

# 20 Years of Tiger: How He Changed the Game

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Can it really be 20 years since Tiger Woods leaned into a microphone in Milwaukee and, with a smile that became as much his trademark as a pumped fist, Sunday red shirt and improbable shots, said: “Hello, world?”

With those words on Aug. 28, 1996, Woods announced he was a professional golfer. What unfolded was nothing short of remarkable.

In our overly hyped world, where whatever happened last night is instantly elevated to greatest-ever status, Woods was that rarity who not only lived up to the hype but also exceeded it. In his first Masters as a pro – 1997 – he won by 12 strokes at the age of 21. It was as if when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball 50 years earlier he had also broken Babe Ruth’s single-season home run record.

Woods was not only a social pioneer – a man of color in an overwhelmingly white sport – but he became a transcendent athlete. Tiger was better than advertised. How often does that happen?

And it is a testimony to his greatness that Tiger’s demise was as fascinating as his rise.

Creeping up on 41, Woods is three years removed from his 79th PGA Tour victory, eight years past his 14th major championship and 15 years beyond the Tiger Slam.

It would not be a stretch to say there are many fans – and, more importantly, competitors – who have never seen Tiger play with his full powers.

From 1991 through the middle of 2008, Woods won three U.S. Junior Amateur Championships, three U.S. Amateur Championships, the NCAA individual championship and 14 of the first 46 majors he played as a pro.

That he is winless in his last 24 majors is made more baffling by the fact he’s finished in the top-six nine times. Suddenly, the greatest closer of all time could not close.

Where did it all go wrong? There are a lot of areas to place blame. Injuries. Perhaps an over-obsession with swing changes. The scandal. Yes, those all played a role.

But under appreciated, I think, is the impact of August 16, 2009, when Y.E. Yang

became the Buster Douglas of golf.

Douglas was the 42-to-1 underdog who took the heavyweight boxing title from the seemingly indestructible Mike Tyson in Tokyo on Feb. 11, 1990.

Tyson, only 23 years old when Douglas beat him, was 37-0 at the time and never the same after that loss, going 13-6-2 until he retired.

Quite simply, Buster shattered the aura of invincibility around Iron Mike. Just like that, the notion of beating Tyson became a believable idea. And, perhaps just as importantly, in his own mind, Tyson was no longer unbeatable. He had doubts.

Yang shattered the aura of invincibility around Woods when he went head-to-head with Tiger in the final round of the PGA Championship at Hazeltine National GC near Minneapolis and won.

Before that day, Woods was perfect in winning with the lead going into the final round of a major – 14 for 14.

But at Hazeltine, it was Yang who made the big shots on Sunday – not Woods. On the short par-4 14<sup>th</sup> hole, Yang chipped in for eagle to take a lead he never relinquished.

On No. 17, Woods had a chance to pull even but could not make an up-and-down on the par-3 and bogeyed to stay one back.

Then on No. 18, Yang delivered a Tiger-like blow and nailed his 210-yard approach shot to 3 feet. He birdied, Woods bogeyed and the final margin was three strokes.

That PGA Championship was Yang's only major and the last of his two victories on the PGA Tour.

As Tyson once said: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." That's when reality sets in. For Tyson, that punch in the mouth came in February 1990. For Woods, it was in August 2009.

At his peak, Woods inflicted scar tissue on the psyche of a generation of players. They knew if he had his A game they were playing to be the B-flight champion.

This new generation of stars does not bear that burden. Jason Day was 20 years old when Woods won his last major; Rory McIlroy was 19 and Jordan Spieth only 14.

Unlike Sergio Garcia and Ernie Els, they have not spent years being pummeled by Tiger.

Like Tyson, Woods may win again. But will he ever be invincible again? Iron Mike wasn't.

But no matter where this story ends all of us who love golf should be grateful we saw Woods. He changed the game. His contributions are countless.

After Tiger turned pro these things happened: The First Tee was created (1997); The new World Golf Hall of Fame opened (1998); the World Golf Championship events were launched (1999); the FedEx Cup came to be (2007); golf got back into the Olympics (2009). And let's not forget that PGA Tour prize money has quintupled since Tiger turned pro.

But there's more. Tiger brought a better quality of athlete to golf by making the game cool and making it possible to get rich playing the pro game.

He also taught the next generation the importance of conditioning and being in shape. These guys are bigger and stronger than before Woods.

And most importantly, he raised the bar when it came to belief. He made the impossible plausible. As the brilliant instructors Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriot say: "What you achieve is limited by what you believe you can achieve."

Two decades after Tiger Woods said, "Hello, world," the world of golf is very different. It's global, as we saw in golf's hugely successful return to the Olympics. And the recent 58 by Jim Furyk might be the shattering of the 4-minute mile. I'm guessing a 57 comes soon.

Nilsson and Marriot champion Vision 54 – the belief you can make 18 birdies on a par-72 course and shoot 54. When that happens, it likely won't be by Woods. But when it happens, it will because of the way Tiger changed the game. It's been a fascinating 20 years and I'm glad I was along for the ride. All of it.