

SPORTS

AMATEUR GOLF

Pano, 13, aims for repeat Doherty title

By Steve Waters
Special to The Post

FORT LAUDERDALE — Alexa Pano is looking to add yet another accomplishment to her impressive golfing résumé 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 Fames Patty Berg, JoAnne Carner, Babe Zaharias, Louise Suggs, Carol Semple Thompson and Marlene Streit.

The tournament begins today at Coral Ridge Country Club with a stroke-play qualifying round to seed the 12 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 today'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 out-



Lake Worth's Alexa Pano won her second Drive, Chip and Putt national title at Augusta National in 2016. She says her putting and distance have improved. AUGUSTA NATIONAL

side of USGA events." Pano defeated Claire Fitzgerald of Lake Mary on the 22nd 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

86TH IONE D. JONES/DOHERTY WOMEN'S AMATEUR CHAMPIONSHIP

■ **WHEN:** Today through Friday

■ **WHERE:** Coral Ridge Country Club, 3801 Bayview Drive, Fort Lauderdale

■ **FIELD:** There are 12 players in the amateur division, including defending champion Alexa Pano of Lake Worth, 2012 champion Meghan Stasi of Oakland Park and 2015 Florida Women's Amateur of the Year Tara Joy Connelly of North Palm Beach.

The senior division has 48 players, including defending champion Lisa Schlesinger of Fort Myers and past senior champions Andrea Kraus of Baltimore, Mary Jane Hestand of Naples, Carolyn Creekmore of Dallas and Connie Short, of York, Pa. South Florida golfers include Carolyn Baumel and Karin-Joyce Tjon of Miami Beach; Allison 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.

■ **FORMAT:** Play starts at 8 a.m. each day and admission is free for spectators. An 18-hole qualifying round to determine the seeding for each flight is today. The first round of match play is Tuesday.

Quarterfinal rounds, the Senior Second and Third Flight semifinals and an optional stroke play consolation round for those who lose on Tuesday is Wednesday.

The semifinals for the Amateur Championship, Senior Championship and Senior First Flight divisions are Thursday, along with the Senior Second and Third Flight finals. The Championship and First Flight final matches are Friday.

■ **INFORMATION:** Visit coralridgecc.com/jonesdoherty or call 954-449-4400.

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 2012 champion Meghan Stasi of Oakland Park; 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, 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."

The top-seeded senior, Schlesinger, like Pano, will use today's qualifier to get her game ready to go against an exceptionally competitive field.