

Korda's improved, positive attitude was found on the shelf at '21 Meijer

By Jeff Babineau

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BELMONT, Mich. – The Meijer LPGA Classic for *Simply Give* is a tournament that always will hold special meaning for World No. 1 Nelly Korda. She looks back at her 2021 victory at Blythefield Country Club and considers it a turning point in her career.

Mostly, winning in 2021 allowed her to rediscover joy in the game. She came to Michigan that year with few expectations, shot 10-under 62 in the third round, and held off Leona Maguire on Sunday to win by two shots, setting a tournament scoring record (25 under) in the process.

What was different? Down the stretch, Korda stopped trying to be perfect in a game that simply doesn't allow it. She told herself to smile more than she did in the past, over good shots and bad. The high-pressure stress of the situation – Sunday afternoon, crowded leaderboard, fighting for the lead, tournament on the line – did not bury her under the weight of it all.

Instead, she chose to embrace it.

“Honestly, there have been times where on Sundays I really haven’t enjoyed it, the stress kind of ate me and I didn’t stay in the moment and [didn’t] enjoy playing golf on a Sunday in a final group,” Korda said candidly at Blythefield Country Club that day she won. “Today I really enjoyed it.”

It was a terrific lesson, something that freed her to climb heights she had not previously scaled despite her enormous talents in the game. After winning at Meijer, she would have a monster summer, adding her first major (KPMG Women’s PGA Championship) before giving the U.S a gold sweep in golf (with Xander Schauffele) at the delayed 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. She will try for two in Paris later this summer.

Carrying an improved attitude is a foundation Korda still can stand upon today, at age 25, in the midst of what arguably has been her best season to date. She is riding a wave of six victories in seven starts, which included winning five consecutive – with several big events, including another Olympics, looming around the corner.

Yes, as Korda readies for the 10th playing of the Meijer LPGA Classic beginning Thursday, the resume is coming along quite nicely. These days, Korda counts 14 LPGA victories and two majors. At 25, she pretty much has one foot in the World Golf Hall of Fame.

“I think she’s really raised the bar for women’s golf,” said Maguire, this week’s defending champion, “and it’s fantastic to see her getting all the coverage and the attention that she deserves. She’s making history right now that we may or may not ever see again.

“It’s tough for us as competitors. We’re trying to keep up with her. But it’s very, very impressive, and I suppose I’ve been fortunate to sort of go toe-to-toe with her at the Meijer 2021 and ‘22, obviously. But she’s a great player and a great role model for golf, and we’re lucky to have her on the LPGA right now.”

The best part for Korda? She isn’t quite so tough on herself any longer, and she is enjoying this run of success, especially after losing nearly half her 2022 season to a dangerous blood clot in her left arm that eventually resulted in surgery. Shoot, Korda even arrived in Michigan this week off a rare missed cut at the U.S. Women’s Open, where she basically was felled by a septuple-bogey 10 on her third hole of the tournament.

She even managed to find the inner beauty in her only missed cut of the season. Korda shot 80 in the opening round, then showed plenty of fight and spirit by shooting 70 on a difficult golf course a day later at Lancaster Country Club, barely missing out on the weekend.

"I mean, I love when golf humbles me," Korda said on Wednesday at Blythefield Country Club following her pro-am round. "Not to that extent, but I do love when golf humbles me. Sometimes you ride the highs, but it's always in a sense nice to know where you can improve, too."

Korda will tee off Thursday at 12:59 p.m. in a power threesome filled with two other Meijer champions, joining two-time winner Brooke Henderson (2017, 2019) and Ireland's Maguire. Maguire was runner-up to Korda in 2021, and then finished second again at Meijer in 2022 before breaking through to win a year ago.

Korda is having one of those seasons that other players can only admire and appreciate from afar. She started her winning run by capturing the LPGA Drive On Championship close to home in Florida in January, then won the FIR HILLS SERI PAK Championship; Ford Championship presented by KCC; soundly defeated Maguire in the finals of the T-Mobile Match Play in Las Vegas; and captured the season's first major, the Chevron Championship, for her fifth consecutive victory.

Korda joined two LPGA all-time greats – Nancy Lopez (1978) and Annika Sorenstam (2004-05) – in winning five consecutive events on the LPGA. Currently, she ranks first on the LPGA in Greens in Regulation (74.75 percent); Scoring (69.61); and Eagles (6); and is second in Putts Per GIR (1.74) and Rounds in the 60s (20 of 36). After tying for seventh at the Cognizant Founders Cup, Korda won Victory No. 6 at the Mizuho Americas Open at Liberty National.

Surely, it's *not* hard to find joy in those great numbers and overall results.

"I think overall I'm always just trying to improve every aspect of my game," said Korda, the first player to already qualify for September's Solheim Cup. "There is some weeks that are better – some parts of my game are better than the others. Overall if my ballstriking isn't that good that week, I've had a good week on the putting green, too, where I've made more putts than maybe I would when I've hit it really close."

"So feel like this year my game has been pretty balanced when I've played and gone into events. Overall, when I'm looking at my game, I'm trying to improve everything overall."

Attitude? She seems to have that part covered, which makes her great play all the more satisfying. That all started right here, at Blythefield, and Korda is thankful it did. Trying to be perfect all the time wasn't working out very well for her. The more she tried to be perfect, the more mistakes she made.

The Meijer was the event where she reset and started anew, the tourney that "put a little more pep in my step, I guess."

Said Korda, "I just told myself, I'm doing what I love for a living. I'm going to amazing places, playing in front of amazing crowds. There is no point to be miserable out there. Go out and have fun – even if you're not playing well.

"Sometimes you have to build a bridge and get over it. Yeah, then the next week I won my first major (KPMG), and it was obviously a dream come true."

She hasn't slowed much since. Could another victory be on tap this week in Michigan? On the eve of another Meijer LPGA, No. 1 appeared not only possible, but probable.

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