



LINKS PLAYERS DAILY DEVOTIONAL

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## Heaven At Royal Troon

*I saw a door standing open in heaven... and the voice said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this. (Rev. 4:1).*

Royal Troon...the site of so many memorable Opens, starting in 1923 when Arthur Havers holed a bunker shot on the 72nd green to upset Walter Hagen by a shot. He won seventy-five Pounds.

Palmer, Weiskopf, and Watson won there. You remember Stenson over Mickelson in 2016.

However, the most recent Major championship at Royal Troon was the AIG Women's Open in 2020, where Sophia Popov emerged as perhaps the most unlikely champion in history.

She was ranked 304th in the world with no status on any professional tour. She nearly quit in late 2019 after losing her LPGA card due to illness, injury, and too many bogeys.

When COVID-19 slammed the door for professional golf in March 2020, all logic for the 27-year-old Sophia would say, "I tried. Now it's time to get a 'real job.'" Instead, she refused to quit. She played a small Arizona tour for almost no money. And when the LPGA went back into business in late July, Sophia humbled herself and caddied for her friend Anne van Dam in Ohio.

The next week, on August 6, playing on a sponsor's exemption created because dozens of Korean LPGA members could not travel, Sophia teed it up at the Marathon LPGA Classic. Pushing her own cart with no caddie, Sophia tied for 9th, which qualified her for the British Open at Royal Troon!

With only one practice round, Sophia made the cut, then shot 67 to propel her into a three-shot lead on Sunday morning. Golf announcers all but declared she would collapse under the pressure.

But no, she waltzed into the history books with her boyfriend Max Mehles on her bag. On August 23, 2020, she was crowned The Open Champion.

Now, as Paul Harvey used to say- what's the 'rest of the story'? Did she have some heavenly help?

On August 4, as Sophia prepared to play the Marathon Classic, Max's teammate on the University of Kentucky golf team and Sophia's dear friend, Cullan Brown, lost his year-long battle with osteosarcoma. Nineteen-year-old Cullan was sadly gone--a passionate witness and follower of Jesus.

He was from tiny Eddyville, Kentucky (population 2,378). Cullan was "like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants..." (Matthew 13:31). Thousands of people, not just Sophia, were inspired by his life and testimony.

Sophia had massive tears in her eyes and a Kentucky Blue ribbon on her golf hat at the Marathon. She wore the same Blue ribbon at Royal Troon in memory of her friend. She played those two weeks with tear-filled eyes and a heavy heart.

Looking back on those days, it feels like Heaven and Earth met in a glorious convergence of tragedy and triumph in one eternal breath.

Is it even possible that Sophia was getting some help from the heavenly realm through her friend Cullan? We will never know, of course, but maybe Cullan's first request when the doors of Heaven opened was, "Jesus, could you help my friend Sophia?"

And the fairy-tale story continues. Max and Sophia married soon after the Open and now are the proud parents of the beautiful Maya Mae Mehles, born in June 2023. God has not finished blessing Cullan's friends.

**PRAYER: Dear Lord, Open the doors of heaven today for anyone reading these words. Thank you for the life and witness of our friend Cullan. Amen.**

—

Tim Philpot

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