God, it’s about time. I’ve been doing this so long.’ Then the second one comes along and I’m, ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe I’ve done it again.’ If it happens again, I still won’t believe it.”

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