

masters  
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BY  
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# CATCH THE TIGER, WILL HE SHOW?

The exceptional athlete becomes a fixture, not just in the memory, or in our book cases, or in posters on our walls, but often in a particular landscape. When we place him in our imaginations, it is in a specific geography. Pete Sampras at Wimbledon. Jesse Owens in Berlin. Muhammed Ali in Zaire.

And him? Here. At 2604 Washington Road in Augusta, Georgia.



Nick Faldo helping Tiger Woods with his first green jacket.

photo: Action Images

Here, at this event initially known as the Augusta National Invitation Tournament, is where most stories of Tiger Woods start and end, like bookends to his uneven legend. Here, in April at the Masters, is the year's first Major to be won and where his first Major as a player in 1997 was won. It is where his chase for Jack Nicklaus used to restart each year and where his Tiger Slam finished in 2001.

Here, in this green cathedral, or at least on his way here in a plane in 1997, wrote Tim Rosaforte in his book *The Championship Years*, he asked Mark O'Meara, "Do you think it's possible to win a Grand Slam?" Here, in this beautifully uptight club, he turned golf cool and taught us to reimagine golf as an athletic pursuit. Only two people then were found in the gym, he once said: me and Vijay.

Here itself is where he won US\$7,205,473 in 19 starts, where he shortened the course with his length, where he eclipsed its challenge – once due to a rain delay playing 26 holes in a day and birdieing 12 – and where he demonstrated his bag included paintbrush next to sledgehammer. For proof he offered us that slow-motion, right-angle-turning, mind-bending, credulity-defying chip into the hole on the par-three 16th in 2005.

Here is where he won four times and had seven other Top-5 finishes – better than any other Major – and yet where he has not won in 10 years nor come close to Nicklaus' assertion that he would win more than him (with six) and Arnold Palmer (four) put together. Here, most of all, is where he took a backward sport forward into a civilized century.

African-Americans had won the heavyweight boxing championship in 1908 (Jack Johnson), coached pro football in 1923 (Fritz Pollard), played baseball in 1947 (Jackie Robinson), won Wimbledon in 1957 (Althea Gibson). But golf's PGA of America struck down its Caucasian Only clause only in 1961

and Augusta had its first black member only in 1990, which might have made its co-founder, Clifford Roberts, squirm in his grave for he once said: "As long as I'm alive, golfers will be white, and caddies will be black."

Here is the place of which Lee Elder, the first black golfer to play at the Masters in 1975, told *Sports Illustrated*: "The Masters has never wanted a black player and they kept changing the rules to make it harder for blacks." So enormous was Elder's debut that his press conference in 1975 started at 4pm and ended at 7pm and he stayed in two houses during the event because he got threats.

Here is where Tiger changed all that in 1997, his win by 12 shots, among the azaleas and dogwoods, changing golf's colour code forever: black man in red shirt wearing green jacket and holding silver trophy and a gold medal.

And so here, in April again, we wait for him. Last year he did not come and TV ratings declined and writer Rick Reilly tweeted: "If you EVER wanted 2C a Sunday #Masters live, this is the year. Tickets can be had for 2 rumped Kleenex." If the absence of such men leaves a tournament incomplete, then this is also sport, where nothing legend stands forever. Last year, the historic Eisenhower Tree on the 17th hole was removed after it was damaged in a storm and now he, an iconic construction too, is teetering. Damaged in body, in confidence, in spirit, in pride, in short game, it as if everything that kept him grounded in greatness has been uprooted.

It was said first by Bobby Jones of Nicklaus, who then said of Woods, "He plays a game with which I am not familiar", words which now carry with them a slightly different bewilderment. Woods' longest drought between Majors was 10, now he has gone 26 with no victory. In his last 10 Tour events, he finished T80, W/D, T25, CUT, 69, W/D, CUT, T17, CUT, W/D. It is an impostor's resume.

Still intense, still grinding away according to scattered media reports, people say to him: be a boy again, have fun. But when was he ever really a boy but in fact always a performer, when did he ever have fun except when winning – "I only enter events to win" he said at the 2006 Masters – and when did we ever want to watch him if he wasn't trying to win?

If cold clarity was once his weapon, now confusion must shadow him. He will want to play, but how will he play? Can he shoot low numbers or be satisfied being just another number? He takes pride in wearing pain but what of the agony of the 82 he shot in his last full round this year? He knows failure, but this is embarrassment he is fighting. He wants applause, he can manage criticism, it is the pity which is unedifying.

Here, in Augusta, where his final round in 1997 drew golf's highest TV rating, some will not care if he plays, some will believe he should not play till he is ready, some will insist he must play. There is still a tribe that wants to see any Tiger, even if it is a limping Woods. If he doesn't come, they will sigh, and mourn, and watch the event but with a reduced ardour. If he comes they will know he, world No. 104, cannot win and yet they will rise at 3am to watch him. Either way in Augusta, Tiger, for a while, will be the tale. This balding man who took hope from everyone else and now rests on it himself.