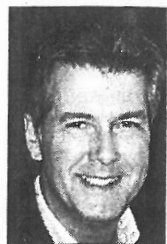


Tiger Woods: Transcendence lost



I miss Tiger Woods.

"But he's still playing, right? Injured, but he'll be back."

Not exactly. Woods recently announced there was "no timetable" for his return from back surgery.

But that's not the guy I'm talking about.

I'm talking about "Tiger Woods!" "Black Jesus," Charles Barkley called him.

I'm talking about the guy who, his father Earl Woods said in a 2007 Golf Digest interview, might "have an impact upon the world, in a humanitarian aspect, very similar to that of Gandhi" and compared him to athletes like Michael Jordan and Joe Montana for his ability to "transcend the game by virtue of their mental toughness."

Yep, that's who I'm talking about. The legend. The Icon. The Man, if there ever was one.

Now it's 2014. The seven years since his father's interview passing as fast as Tiger striping a drive at Augusta on the way to another green jacket. Except it's been nine years since he won the Masters.

People no longer make comparisons to Jesus, Gandhi and Mandela (or Jordan or Montana.) Tiger's another PGA Tour pro now, and Father Time is closing fast, making his given name, Eldrick, more fitting with each major-missing year.

But physical demise strikes everyone, and Tiger's downfall began at 32, not 38. Besides, it can be off-

set by experience. What is not easy to replace is lost confidence. The type that allows a golfer to strike a ball flush, no doubt in midswing, no flutter in the putter. A purely hit golf ball is a moment of transcendence. The repetition of that act in front of millions, within the pressure cooker of major championship golf while bearing the mantle of overwhelming favorite, is a sustained transcendence on the order of genius.

And no athlete was ever more transcendent than Tiger Woods. Not Jordan. Not Montana.

From his 1997 Masters victory to the 2008 U.S. Open, which he played on a broken leg, Tiger lived up to the hype. He rose to the occasion so often he shocked us when he failed. Tiger with the third round lead was money. The other golfers were playing for second. It could be argued that not even Jack Nicklaus in his prime, the Golden Bear whose tracks Tiger trails, provoked the resignation to defeat in opponents the way Tiger did.

As impressive as his physical abilities were, however, it was Tiger's mind that set him apart. Earl Woods was spot-on with that observation.

Many PGA players have exceptional all-round games that put them in position to win, but none closed the deal like Tiger. It was not lack of physical ability that stopped Phil Mickelson from winning his first major for years. He too often wilted instead of bloomed, jerking drives into the rough and lipping short putts, errors emanating from mental stress. Tiger seldom did such things

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and, when he did, recovered on the next shot, oblivious to the pressure, focused on the task at hand. To paraphrase the great sportswriter Dan Jenkins' thoughts on Nicklaus at his best, Tiger may not have been the greatest ever tee-to-green, but if your life depended on a guy draining a slippery sloped 20-foot putt, pick Tiger.

The 19th-century philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, argued in his book "The World as Will and Idea" that artistic "genius is the capacity to maintain oneself in the state of pure perception." That is, genius is immersed in the action, "divesting oneself of one's own personality for a time" and becoming "pure knowing subject...not merely at moments, but for long enough, and with consciousness enough, to enable one to reproduce by deliberate art what has thus been apprehended." Schopenhauer believed the creation of music was the highest form of "aesthetic perception as a mode

of transcendence," great composers occupying an intellectual realm the rest of us cannot attain. We can, however, join them temporarily when we listen to the music, losing ourselves in the song and achieving a moment of transcendence.

From an athletic perspective, Tiger Woods achieved transcendence, a "pure knowing subject," reproducing "by deliberate art" a golf game which is unattainable to 99.99 percent of humanity. To see him at his peak on the final nine of a major, eyes tracking a well-struck putt, charging toward the cup where the ball inevitably disappeared, was to see a man immersed in his craft, composing athletic genius.

Like music aficionados listening to Beethoven, hackers experience moments of transcendence. We flush a 7-iron on a short par 3 and drop it next to the flag — then run the 2-foot putt 1 foot past. We glimpse transcendence, but cannot sustain it. Nor can most golfers, even professionals.

The jolt the last few years, for those who remember his magical decade, is that Tiger is like most professional golfers, his athletic compositions no longer genius.

Of course, there is a physical aspect to athletics absent from music. Beethoven, deaf, produced works of genius. Tiger Woods, with a bum knee or bad back, cannot swing a club. Even after an athlete's injury heals, there is a time period where they may not trust their body. Where there is doubt when a driver needs to be ripped 300 yards down the middle. How much of Tiger's demise can be attributed to physical problems,

I do not know. Lee Trevino once said if Tiger did not stop snapping his left knee on follow-through, his days as a top golfer were over. I defer to such experts.

Others say Karma did Tiger in, his personal behavior coming home to roost. I know there are many who root against him, his personal transgressions not forgotten. People's investment in the iconic Tiger — Black Jesus, Gandhi, Mandela — exacerbating their disillusionment when his all-too-human faults came to light. Again, I cannot say.

What is clear, however, is that there is now a flicker of doubt in Tiger Woods not present in his prime. A mental hiccup erupting when the big drive is required or the crucial putt drained. His fellow competitors, especially the young guns, the fearless ones, sense it. The intimidation factor is gone.

Whether it's due to age, wear and tear, or personal problems, if that flicker of doubt continues to spark in the heat of competition, the Tiger Woods we reveled in will not reappear, even with successful back surgery. Eldrick Woods will win tournaments, maybe another major, even be ranked number one in the world. But Tiger Woods will be history.

And I'll miss him.
Transcendence lost.

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