

WAITING FOR GODOT: LOOKING FOR GOLF'S NEXT SUPERSTAR

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The conversation began shortly after Jack Nicklaus won his 18th and final professional major championship at the 1986 Masters. “There will never be another golfer as dominant as Nicklaus,” the reasoning went, “because there is simply too much talent now for anyone to win that often.” A decade later we had Tiger Woods.

The point is this: Genius always comes along; it just takes a while. That’s why it’s so special when it happens. From Jones to Hogan to Nicklaus to Woods; from Suggs to Whitworth to Wright to Lopez to Sorenstam generational genius arrives with comforting regularity. Right now, both the men and women are blessed with an abundance of greatness while waiting for the next transcendent player to show up.

Between Nicklaus and Woods – from 1987 to 1997 – the closest thing to a dominant player was Nick Faldo, who won six majors in that 10-year-period. What we had while waiting for Woods was a lot of players building Hall-of-Fame careers winning majors, including Greg Norman, Curtis Strange, Nick Price, Ernie Els, Seve Ballesteros, Bernhard Langer and Fred Couples. It feels like we are in a similar situation right now.

The last 10 men's majors have been won by 10 different players: Justin Thomas, Jordan Spieth, Brooks Koepka, Sergio Garcia, Jimmy Walker, Henrik Stenson, Dustin Johnson, Danny Willet, Jason Day and Zach Johnson. And of the top-10 in the Official World Golf Ranking, seven are under the age of 30.

The last 10 women's majors have also had 10 different winners: Anna Nordqvist, In-Kyung Kim, Sung Hyun Park, Danielle Kang, So Yeon Ryu, In Gee Chun, Ariya Jutanugarn, Brittany Lang, Brooke Henderson and Lydia Ko. And of the top-10 in the Rolex Ranking, eight are under the age of 30.

The stage seems set for both the men and the women to have an intense present and a bright future. It does raise some compelling questions, however. Will someone emerge from the pack to be the next Tiger or Annika, or is the next transcendent man or woman not on anyone's radar right now? Is golf better when it has a clear king or queen of the hill or when it has intense parity? Will the young stars of today have the longevity of a Phil Mickelson or a Karrie Webb?

The fun thing is that there are no clear answers to any of those questions. Yes, Jordan Spieth or Sung Hyun Park could emerge as a true superstar. And yes, so much young talent has come along the last few years – call it the Tiger effect – that you wonder who out there might burst onto the scene and knock our socks off.

In terms of media attention, the individual sports like boxing, tennis and golf probably do better when there is a clear No. 1 that everyone is trying to knock off. That's when the casual fan tunes in. But for the hardcore fans, a time like right now is extremely exciting. We go into each major on both the PGA Tour and the LPGA with no clear favorite but a lot of extremely talented contenders. We never know when we are going to see a Justin Thomas or Danielle Kang do their star turn.

As for the longevity question, well, it just might be the most interesting unknown. So much is expected of so many at such a young age that you worry about burnout, especially in those who travel an international competition schedule. Also, there is the monetary matter. There is so much money, especially on the men's tour, that financial motivation can dwindle at an early age.

The best thing about sports – the reason that we are fans – is that there are no scripts. Athletes are improvisational actors reacting to the moment they are in. Mickey Wright once famously said: “Every star needs a chorus line.”

Bobby Jones had Walter Hagen and Gene Sarazen; Ben Hogan had Sam Snead and Byron Nelson; Nicklaus had Gary Player, Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino and Tom Watson. Mickey Wright and Kathy Whitworth were golf's greatest rivalry. And there was one five-

year period when 16 of the 20 LPGA majors were won by Sorenstam, Webb, Juli Inkster and Se Ri Pak.

Right now, both the men and women have extremely talented chorus lines waiting for someone to step forward and dominate the spotlight.

On the women's side, 2017 saw Sung Hyun Park be both Rookie of the Year and share Player of the Year with So Yeon Ryu, becoming the only LPGA player other than Nancy Lopez to cop both honors in the same season. We also saw Lexi Thompson emerge from her disappointment at the ANA Inspiration as a tougher, more complete player. They both have my attention for 2018.

On the men's side, Spieth, Thomas, Jon Rahm and Hideki Matsuyama all could be more than special. Dustin Johnson is in his prime and Justin Rose is, right now, playing the best golf on the planet. Oh, and there is that guy named Tiger Woods lurking out there who seems to be healthy for the first time in a long time but who has gone five years without a win and 10 years without a major. He has my attention.

Let's call it the era of uncertainty in golf as we wait for Godot. But the good thing about golf is we know that, unlike in the play, eventually Godot shows up. He or she always does. What is certain is that there are more great players in the professional game right now than at any time in the history. On sheer volume, this is the

game's golden age. I can't wait to see what happens next. It will be worth waiting for, of that I'm certain.