

Tiger Woods

AFTER ALL THE HURT,
A HEALTHY PAUSE

BY JAIME DIAZ

SPIETH v YOUNG WOODS

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SERAPONG STUNNER

HOW S'PORE'S NO. 1 COURSE
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WATCH FEATURED SUBJECT TO STOCK AVAILABILITY

BY
JAIME
DIAZ

Three weeks before his 40th birthday in December,

Tiger Woods did something he should have done a long time ago: He publicly stepped away from golf. Truly stepped away, with no stated expectations for when — or if — he might return. It placed before him an undetermined period free of scrutiny and judgment, something he has probably longed for since he started racking up age-group titles as a junior.

The decision was accompanied by a rare openness. At his pre-tournament press conference at the Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas, where he was the host, and two days later in the release of a wide-ranging interview with Time magazine, Woods showed vulnerability, a quality he has always implicitly denied that he even possesses.

Rather than defiant optimism, Woods was fatalistic. “I’ve reconciled myself to it,” he said of the real possibility that he might never play tournament golf again. At the press conference, two statements in particular stunned the room. “Where is the light at the end of the tunnel? I don’t know.” And: “I think pretty much everything beyond this will be gravy.”

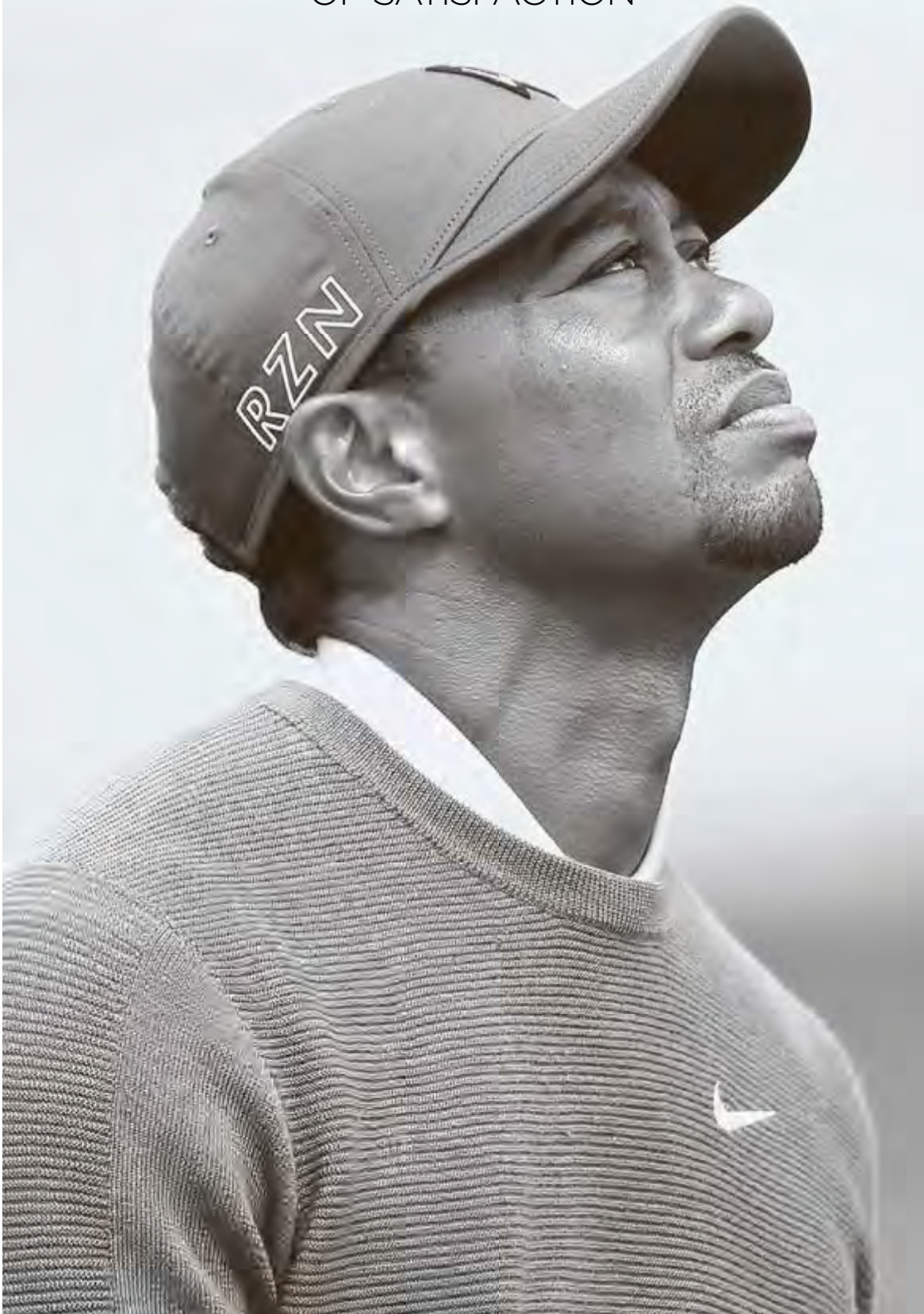
Upon first airing, these words and others were a sad acknowledgement of the end, a de facto retirement speech. Nerve damage in his lower back, first requiring surgery in March 2014 before two more procedures to the same spot within six weeks late last year, left him unable to even know when he could begin rehabilitation. It’s likely 2016 ends up a competitive washout.

Yet amid all the gloom, I sensed Woods was relieved. Finally, he was letting go of the immense burden of being golf’s Superman. He immediately seemed lighter, but not because his playing career is over. Woods never said he was quitting. Rather, for who knows how long, he is pausing. “With all my heart,” he told veteran golf journalist Lorne Rubenstein in the Time interview, “I do not want to stop playing golf.”

If he is able to compete again, Woods won’t be in a rush — a first. Restless fury fuelled his domination at every level of his career. It also led him to take on risky swing changes, to adopt a joint-jarring Navy SEAL-style exercise regimen that trainers warned him against, and to return to competition after in-

AFTER ALL THE HURT, A HEALTHY PAUSE

THE TIGER OF OLD IS DONE,
BUT A NEW VERSION COULD
BRING A DIFFERENT KIND
OF SATISFACTION



juries sooner than physicians advised.

He conceded the cost of at least some of that behaviour. Coming back from surgeries too quickly probably “made injuries worse.” His epic victory at the 2008 US Open came two months after cartilage was cleaned out of a knee with a torn ACL. After a procedure on his meniscus in December 2002, he would play (and win) at Torrey Pines two months later. Many around him believe Woods’ return to competition at the 2010 Masters was too soon after his public humiliation began on Thanksgiving 2009. He even seemed to rush back in 2014 from his first microdiscectomy, only to play poorly. Graham DeLaet, who has had the same procedure, says it took him almost a year to feel close to recovery.

Perhaps acknowledging the pattern and its toll have been the reason for Woods downshifting his old persona and becoming more human over the past year. He hugged people at last year’s Masters, gladly offered mentoring to a hesitant-to-ask Jason Day, and made it known he would invite being asked to serve in the almost comically subordinate role of Ryder Cup assistant captain.

In the Bahamas, Woods was amiable, never bristly. In the Time interview, he addressed some past mistakes, his relationship with ex-wife Elin, and why he and Lindsey Vonn broke up. His main theme was that his role as a parent to his two young children is far more important than his golf.

Amid such relative candour, it seems the trickiest subject for Woods is his legacy. Eagerly comparing himself to team-sports contemporaries Kobe Bryant, Derek Jeter and Peyton Manning, all of whom have a shorter window than a golfer, was a way of saying he, too, had left it all out there nobly, only to see his gift worn away by injury. It’s a preferable narrative than being the singularly gifted “chosen one” on track to be the greatest golfer of all time — perhaps the greatest athlete ever—who self-destructed.

To the inevitable question about catching Jack Nicklaus’ 18 professional Major victories, Woods offered this cherry-picked self-assessment: “I’ve passed Jack on the all-time win list (79 to 73), just shy of Sam (Snead, 82),” he said. “I passed Sam basically a decade ago in Major championships, but I’m still shy of Jack’s. So I’ve had a pretty good career for my 20s and 30s. For my 20 years out here, I think I’ve achieved a lot, and if that’s all it entails, then I’ve had a pretty good run.” He added, “I’ve done a lot more in the game than I ever thought I could.”

The downsizing doesn’t ring true. Catch-phrases like “let the legend grow,” “second place sucks,” “first loser” and “never settle” all came from a belief in his competitive superiority. It never looked like cockiness as Woods was winning 14 Majors by the age of 32, a run so colossal it seemed to make him a one-man human-potential movement, never mind a lock to overtake Nicklaus. It’s hard to believe Woods would accept falling short so matter-of-factly.

Perhaps Woods’ response was calculated to set him up as a more likable hero in a comeback. Humility always becomes an aging star.

Then again, we might have underestimated the weight of being the chaser in the most celebrated extended pursuit in sports history. More than a hint was provided by Hank Haney in The Big Miss, in which Woods’ former teacher recounted a 2007 exchange after Haney had become exasperated with his player’s increasing involvement in physically punishing training. Haney: “Man, what are you doing? Are you out of your mind? What about Nicklaus’ record? Don’t you care about that?” Woods: “No. I’m satisfied with what I’ve done in my career.”

Comparisons with Nicklaus brought glory, but they also carried intense questioning and pressure. Woods has always been perceived as welcoming pressure — his record as a closer is where he has put the most separation between himself and

the other greats of the game. But in his post-scandal years, he has played tight on weekends at Majors, and in the past year he experienced a shocking bout of the chipping yips and a flurry of the highest 18-hole scores of his career.

Professing satisfaction with his record allows Woods the view that he didn’t lose a battle he never really fought. Woods correctly reminded us that the list he hung over his bed as a kid was not of Nicklaus’ Majors, as was commonly believed, but instead one that compiled Nicklaus’ ages when he achieved certain early milestones, ending with victory in his first Major championship. Woods’ goal, he told Rubenstein, was to reach the same accomplishments at a younger age. And then, in a phrase whose repetition indicates just how much he competed with Nicklaus, Woods said, “I beat them all. I beat them all.”

Presuming that Woods can go forward competitively, freeing himself from Nicklaus comparisons, allows the possibility of an extended free run. At the same moment that there’s plenty of evidence that Woods’ time is over, he has nothing but time.

IF HIS BACK RESPONDS,
WHO COULD SAY THAT
WOODS IN HIS EARLY OR
EVEN MID-40S COULDN’T BE
A FORCE AGAIN?

The long road is the biggest advantage professional golfers have over other athletes. Woods, meanwhile, can credibly cite the post-40 feats of Vijay Singh and, yes, Nicklaus’ victory at 46 at the 1986 Masters.

Woods’ sabbatical not only gives the best chance for his back to heal, but also time (and presumably, reflection) give him an even better chance to heal psychologically. The most haunting thing that he said in the Time interview was this: “I would have to say, probably, my only peace has been in between the ropes and hitting the shots.” As he must know, any peace that he finds in life would help him as a golfer.

Of course, if Woods’ back never responds, all bets are off. But if it does, who could say that Woods in his early or even mid-40s couldn’t be a force again?

What style of golfer would a relatively healthy Woods coming back in 2018 or thereabouts have to be to have success? He’d have to finally surrender the ego and fun that comes from using superior power and distance as a main weapon. It would mean focusing on being straighter and more precise with a swing that takes less of a physical toll, and placing more emphasis on short-game and putting excellence. A preview of that game was on display in Woods’ victory at the 2013 Players. It would often put him at a disadvantage in regular tournaments but raise his chances in Majors.

A bigger question is whether he still possesses the desire required for even a late-career version of greatness. He insists he does, but close observers have seen a drop in his work ethic, which has led to a commensurate drop in his joy for playing. No doubt injuries have bred discouragement, but Woods has always maintained that the moment he believes he is no longer capable of winning, “I’ll rack the cue.”

He is not there yet, though he’s definitely in new territory. But not completely foreign. Woods was in an eerily similar position at the most dramatic point of his career, the weeks before his victory at the 2008 US Open. As Haney recounted, “For one of the few times in his career, he wasn’t facing crazy expectations. Because he was injured, the pres-

sure to win was largely off, and he basically had a free run. It gave him the perfect attitude: highly motivated, but with little to lose...At Torrey Pines, more than anywhere else, Tiger was the model student.”

Since then, life has presumably taught Woods a lot. If he has been a good student, perhaps he can have that perfect attitude again. He’s hurt, he’s in limbo, he might even be done. But at the moment, the course he has embarked on finally seems healthy. 



GREAT MOMENTS IN (AGEING) GOLF

Tiger Woods turned 40 on Dec 30. Significant achievements by golfers late in their careers:

OLDEST TO WIN...

THE MASTERS

- Jack Nicklaus, 46 (1986).
- Ben Crenshaw, 43 (1995).

US OPEN

- Hale Irwin, 45 (1990).
- Raymond Floyd, 43 (1986).
- Ted Ray, 43 (1920).

OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

- Old Tom Morris, 46 (1867).
- Roberto De Vicenzo, 44 (1967).
- Harry Vardon, 44 (1914).
- Old Tom Morris, 43 (1864).
- Phil Mickelson, 43 (2013).
- Darren Clarke, 42 (2011).
- Ernie Els, 42 (2012).
- J.H. Taylor, 42 (1913).
- Willie Park Sr., 42 (1875).
- Tom Watson was 59 in 2009 when he lost a play-off to Stewart Cink, and Greg Norman was 53 in 2008 when he led after three rounds.

PGA CHAMPIONSHIP

- Julius Boros, 48 (1968).
- Lee Trevino, 44 (1984).
- Sam Snead was 62 when he finished T-3 in 1974.

RYDER CUP

- Raymond Floyd, 51 (1993).

PGA TOUR EVENT

- Sam Snead, 52 (1965 Greater Greensboro Open).
- Art Wall, 51 (1975 Greater Milwaukee Open).
- Davis Love III, 51 (2015 Wyndham Championship).

EUROPEAN TOUR EVENT

- Miguel Angel Jimenez, 50 (2014).
- Jimenez, 49 (2014).
- Jimenez, 48 (2012).

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