

The Doctor is In!

By: Nathan Crace Date: July 24, 2006

It's hard to believe that Tiger Woods turned pro ten years ago. It's hard to believe that it has *already* been ten years and it's hard to believe that it's *only* been ten years. So much has been accomplished in a decade and to think, when he won the Masters in 1997, most dismissed those who said he could one day catch Nicklaus and take over the role of the best of the game. Only time will tell if that shall come to pass, but there have been multiple versions of Tiger over the past ten years both on and off the course.

His off the course life is kept fiercely private, from his close ties to his family to his marriage to a Swedish super model to the unfortunate death of his father, Earl earlier this year. But on the course, he has worked possibly harder than anyone to create the swing and the game he wants for longevity and total command of the competition. He has evolved from the Tiger that overwhelmed Augusta in 1997 and led Hootie Johnson to begin a long-term practice of "Tiger-proofing" to the Tiger that dominated the world of golf in 2000 (including running away from the field in a 15 shot trouncing of the US Open) to the Tiger that systematically dissected Royal Liverpool in Hoylake, England this past weekend with the skillful tact of a brain surgeon.

We saw the Tiger Woods that had left Butch Harmon for Hank Haney to re-tool his swing (a move that had the pundits collecting their lower jaws from their shoes) after completely dominating the game of golf and winning the "Tiger Slam." It was a move that raised many an eyebrow. "Why in the world would he do such a thing," they asked. "He may never get out of this slump," were some projections. "What slump," said I.

Winning only a couple of tournaments in a year and no Majors would be a career year for the vast majority of Tour players! But then again, that's why Tiger is Tiger and everyone else is, well, everyone else. Take Phil Mickelson for instance. He won the 2005 PGA Championship, back-to-back Masters titles in 2005 and 2006, and arrived at Winged Foot for the US Open looking to add the third of four titles to the "Mickel-slam." In the course of one painful to watch finishing hole, Phil went from the probability of overtaking Woods as the world's new number one to one of the "others." And Tiger's lead continues to grow.

Woods' course management and ball striking at the British Open was a clinic for young aspiring golfers. He hit more fairways than you could shake a plate of haggis at and he only hit his driver one time in four rounds! That's impressive. Unless of course, you are the person tasked with putting together the next Nike Sasquatch driver commercial and you need to rustle up some British Open footage for Phil Knight and the boys at Nike Corporate. That notwithstanding, the way Tiger manipulated Hoylake he could have won the tournament playing with a butter knife. And I don't mean a 1-iron—I literally mean a butter knife.

So ten years are behind us and Tiger has 11 Majors to his credit—more than one a year on average for those keeping score at home—including the year or so he was in his alleged "slump." And because it is Tiger, people are already saying that a win at the PGA will have him half way to his second Tiger Slam. So all eyes turn to the same historic course outside of Chicago where Tiger battled Garcia in the 1999 PGA to see what the tactician will accomplish at a course where he will have to hit driver more than once. Surgical precision may be more of a premium with driver in hand and trees lining the fairways. We will have to wait and see...

"Ms. Medinah, the Doctor will see you now."

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2006.