

Has Tiger Exceeded Golf's Window of Greatness?

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Word Tiger Woods pulled out of two more tournaments triggered twin responses, one predictable and the other rather shocking. Predictable was the knee-jerk response from Tiger haters on social media wondering why people like me still write about a guy whose last major championship was nearly nine years ago.

The answer to that is simple: Woods is one of the best to ever play the game, he's a global personality and he's stopped winning. In my 47 years as a journalist, there have been few who were as impactful in their profession as Woods. Tiger will be news until he tells us he just can't do it any more.

I've tried to think of comparisons and, like with much Tiger has done, it's difficult to find any.

The pitcher Catfish Hunter won 146 games in seven years, blew his arm out and won only 23 times after the age of 30 and was done at 33. Another pitcher, Steve Blass, had 78 wins in five years and won only three times after 30, suddenly unable to throw the ball over the plate. The best pitcher I ever saw – Sandy Koufax – went 27-9 with a 1.73 ERA in 1966 and quit at the age of 29 because of an arthritic elbow.

From 1957 through 1965, the running back Jim Brown played every game for the Cleveland Browns, never sitting out because of injury, averaging an astounding 5.2 yards per carry. Then, at the age of 29 and

fully healthy, he walked away from the game to pursue an acting career.

In golf, Johnny Miller won 18 times and two majors by the age of 29 then won seven times with no majors after. Both Greg Norman and Nick Faldo never recovered from their 1996 Masters duel, won by Faldo at the age of 38. He won only one more time. Norman was 41 and won only twice after. Lorena Ochoa retired to have a family at 28 with 27 LPGA wins and two majors.

So social media trolls, that's why Tiger matters. His demise is as compelling as his rise because of the heights he reached.

The other reaction to the twin WDs by Woods is jarring. For the first time, people that matter in the game, people who know what they are talking about, are saying this might be it for Woods. The man who seemed invincible – winning the Masters by 12 strokes at 21, the U.S. Open by 15 at 24 and, appropriately, winning his last major on a broken leg at 32 – may be out of gas.

Maybe this should not come as a surprise. When you really think about it, Woods has been hit with a perfect storm of physical, technical, personal and mental issues, any one of which could have derailed the career of anyone else.

In May 2006 his father and mentor Earl died. In June 2008 he had major surgery on his left knee. In August 2009 his streak of winning 14 straight majors with the Sunday lead ended. In November of that year there was the fire hydrant. Since then, there were three back surgeries. Add in the fact that he has swing theories of at least five coaches rattling around in his head and is it any wonder he looks lost on the golf course.

The golf gods don't leave the window to greatness open for a very long time. Eleven men have won seven or more major championships. Throw

out the two exceptions who prove the rule – Jack Nicklaus won majors 24 years apart and Gary Player 19 – and the average run for male major winners is 10.1 years.

Nine women have won seven or more majors. Throw out three exceptions – Patty Berg, 21 years; Betsy Rawls and Juli Inkster both 18 years – and the average run for a female major winner is 10.6 years.

Tiger won his 14 majors in an 11-year span. Maybe his time is quite simply up. Of course, Woods could turn out to be one of those exceptions to the longevity rule, but Nicklaus, Player, Berg, Rawls and Inkster did not face the physical issues of Woods, or the other components of the perfect storm that shipwrecked him.

I used to think Woods had a Jack-at-the-1986-Masters miracle in left him. Now I'm not sure. But I do know this for sure: I'd love to see him soar one more time – like when Jack shot 65 on Sunday at the age of 46 to win that 1986 Masters; or when Ben Hogan shot 66 on Saturday at the age of 54 in the 1967 Masters.

We hate to see our athletic heroes age because it reminds us we all grow old. When we let go of Tiger we are letting go of a part of our self. That's why he remains news. And that's why these latest two withdrawals feel very different than any other by Woods. For the first time, for me at least, it feels like this could be it.