

TIGER'S PLACE IN HISTORY: A GREAT ATHLETE; A PHENOMENAL ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENT

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The problem with history is that it gets old in a hurry; we forget it sooner than we should. That's especially true in our current 24-hour news cycle relentlessly driven by social media. Whatever happened last night is deemed this morning to be the most significant achievement ever. There is a paucity of perspective.

As I was boarding my plane home after the Masters, I saw on my phone that Notre Dame was burning in Paris. Somehow, that fit into what I had just witnessed at Augusta National Golf Club in my 30th and perhaps most memorable Masters. Notre Dame provided the perspective to fully understand what Tiger Woods had accomplished.

That great cathedral is more than a religious monument, more than the symbol of a great city – Paris – and a proud nation – France. Notre Dame is an enduring example of the creativity, passion and determination of people. It is a monument to God built by humans. Like Michelangelo's divine David, it celebrates the spirit and achievement of mere mortals.

There are many ways in which the endless imagination of humanity is displayed in art and science. The physics of Einstein is as inspiring as the words of Schiller's "Ode to Joy" set to music by Beethoven in the fourth movement of his Ninth Symphony. And sport has its own place in this creative expression.

But there is also no arena in which perspective is lost as quickly as in athletics, where many think ESPN invented sports and Tiger Woods invented golf. The feats of Jim Thorpe and Babe Zaharias; Ben Hogan and Mickey Wright fade into oblivion because they lack endless replays to be shown.

We actually have to read to revisit those astounding athletic achievement. But when greatness unfolds in front of us, as it did with Tiger at the Masters, we are given an opportunity to remember the past as we appreciate the present.

Sport touches us in a special way because it involves what Churchill called the "blood, sweat and tears" of humanity. Some of the greatest acts of courage are the ordinary but necessary tasks of finding a job; building a home; raising a family; putting food on the table; coping with the adversity life throws at you.

Those will always be the under-appreciated heroes. But part of the appeal of sport is that the timeframe of human existence is accelerated. In a compressed period

of time we learn a lot about a person: How they handle success and failure; How they function as a teammate; If they are honest; If they have compassion; If they give all they have all of the time.

In life, we learn those things about a person over a much longer period of time. We probably gained more insight into Woods during this one week in Augusta as he picked up his fifth green jacket and 15th major championship than we learned during his decades of success. But what did we learn?

I spent much of Sunday night after I watched Tiger melt into the arms of his mother, children, girlfriend and others he loves trying to sort it out, trying to gain perspective, trying to evaluate the present and place it in the perspective of the past so I could put it into an historical context.

When Woods won the Tour Championship, I did not join the rush to call it the greatest comeback in sports history. I wasn't buying it. I didn't even think it was the greatest comeback in the history of golf – See Hogan and Greyhound bus; See Zaharias and cancer.

But as I lay sleepless in Augusta, these realizations crawled into my brain. Tiger's collapse had been complete. His body fell apart; his technique as a golfer fell apart; his confidence fell apart; and his personal life fell apart. Now, there will be those who say he brought

some of that on himself, but that is a discussion for another time.

What matters is how far he had fallen. Try as I might, I cannot think of any athlete who experienced a collapse as compete as that of Tiger and then came back to win an event that defines greatness in his or her sport. Let's take just golf: Hogan and Zaharias lost their health but not their games; Jack Nicklaus stopped winning majors, but he never got the yips or lost his belief.

Tiger lost it all.

And I can't think of anyone who was away from the top of his or her game for as long as Woods and then returned to the pinnacle of their profession. His Tour Championship win was his first in five years. He hadn't won a major championship in nearly 11 years, the Masters in 14 years and he completed the Tiger Slam 18 years ago.

The 43-year-old man who won the Masters on April 14, 2019, was not the 21-year-old Adonis who triumphed there on April 13, 1997, by an astonishing 12 strokes. This champion is a middle-aged father of two with a receding hairline who hung on to win by a single stroke, punctuating victory with the surviving semicolon of a bogey rather than the exclamation point of a birdie.

The first version of Woods was placed on a pedestal by all of us – fans, media, sponsors – and rightly so. Tiger was that rarity in marketing – better than advertised. And Tiger loved being on that pedestal. He never made an effort to climb down but descended only when he was knocked off by life.

The first version of Woods was held in awe, but not always adored. This version is much easier to love because he's more human. As Joan Baez wrote in *Winds of the Old Days* about her one-time boyfriend, Bob Dylan: "A savior's a nuisance to live with at home."

During those first 14 major championships, there was a sense of inevitability about Woods. We expected him to win and he did. But victory is sweeter when it is not a foregone conclusion. Until the very end on Sunday at Augusta National, I had my doubts.

In August, it will be 10 years since Y.E. Yang became the Buster Douglas of golf and shattered the aura of invincibility around Woods the way Douglas destroyed it for Mike Tyson when he took the heavyweight boxing title from the 42-1 favorite in 1990.

Until the 2009 PGA Championship, Woods had been 14-for-14 with the lead going to Sunday in a major. On that Sunday, the other guy made all the big shots.

In November, it will be 10 years since Tiger's personal life careened off a fire hydrant, into a tree and onto the front pages. Perhaps a danger of uninterrupted success – and until 2009 Woods had known only victory – is that it breeds an unrealistic belief in invincibility.

That makes the fall from the pedestal all the more painful. And it makes the return to the top all the more arduous of a climb and all the sweeter when the summit is reached. In sport, I'm not sure anyone has ever made a more impressive return to glory.

I've been on hand to witness Woods win major championships by 15 strokes, 12 strokes and eight strokes. This Masters victory by one stroke is as impressive – or more so – than any of those others.

From the perfect storm of disaster, Woods has not so much returned to serene seas but rather sailed upon them for the first time. This was a work of art, a triumph of human resiliency and an ode to joy. Savor it. And don't forget it.