

WHY TIGER WOODS MATTERS: LIKE GILLIGAN, WORTH WATCHING

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November 3, 2017



If you feel like you've heard this story before, you have. If you feel like this is that episode of Gilligan's Island where the castaways are almost rescued but Gilligan messes it up, it is. Believe me, I know. I've written it before. Tiger is coming back.

We've been here before, yet this is a show always worth watching.

The last time we saw Woods in competition was in Dubai nine months ago when he put up a big number in the first round and then withdrew. Now, he says he's returning in the limited-field Hero World Challenge in December.

Two sets of numbers make Woods must-see TV. On the course, he has 79 PGA Tour wins, second only to Sam Snead's 82, and 14 professional major titles, second only to the 18 by Jack Nicklaus. In his first 13 full seasons on tour, Woods topped the money list nine times and was never worse than fourth. He had the lowest scoring average nine times and was never worse than third. He won at least one major in nine of those years.

Simply put, golf has never known anyone like Tiger Woods and sports in general has had precious few. He's in

a class with Muhammad Ali, who was the most compelling athlete of my lifetime, or Babe Zaharias, who was world-class in not just golf but also tennis and track. Tiger was larger than golf. He was a cultural phenomenon. Like Ali and the Babe, he moved the needle.

Tiger was a rarity that not only lived up to the hype but also exceeded it. He was better than advertised, and how rare is that in the over-hyped world in which we live? He was almost too good to be true: Young, athletic, good looking with that dynamic smile and powerful fist pump, a man of color dominating a mostly white sport. Even his name was a marketing man's dream. If you were going to create the perfect character for a novel or movie, it would be Tiger.

But what really makes his return so fascinating is the other set of numbers – those off the golf course. In December, he will be 42 years old. There have been four surgeries on his left knee and now an additional four operations on his back. There was an embarrassing scandal and a messy, costly divorce. And there was the humiliating mug shot and sobriety video after he was found passed out behind the wheel of his damaged car in the wee hours of the morning.

All of that brought the superhuman shadow cast by an almost mythical figure named Tiger down to the more human-size outline of a mere mortal named Woods. And we are at a point right now where the mortal Woods has been around almost as long as the larger-than-life one.

In June, it will be a decade since he won his last major. In August, it will be five years since his last PGA Tour victory. Who would have thought his last major would come when he was only 32 years old? Who would have thought his last career win would come at 37?

When Woods returns, we will be assessing not only the quality his game and the state of his health but also the resiliency of his mind. Certainly, as much as his body broke down, so did his confidence. Suddenly, those eight-footers he drilled into the back of the cup had become power lip-outs. There were the mind-boggling chipping yips from a man who once had an unbelievable short game.

And there were missed opportunities – a failure to close out tournaments from one of the greatest closers of all time. In the first 17 majors Woods played after that 2008 U.S. Open win at Torrey Pines, he had nine top-six finishes and went into the weekend multiple times with a chance to win but couldn't get it done. Since that last major win, Woods also has missed six cuts and skipped 14 other majors because of injuries.

Like Gilligan and The Minnow, Woods was hit by a perfect storm. Tiger has had technical issues, physical issues, emotional issues and a crisis of confidence. It all combined to leave him on a deserted island. While he once stood alone as the greatest golfer of his generation, he is now merely alone, looking for a way back to greatness, a way back home.

In addition to his own challenges, Woods also faces this: There is a new generation that is not afraid of him. Justin Thomas, Jordan Spieth, Daniel Berger, Rory McIlroy, Jason Day, Hideki Matsuyama, Jon Rahm, Brooks Koepka and others are too young to have seen the real Tiger except on TV and in video games. They are not intimidated.

Does Woods win again? Does he break Slamming Sammy's record and make a run at Jack's? I do think Tiger might have a Jack-at-the-Masters-at-46 moment left in him. But I don't think we will see the year 2000 again. No 42 year old ever becomes 24 again. That's just reality.

But other than that, I have no idea how this story ends. No one does and anyone who tells you otherwise is daft. That's what makes his return so compelling. It may only be another well-worn episode of Gilligan's Island, riddled with missed cuts and injuries, our hero remaining stranded. But then again, Tiger might go home again and there might be a flashback to a magical time. And we can all use that.