

masters
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BY
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ONE FAN'S BURDEN

he world waited in anticipation. And just a week before the US Masters when he announced that he would compete at Augusta, the world cheered. Tiger's back, that was the chorus. Bigger crowds turned up at Augusta and TV ratings went up. But Woods had a sweet-sour outing. Columnist Rahul Pathak susses out the new Woods. And puts him under the microscope.

"I don't know how to break this to you," says the live blog on the adventures of the world's 106th-ranked player around the manicured jungles of Augusta. "He had one of those short, little shots and he has left it short of the green."

You curse. You log off. Then 15 minutes later you sneak back to see if he has bounced back with a birdie. He has.

It is unhealthy, this obsession with one man's triumphs and travails around the golf course.

Once, you saw him do things that stretched a tale-teller's imagination and defied the laws of physics.

The chip at Augusta that flashed a Nike grin before diving in. That up and down from the rough, 101 yards away, on a fractured knee to catch Rocco Mediate on the 72nd hole at a US Open.

Those reels needed no sub-titles.

Today, he spews fanciful jargon to explain away a dodgy game.

Suddenly, his glutes refuse to activate. What? Those hips don't lie? Or, he claims that a joint popped out of place on the last day at Augusta, but he forced it back...really? Now he's the Medicine Man from Mogadishu?

But still you follow him. Once you did it in anticipation of the surreal. Now you do so with trepidation.

This man who has given you some of your fondest sporting memories, you don't want him to embarrass himself.

He pretends he knows no shame. Coming to Augusta after putting on the worst display of chipping in the history of professional golf (everyone said it was the yips, he claimed he was caught between two release patterns), he marches to the practice green and, surrounded by a hundred TV cameras, starts to chip.

Experts say the yips, involuntary spasms, will surface only under the heat and pressure of competition. But still! Is it this bravado that draws you to him?

I doubt it. Some have argued that when you follow a team or a player,

they become like an extension of your own ego. That's why it's so personal.

Or, as a French writer of children's books put it more poetically, while all roses may look this same, what makes your rose different from all others is that it is yours. This player is your man.

Perhaps you chose him when he first upended established order, played, as someone said, "a game that I am not familiar with", righted racial wrongs and became an icon. Or you chose him for his naked aggression and that dazzling smile. Doesn't matter. You are stuck with him.

For 12 years, he gave you a glimpse of golfing heaven. You suffered through his injuries and swing changes but never felt more alive than when he was on a charge on Sunday.

One Thanksgiving night, a brush with a fire hydrant and lurid tales of sex have put that story to bed. Still, you follow him.

Day One: He starts with a bogey. Can't make a putt. Is in danger of missing the cut. You tell yourself you expected this.

Day Two: The dreaded duffed chip. The bounceback. He makes the cut.

Day Three: For nine holes he is on fire. Then he fades. Still, he lies sixth at the end of Round Three.

Final Day: An anti-climax. The young Mr McIlroy. The younger Mr Spieth. They are all charging ahead of him. All you are doing is hoping that Spieth does not break his Masters' record or Rory doesn't complete the Grand Slam just yet. They don't.

He will not be playing for a while, he said. But you have started staying up again to watch golf.

They should stick a health warning on this man. He leaves you long on hope and short of breath.



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