

OUT OF THE WOODS

THE RETURN OF TIGER

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When I tweeted that Tiger Woods had officially entered this week's Safeway Open my Twitter feed exploded. There was overwhelming excitement mixed with a dash of apprehension and even a little resentment. But what's clear is this: No one in golf moves the needle like Tiger. His return is huge news. No one is neutral when it comes to Woods.

If Woods does, in fact, tee it up at the Silverado Resort & Spa in Napa, Calif. – and with Woods you never know – it will be 20 years and one week after his first PGA Tour win at the Las Vegas Invitational. Twenty years. That's hard to fathom. Time is an impossible adversary. Quite simply, it's undefeated, untied and unscored upon. And time has taken a toll on Woods.

Consider this: It's been more than a year since Tiger last competed; more than three years since he last won on the PGA Tour; more than eight years since his last major championship; and more than 15 years since he completed the Tiger Slam. He's also had four knee surgeries, three back operations and one painful scandal. Lot of scar tissue there.

So what are we to expect from Tiger in his return? That's why this is so fascinating. We have no idea what to expect. When it comes to sharing information on Woods' health or the state of his game, Tiger and his camp make Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots look downright chatty. I was even rebuffed when I asked what equipment Tiger would play this week.

We do know this: Tiger will be held to an unfair standard. Genius always is. There will be those who will expect it to be the year 2000 again and for Tiger to make magic. Those folks will likely be

disappointed. But we also know this about Woods: He has made a career out of making the impossible possible. Were he to turn back time, even for a day or two, it would come as no surprise to those who've followed him.

We have many examples of great players pushing back the hands of the clock or the pages of the calendar, if only briefly. Ben Hogan shot 66 on Saturday in the 1967 Masters at the age of 54 before finishing T-10. Jack Nicklaus was T-6 at Augusta National in 1998 at 58 and 59-year-old Tom Watson finished second in the 2009 British Open.

Still a couple months shy of his 41st birthday, Woods is a lot younger than Hogan, Nicklaus or Watson when they tried to turn back time. But there are a lot of miles on Tiger's body. He's hit zillions of golf balls pretty much since he could walk; starting playing on the world stage pretty soon after that; has worked out harder than anyone who ever played the game and has had a lot of repair work done on his body.

We've also seen, at various times over the last seven years, driver yips, chipping yips and putting yips. Since winning the 2008 U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, Woods has had his chances to win a major, finishing in the top six on nine occasions, often going into the weekend with a chance to win but being unable to close the deal.

I'm not sure what confounds me more: The fact that a guy who once was the greatest closer the game has ever known suddenly stopped closing or the disappearance of probably the greatest short game golfer has ever seen. Why did those up-and-downs stop happening? Why did those 12-foot putts stop going in? I've never seen any great player make as many 12-foot par saves as Tiger. And then someone turned off the faucet.

The chemistry that makes up a great athlete is extremely complicated and the mixture need only be off a tiny bit to throw the whole thing out of whack. In 1972, Steve Blass, a pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates was 19-8 with a 2.49 ERA and 84 walks in 250 innings. The next year he walked 84 batters in 88 innings and the year after that he was out

of baseball. Suddenly, he couldn't find home plate.

This is by way of saying that Woods faces many challenges in his return to competitive golf. In fact, he is confronted with a perfect storm of the physical, technical, mental and emotional. His challenge is not singular but many pronged.

His physical issues have been well documented. In terms of technique, which swing will he settle on this time: Butch, Hank, Sean or that guy he talked to on the range last week? Obsessive tinkering has always been his flaw as he's tried to perfect the imperfectable. Mentally, does he still have the same focus and, more importantly, belief? And emotionally, what must it be like for him not to have the intimidation factor on his side?

I don't know what to expect from Tiger this week, but I am glad that he's back. Hopefully, this is the beginning of – to use one of Tiger's favorite words – a process. Hopefully, this is the first of many steps on the road to recovery. Can it be the year 2000 again? Probably not. Can it be magical again, even if just for a shot, a round or a tournament? Don't be at all surprised. This could be Tiger's most improbable up-and-down.