

# UNLIKE GODOT, THE NEXT GREAT GOLFER ALWAYS SHOWS UP

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Comparing greatness in any sport across generations is pretty much useless since there is no way to factor in changes in equipment, conditioning, coaching and the quality of competition. But history does teach us there is no shortage of genius. Brilliance surfaces sparingly but regularly.

In my opinion, golf has produced five dominant players since the U.S. Open joined the Open as a major championship around the turn of the last century. And each dominant player had specific challengers, except for Tiger Woods, who faced a rivalry by committee.

In 1900, Harry Vardon made the U.S. Open the fourth of his seven career majors at the age of 30.

In 1930, Bobby Jones won the U.S. and British Opens and the U.S. and British Amateurs at 28 then retired to finish with seven pro majors and six amateur titles.

In 1950, Ben Hogan, 37, picked up the fourth of his nine majors at the U.S. Open.

In 1970, Jack Nicklaus, 30, got the eighth of his 18 pro majors at the Open Championship.

In 2000, Woods, 24, won the U.S. Open, British Open and PGA Championship to get to five in a major total that now stands at 14.

There is a clear cycle of greatness that produces a breakout player about every 20 to 30 years. By that standard, we are 16 years into the Woods cycle. In addition to the cyclical emergence of a great player there is also the recurrent pattern of a three-way rivalry.

The first Great Triumvirate was called exactly that as Vardon was pushed by James Braid and J.H. Taylor, who both won the Open Championship five times to the six by Vardon.

Jones had Walter Hagen, who had 11 majors, and Gene Sarazen, whose seven include both Opens, the PGA and the Masters, making him the first to complete the career Grand Slam.

Hogan won nine majors against Sam Snead, who had seven, and Byron Nelson, who retired at the age of 34 with five. Those three were born within six months of each other in 1912.

Nicklaus might have fended off the greatest crew of major winners, racking up his 18 against Gary Player (9), Tom Watson (8), Arnold Palmer (7) and Lee Trevino (6).

And Woods has earned 14 pro majors against the deepest pool of talent. No one has won as many as six in the Woods Era, but Phil Mickelson has five with Ernie Els and Rory McIlroy at four each, although McIlroy has all of his since Woods won his last major in 2008.

Padraig Harrington and Vijay Singh have notched three each; Jordan Spieth, Martin Kaymer, Bubba Watson and Zach Johnson all have two, while guys such as Justin Rose, Henrik Stenson, Adam Scott, Jason Day and Dustin Johnson sit at one.

In my mind, when using majors as the standard for golf greatness, the bar is set at six. That's the total for Trevino and Nick Faldo.

Seven is a magical class that includes Jones, Vardon, Snead, Sarazen and Palmer. Tom Watson has eight; Hogan and Player nine; Hagen 11; Woods 14 and then Nicklaus with 18.

So who playing now has a chance to get to six majors? And is there anyone out there who can join that top-11 all-time with seven or more?

Even though Mickelson turns 47 in June, he proved at the Open Championship he can still compete in the majors. I would not be surprised if Lefty gets to six or even seven. But his age disqualifies him from being the next dominant golfer.

Els with four as well as Harrington and Singh with three each are unlikely to add more. That makes McIlroy, who turns 28 in May, the most likely candidate to join Mickelson at the six or seven level, but can he get beyond that? His inconsistency is baffling.

McIlroy won his first major then went five without contending. He won another then went six without finishing inside the top eight. Then he won two in a row in 2014 but has since gone 0-for-two-years. To dominate your generation you need to be in the mix virtually every time you tee it up, as were Hogan, Nicklaus and Woods.

This coming season could be an important one in determining if Spieth will be a breakout player. In six of nine majors beginning with the 2014 Masters, Spieth had two wins, three second-place finishes and a T-4. In his last three majors he's finished T-37, T-30 and T-13.

He'll only be 24 in July and it could very well be that he took a step backward in 2016 only because he was adjusting to the increased demands brought on by his success in 2015. In 2017 we'll see if he is as smart as we think he is.

It would not be surprising if Bubba Watson, Zach Johnson or Kaymer added to their two majors but I don't anyone in that trio getting to six or more. And of Rose, Stenson, Scott, Day and Dustin Johnson only Day and Dustin have the feel of a player who could go on a major tear. In my mind, a guy without a major – Hideki Matsuyama – also has that feel.

Could Woods be the next Woods? Probably not, but he might have a Nicklaus-at-the-1986-Masters moment waiting for us.

So is the next Tiger currently on tour? Maybe not, although McIlroy, Spieth, Day or even Matsuyama could prove me wrong. But we do know this:

History says the next transcendent player will arrive in the next five to 10 years. That's just always been true.

In 1986, after Nicklaus won that magical Masters, I remember people saying there will never be another golfer that dominant again because there is simply too much talent. Ten years later, Tiger arrived. Genius is rare, but it is endless. And it is well worth the wait. Unlike with Godot, its arrival is only a matter of time.