

# TIGER'S RETURN: MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING; OR SOMETHING MORE?

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Well now, that was probably the most intensely watched and highly scrutinized 15<sup>th</sup>-place finish in the history of golf. But I'll give Tiger haters one more chance to call me names on social media – until Woods plays again and they can once again pretend he is not news – by providing my takeaway on the return at the Hero World Challenge after a 16-month absence from competition of the guy with 79 PGA Tour titles and 14 major championships.

For the most part, there were more positives than negatives. Actually, there were way more positives than negatives. Let's take a look.

- **HEALTH:** Perhaps the best thing that can be said about Woods' 15<sup>th</sup>-place finish in the 17-man field is that he finished. And he finished on his feet. There was no wincing, no limping and – on several occasions – there were violent swings that were reminiscent of the Tiger of old. While I'd generally like to see him dial back that swing a bit in order to gain greater accuracy off the tee and more longevity, it was hugely encouraging to see what appeared to be a Tiger who showed no indication he's had four knee surgeries and three back operations.

- **ONE-WAY MISS:** When Tiger's struggles were at their peak – or depths – he'd stand on the tee with absolutely no idea where the ball was going to go. His miss was low left or high right. When you have a two-way miss going you've cut the size of the fairway in half. Instead of playing for a certain shot shape, you are aiming at the middle of the fairway and hoping for the best. Last week, Woods was playing a draw and when he missed a fairway it was pretty much to the left. That's progress.

- **CHIPPING:** One of the most difficult parts to watch of Tiger's decline was when he had the chipping yips. All of a sudden, the guy who used to be

able to get the ball up-and-down from impossible places was putting from 30 yards off the green because he was afraid he'd skull his chip over the green. Tiger did have a couple of chunky chips at the Hero, but no real cringe moments and he pulled off a couple of real beauties. Again, a positive sign.

- **PUTTING:** When Tiger was at his peak I remember thinking I'd never seen any great golfer make as many 12-foot par putts as he did. His short game – that deft chipping and boldly confident putting – is what enabled him to attack pins and always try to go low. He knew he could save par from anywhere. The short-side leave did not scare him one bit. Then, all of a sudden, those putts from 12 feet and in started missing. Power lip-ins became power lip-outs. At the Hero, Woods was rock-solid putting the makeable putts. He didn't seem as automatic as he once was, but he sure was close. Oh, and he also knocked in a few bombs.

- **CONFIDENCE:** At the end of 1997, Tiger's first full year on tour, we talked about the craziness of Tigermania and the impact that distraction had on him. He told me the toll it took was that by the U.S. Open in June he was mentally tired and that by the PGA Championship in August he was physically tired. I asked: "How did that affect you." He replied: "I lost my ability to will things to happen." For anyone else, I would have thrown the BS flag. But I'd seen it. I'd seen him seemingly will things to happen. At his peak, Tiger's belief system was off the charts. There were glimpses of that at the Hero.

All of that is hugely encouraging. But we are left wondering this: Is Woods the 65 he shot in the second round or the 76 he struggled to in the final round? Was what happened on Sunday merely the result of the physical and mental toll of four days grinding at stroke-play golf after being away from competition for so long. Which leads me to what I think Tiger should do next.

- **PLAY MORE:** If Tiger were to follow the pattern he's used most of the last 20 years, the next time we see him in competition will be at the Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pine Jan. 26-29. If his body shows no ill effects from four rounds in The Bahamas, I think he needs to get back out there as

soon as possible, maybe the SONY Open in Hawaii two weeks before the Farmers. It's all about the reps, dude. I'm a big believer that golf is like every other sport: The only way to get your game legs is by playing games. You can't get them on the practice field.

The bottom line? We saw glimpses of the greatness that once dominated golf at the Hero World Challenge. Can Tiger win again? Can he get the four wins he needs to break Sam Snead's record of 82 career PGA Tour victories? Can he get the five majors he needs to break Jack Nicklaus' record of 18? Who knows? But it's just good to be asking those questions again. Welcome back, Tiger. Hope to see you soon.