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MAJOR  
GLORY

# TIGER WOODS REALITY BITES

IS IT TIME FOR THE 14-TIME MAJOR CHAMPION  
TO WAKE UP FROM HIS DREAM OF MATCHING  
JACK NICKLAUS' WINNING RECORD?

WORDS Paul Prendergast

Whether you're a cynic, a realist or one who kneels at the altar of all things Tiger Woods, the recent return of the Florida restaurateur to the PGA Tour at the beginning of 2017 was being viewed by all as a potentially seismic event for the sport.

A hugely talented gaggle of players have stepped in to collectively fill the superstar breach while the 14-time major champion convalesced, but as most of these players and the viewing golf public have said, nobody 'moves the needle' quite like Tiger Woods.

His competition comeback at his World Challenge event in the Bahamas in December was a perfect environment for his return. While there is no such thing as 'under the radar' for Tiger Woods, this event was relatively low-key, on a golf course that was not too physically demanding and on which he could shed some rust and start to rebuild some competitive habits.

On the back of some encouraging play at that event, Woods outlined what appeared to be an ambitious splash back into tournament golf proper, starting at the Farmers Insurance Open in San Diego, heading across the globe to Dubai before returning for more consecutive weeks on the PGA TOUR.

Winter golf and dodgy backs don't always go hand in hand, so the schedule did appear optimistic at best; but at the same time, it could have been viewed as a sign that Woods was feeling great about his game and body and up to the physical challenge of travel and tournament play.

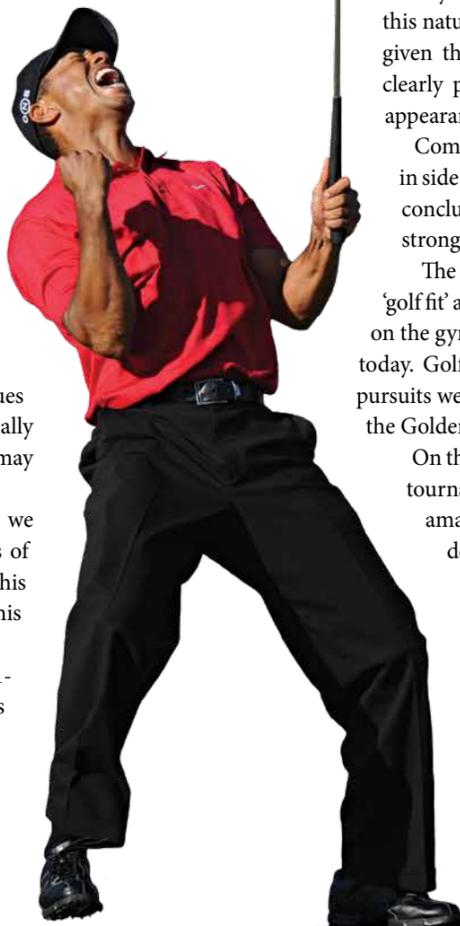
Woods certainly moved the needle in terms of gallery interest at Torrey Pines, where all eyes (and iPhones) were fixed on him despite his superstar grouping alongside world number-one Jason Day and US Open champion Dustin Johnson.

However, his subsequent withdrawal after one round in Dubai and another stint on the sidelines with more back issues prompted an admission that he may actually never feel 'great' in himself again. 'Good' may be as good as it gets from here on.

During this all too-brief return, we continued to be fed dollops of the Woods of old behind the microphone, declaring his intention to win every time he pulls on his soft spikes.

The reality of course, even if the now 41-year old Woods chooses to accept it or not, is that completing a few four-round events in a row would be akin to a tournament win at this stage of his career and comeback from injury.

The run by 59-year-old Tom Watson at



the 2009 British Open proves anything is possible, but winning in his next start or, God forbid, talk of continuing to chase down Jack Nicklaus' 18 majors record, might be ambitions best kept to himself for the time being.

I thought of Tiger's future career prospects recently while watching, of all things, a replay of the 1976 Open Championship at Royal Birkdale, which Johnny Miller won during a rare heat-wave summer in England.

During the second round, the then 36-year old Nicklaus faced a shot from thick rough on the opening nine and I was amazed at the ferocity of the swing he was able to take at the ball to extract it from the depths.

The shot appeared to be close to 200 yards (183m) and Nicklaus was able to muscle the ball onto the green after a swing that threw him off balance and had the club almost bounce off his back.

Reflecting on how 40-year old Woods appeared in his early 2017 outings in San Diego and Dubai, there is no way his physical condition would have allowed him to play this shot the way Nicklaus was able to.

Extracting a ball from thick rough was one of the trademark advantages that Woods had over many in his heyday, but I doubt he would contemplate shots of this nature at the present time. Or perhaps ever again, given the ginger nature of his gait and how he was clearly protecting against injury in these two recent appearances in February.

Compare these two 'best ever' players at age 40/41 in side-by-side photographs and the lay person would conclude Woods was clearly the more supremely strong and fit of the two.

The important difference is that Nicklaus remained 'golf fit' and injury free well into his 40s with no reliance on the gyms, fitness trainers and personal instructors of today. Golf, tennis and other more traditional outdoor pursuits were the keystones of the lifelong health 'regime' the Golden Bear subscribed to.

On the back of his lifestyle approach and meticulous tournament preparations, Nicklaus was able to amass an extraordinary record of resilience over decades of major championship play. Back spasms forced his withdrawal from the 1983 Masters, but otherwise he had unblemished participation in a major championship career dating back to the late 1950s.

Nicklaus' 40th year was one of the most momentous of his career, winning the 1980 US Open and PGA Championship in heroic fashion to win his 16th and 17th major championships. He contended strongly at several more majors over the next few years

# TIGER'S MAJOR VICTORIES



1997 THE MASTERS



1999 PGA CHAMPIONSHIP



2000 US OPEN



2001 THE MASTERS



2000 PGA CHAMPIONSHIP



2000 THE OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP



2002 THE MASTERS



2002 US OPEN



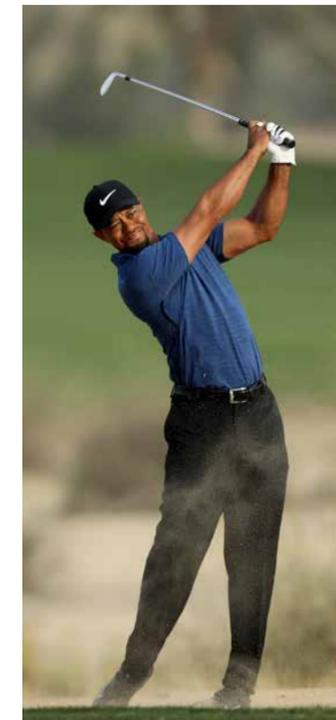
2006 PGA CHAMPIONSHIP



2008 US OPEN



2007 PGA CHAMPIONSHIP



The two 'best ever' players Tiger Woods and Jack Nicklaus at age 41, Woods is clearly the more supremely strong and fit of the two.

on his limited schedule and, of course, won his 18th and final major at the 1986 Masters at age 46.

Anchored on 14 major wins, Woods has yet to move the needle on the scoreboard in his 40s and faces another mental and physical challenge to regain full health and fitness before he can even contemplate being competitive again.

The Nicklaus record will no doubt be a high-water mark that he continues to aspire to publicly but he is now almost nine years removed from his last major title at the 2008 US Open. By contrast, Nicklaus' dual-major winning season in 1980 came after a gap of just 17 months from his win at the 1978 Open at St Andrews.

The Golden Bear may have struggled with his game by his standards for most of 1979 – despite finishing fourth, tied ninth and tied second in the first three majors that year – but he proved beyond doubt that in no way, shape or form had he forgotten how to win in that time.

Until he is able to get back on course and compete for an extended period of time without incident, we won't know if the same can be said for Tiger Woods. □