

20 YEARS AGO, WHEN A BLACK MAN SLIPPED ON A GREEN JACKET THE WORLD OF GOLF CHANGED

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The scene unfolded almost as if in slow motion. As Nick Faldo, the defending Masters champion, and Tiger Woods, who won the U.S. Amateur a year earlier, moved from the practice green toward the first tee for their opening-round pairing at the 1997 Masters, a ripple of anxiety ran through the massive gallery.

But what I will always remember is the fans beyond the fans. There are at Augusta National the patrons, as the club refers to the paying customers, and then there are the workers. In the clubhouse, the employees wear white jackets. On the course, they are adorned in green jumpsuits.

The majority of those employees are black and that was especially true 20 years ago. On that day, those employees slowly inched their way onto the clubhouse balcony and into the doorways. They eased their way out of the Georgia pines on the right side of the first fairway. They wanted to watch.

Someone who looked like them was about to tee off in the Masters. More importantly, someone who looked like them was regarded as having a chance to win the Masters. Four days later, on Sunday afternoon, when a black man slipped on a green jacket, the world of golf had changed.

In our overly hyped society Tiger was that rarity: Someone who not only lived up to the hype but exceeded it. He was better than advertised. When he finished at 18 under par, 12 strokes clear of the field, he was, at 21, the future of the game. In August 1996 Woods turned pro and by April 1997 he was the unquestioned best player in the world.

There are many ways to assess the impact Woods has had on golf over the last 20 years. For one thing, he attracted bigger, stronger athletes to the game. And he did that in two ways: He made golf cool; and he made it possible to get rich playing golf. Talented men who might have chosen another sport a generation earlier now chose golf. Dustin Johnson is a great example.

Woods also changed the belief system of young players. The common knowledge that a player wasn't ready to win until he was in his early thirties was out the window. Woods was ready to win right away. He also made impossible feats – like the Grand Slam – seem possible. Look how many twenty-something stars there are on tour now.

And that Masters victory by Woods in 1997 unleashed a financial impact on the game – especially the professional game – unlike anything seen since Arnold Palmer flicked a cigarette aside, hitched up his pants and lashed at the ball with an athletic move the game had never seen before.

After the final round of the 1997 Masters got a record 14.1 TV rating – a mark that still stands and likely will never be touched – tickets sales shot up, TV ratings for other events jumped, interest in the game among casual sports fans and even non-fans increased and the PGA Tour leveraged that Masters rating into a lucrative new TV deal.

In 1997, I was working for The Associated Press and in a multi-month reporting project in which I spoke with dozens of tournament officials, TV and corporate executives and business analysts I determined that in his first year as a pro Wood generated more than \$650 million in additional revenue for the game.

A mere month after Woods won the Masters in record fashion and drew nearly 40 million viewers for the final round, the PGA Tour negotiated a new four-year TV deal that started in 1999. That deal was worth \$650 million, about \$325 million more than the previous contract.

Tim Finchem, then the PGA Tour commissioner, said that as a result of the increased TV revenue, the average tournament purse of \$1.7 million in 1997 would be "north of \$3 million" in the year 2000 and average \$3.5 million by the time the agreements expire at the end of 2002.

And fortunately for Finchem, Woods performed during that first four-year TV contract, winning the 2000 U.S. Open by 15 strokes and completing the Tiger Slam at the 2001 Masters.

The first Tiger TV deal raised PGA Tour prize money from \$96.4 million in 1998 to \$135 million in 1999. The second Tiger deal took the purse from \$199 million in 2002 to \$224 million in 2003. And the third boosted it from \$257 million in 2006 to \$270 million in 2007.

When Tiger turned pro in 1996, the total purse on the PGA Tour was

\$66 million. By 2011 it was \$280 million. And that increase is pretty much all generated by TV revenue. There was a significant amount of jealousy when Woods walked onto the PGA Tour with a pocket full of Nike and Titleist endorsement money. But that jealousy went away when players realized two things: This guy is good; and he's going to make us all rich.

Twenty years after that magical 1997 Masters the future of Tiger is very much in doubt. We don't even know if he will play this year and if he does if he will finish. A perfect storm of ills – physical, technical, mental and emotional – has dimmed the brilliance of an enormous talent.

But no matter where Woods goes from here, his impact on the game will always be remembered. And what became known as Tiger-Mania all began at Augusta National in the 1997 Masters.