

The New York Times

SPORTING

Why We Can't Stop Rooting for Tiger Woods

He's the most talented golfer ever to play the game. But more than ever he's showing he's also a human being.

Sept. 29, 2018

By Jeff Benedict and Armen Keteyian
Mr. Benedict and Mr. Keteyian are the authors of "Tiger Woods."

Our book, "Tiger Woods," a biography of the grittiest and most mysterious athlete either of us has encountered in our over 50 years covering sports, came out in March. The final chapter, set in early 2018, sets the scene for Woods as he prepared to return to golf after his fourth back surgery. The last sentence read: "A changed man, he stood poised to show his children — and a fresh generation of golf pros and fans — just what a living legend looks like."

In all honesty, when we wrote that, our expectations were low — very low. There is no way we would have predicted the scene last weekend at the Tour Championship, when hundreds of raucous fans overcome with euphoria

swarmed down the final fairway at East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, following Woods like a human sea. We were sent back decades earlier, to 1997, to his triumphant stroll down the 18th fairway at Cog Hill during the Western Open.

After he tapped in his final putt to win his first P.G.A. tournament in five years, the raucous crowd chanted “TI-GER TI-GER.”

At age 42, Woods is writing a new chapter with himself as the central character in the greatest comeback in the history of sports. But this comeback is bigger than golf. Woods has emerged, in our deeply divided country, as a symbol of unity and admiration. When he was announced at the opening ceremony for this weekend’s Ryder Cup at Le Golf National in France, the enormous crowd gave him a lengthy, spirited standing ovation, chanting his name in French amid the waving of American flags.

As recently as a year ago, we could hardly find anyone who genuinely believed that Woods would play again on the P.G.A. Tour, much less win. Woods himself confided to a former Masters winner at the Champions Dinner at Augusta in April 2017 that he was “done.” Nine surgeries will do that to most people.

But Woods, as we found in our extensive research on him and interviews with hundreds of people from every facet of his life, has an unparalleled determination to persevere through disappointment, adversity and pain. His comeback began this year, and as he found his swing, he quietly moved up in the

World Golf Rankings. Remarkably, in July he briefly led the British Open with eight holes to play. In August he finished two shots behind the winner at the P.G.A. Championship.

How unlikely was this? Just 16 months ago, Woods was found on the side of the road near his home in Florida, asleep behind the wheel of his car in the middle of the night. He was arrested for D.U.I., and a toxicology report subsequently revealed that he had taken a potentially lethal combination of drugs that included the painkillers Vicodin and Dilaudid, the anti-anxiety medication Xanax and the sleep aid Ambien. His mug shot ricocheted around the world.

He had hit rock bottom, even lower than the stretch in 2009, following his infidelity scandal, when his name appeared on the cover of The New York Post for 21 consecutive days, surpassing the previous record of 20 consecutive covers devoted to the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

Woods hasn't won a major championship since 2008. It erased his aura of invincibility. Everyone started to look at him differently. He was still the most talented golfer ever to play the game, but he was also fallible, a human being with weaknesses and frailties.

Even worse, for a professional athlete, his body broke down. His arrest last year was ultimately the result of misusing highly addictive pain medications. He has acknowledged and overcome that situation as well.

The more we thought about what he has been through, the more we admired him. For so many years, when Woods was at the pinnacle of his sport, he came off more like a machine than a man. He dispatched opponents with the cold precision of a trained assassin. He had a distant, often surly relationship with the press. He kept fans at a distance. He was so much better than everyone else and so single-minded that spectators couldn't really relate to him.

But pain has changed Woods. The first visible sign of this came in January at the Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pines. It was his first P.G.A. tour event since his latest back surgery. As he walked off the green on the 13th hole on the first day of the tournament, he looked up and noticed the abundance of military personnel packed into the stands behind the green. A Marine in full dress had been holding the flag as players putted out. It was Torrey's tribute to a military town. Pausing, Woods acknowledged the men and women in uniform.

"He never, ever, ever would have done that before," said a tour insider who witnessed the moment. "He would have had his head down and not seen a thing. Now he was looking up and taking it all in, smelling the roses."

Similarly, after winning last weekend, Woods admitted, "I had a hard time not crying on the last hole."

That sentence, more than anything, reveals the new Tiger Woods. He is still the most talented golfer ever to play the game and remains the toughest competitor we've ever seen. But more than ever he's showing he's also a human being.

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