

Important Stretch for Tiger

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This was to be an important stretch of golf for Tiger Woods. More than 500 days removed from a PGA Tour event, he had four events scheduled in five weeks, hitting both coasts of the United States via the Middle East on the road to the Masters. After that, it seemed, we'd have a better barometer of the state of his health and the quality of his play.

But a missed cut at Torrey Pines – a place he'd won eight times – and a withdrawal in Dubai because of back spasms raised more questions than they answered about Tiger's future. Was his WD physical or the result of frustration after an opening-round 77? Neither answer is especially encouraging.

The best-case scenario is the happy face painted on the situation by Tiger and his camp: Back spasms unrelated to the three surgical procedures he's had on his back. More alarming – and perhaps career ending – would be a recurrence of his back problems. Just as concerning would be if he pulled out of Dubai because of frustration.

If this comeback is to continue, the road ahead is likely long and very frustrating, especially for a 41-year-old used to not only winning but also dominating. Since his last tour win in 2013, Woods has played only 20 times, missing seven cuts, withdrawing four times and having only one top-10. The numbers just don't lie. It's nearly four years since his last win, almost nine years since his last major and 16 years since completing the Tiger Slam. Time is a cruel opponent.

Back in 1997, Woods rolled in Jack Nicklaus' Memorial tournament

having won the Mercedes Championship, Masters and Byron Nelson, finishing second at the AT&T and T-4 at Colonial. His 12-stroke victory at Augusta National shouted to the world that, at the age of 21, Tiger was the best player in the world.

At his pre-tournament press conference, Nicklaus was asked what the biggest challenge would be for Woods going forward. Jack's answer was brilliant bordering on prophetic.

"The frenzy around him is hard, you guys, you gals," Jack said to reporters on May 27, 1997. "And he's single. He's got that issue in front of him. How do you know how he's going to react to getting married or not getting married? To having children or not having children. You don't know, he's just starting his life. All our lives changed when we got married, all our lives changed when we had children, all our lives changed every day."

"I'm really quite interested in seeing what's going to happen to him," Nicklaus continued. "Every single thing he's going to do will be right in your newspapers. It will be under a microscope. It's a tough way to live. It's a tough way to perform as an athlete, [to] have to stand over 3 footers all day long after having that hang over you. But I think he's quite capable of doing so."

And asked if Tiger would have the longevity to break his record of 18 professional major championships, Nicklaus said:

"I think he wants to win. And winning is his objective every time he turns out. So whether he can maintain that for 24 years (Jack won majors in 1962 and 1986), I don't know. Probably very difficult, but he's maintained that kind of -- he's been right in the limelight ever since he's been 15 years old or younger, he's had it for about six years, so don't count him out."

What Jack didn't factor in were physical problems, which he rarely had to deal with. From 1962 through 1998, Nicklaus played in every major on his way to a record 18 titles. Since winning his 14th at the 2008 U.S. Open, Woods has missed the cut in six majors and did not play in 10 others. And when Tiger won his fourth Masters in 2005, who would have thought that a dozen years later he'd not have added another green jacket to his closet?

As of now, Woods plans to play the Genesis Open and the Honda Classic. Is that enough to get ready for the Masters? He's not qualified to play in either of the two World Golf Championship events before heading to Augusta National, but he could add the Arnold Palmer Invitational both because he's had success at Bay Hill and because it would be a nice tribute to The King.

What lay ahead for Woods? Who knows? That's why we love sports. You have to play the game. Personally, I think Tiger has one more Jack-Winning-the-Masters-at-46 magic moment waiting for us, perhaps not this year but sometime. But I don't expect him to become 24 years old again.

The truth is that Woods has been hit with a perfect storm of hurdles, some self-inflicted and some beyond his control. Confidence-wise, he's not been the same since Y.E. Yang ended his 14-for-14 winning streak with the final-round lead in a major at the 2009 PGA Championship. Three months later, that personal life Nicklaus referred to crashed into a fire hydrant.

There have been three back surgeries, four knee operations and five swing coaches. Since limping to that last major at Torrey Pines in 2008 Woods had had to deal with physical, technical, personal and confidence challenges. Any one of those would be difficult enough but all four are a grand slam of barriers in the way of a return to greatness.

Is this it for Tiger? When I hear that question I think of the number of times a TV commentator said Tiger had an impossible up-and-down and then watched him pull it off. But my more recent images are of the chipping yips, power lipouts, gimpy steps and grimaces.

I know this: The next time he tees it up, I'll be watching. No matter what, Tiger remains one of the most compelling stories in all of sports and likely will until he says: "That's it." That time has never felt closer than it does right now.