

One for the Golf Gods

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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If this past week's Masters tournament represented anything, it was the triumph of the sublime over the ridiculous.

Phil Mickelson's implausible victory represented the intersection where outsized talent meets brashness. Tiger Woods' presence represented the simple fact that the carnival-like atmosphere that now represents his life isn't going away any time soon.

For anyone whose ever played golf more than a few times, the Mickelson win was proof that every once in awhile the golf gods get it right. So deserving was his victory in contrast to what otherwise could have been if Woods hadn't become a victim of his own hubris, that it's almost impossible to overstate its lasting relevance.

It wasn't just Mickelson's shot at the 13th hole on Sunday that was so enthralling, or that his eagle-eagle-near eagle/birdie stretch on Saturday was so captivating, it was more about the fact that golf is the ultimate character test and Woods so fittingly failed it.

Woods is clearly a work in progress at the moment. Whether or not you buy this whole "sex addiction" thing or not, it's pretty clear that he's wrestling with some serious demons at the moment and for once he's not winning. Sure, he played well. In fact he played well enough that nearly any other golf pro in the world would be satisfied. But there was a reason he couldn't find his swing when he needed it most.

Golf, singular to every other athletic pursuit, has an uncanny way of finding one's weak spots at

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just the wrong moment. With Woods, it was only a matter of time.

For all of Woods' so-called mental toughness, he did prove this week that he's not an automaton. If he were he wouldn't have yanked his opening drive on Sunday. The collective weight that all his transgressions brought upon him revealed themselves fully at that moment and whether he ever admits it or not, that was the single shot that told him not only that Sunday wouldn't be his day but his rehabilitation will take a lot more than mere lip service about Buddhism and contriteness.

That's the way it should be since it's really the same for anyone else. When Woods' life came crashing down that Thanksgiving night, the aftershocks felt by everyone else close to him were nearly insurmountable. It would be one thing if Woods had simply shamed himself. Far worse is what he did to his wife and children, forever making them the object of scorn and ridicule, and the business partners who relied on him for their own livelihood.

Woods can talk about repairing his relationship with his wife and maybe that will come to pass in time. But the mess he made will leave a lasting scar that no amount of forced sincerity could ever cover. Woods put his wife and his two young children into the forever position of carrying a cross that should be his to bear alone. For that he deserves much more than a self-imposed 144-day layoff and a return to the winner's circle in the most compelling major as a feel good story for the ages.

The truth is that Woods will never be a feel-good story because the only odds he'll ever overcome are the chances he took with the lives of others. The other truth is that Woods is still struggling with that truth.

In his contrived "public" apology and even in his press conference last Monday, Woods talked about respecting the game better, improving his on-course demeanor and essentially vowing to stop being the terse prick he's been allowed to be since turning pro. That lasted about two rounds.

When things fell apart for him on Sunday, it was pretty clear that not much had changed in this regard. Woods continued to flip clubs in anger as he cursed loud enough for all the patrons, both on the course and at home, to hear. When he was interviewed on Sunday he was his

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usual ungracious self, focused far more on describing how bad he played in that backhand way he has of saying why someone else won instead of him.

That doesn't mean Woods isn't sincere about the changes he needs to make. It just means that he hasn't come close to conquering them just yet and that at the first little sign of pressure he finds comfort in the old ways. The saying is that golf doesn't build character but instead reveals it. Never was that more evident with Woods again on Sunday.

Mickelson, on the other hand, walks on far firmer ground. The knock on Mickelson has always been that his "aw shucks" image is contrived, that no one can be as nice as he seems. In retrospect it seems awfully ironic, doesn't it?

I doubt that Mickelson is a saint. He's always had a reckless streak on the course and it would surprise and amaze that if he hasn't been a little reckless off of it as well. Yet because we tend toward cynicism so often, it's convenient to think someone who smiles and is polite has to be Eddie Haskell even if we don't exactly have proof of that fact.

After watching Mickelson all these years, I can't recall even once where I've seen him throw a club or audibly curse on the course. On the other hand I can recall countless acts of generosity through the years starting with his willingness each year to sign each and every piece of paper put in front of him following a round.

He treats both the game and those who cover it with respect by never shying away from giving an interview while striving to give something more than a rote answer. He's as gracious to those he's bested in tournaments as well as praiseworthy to those who have gotten the best of him.

What Mickelson demonstrates most, particularly when contrasted with Woods, is that he more than Woods is the logical extension to players like Nicklaus, Watson and Palmer. Mickelson may not have Woods' bank account but he's within reasonable enough shouting difference to become just as jaded and standoffish if that was his nature. Instead he understands the game's history and his duty to both respect and extend it. Somehow I just don't ever see Mickelson cynically filming a commercial that attempts to use his personal problems as a vehicle for selling shoes or golf clubs as Woods did this past week.

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But putting all of that aside, Mickelson is just far more fun to watch. Maybe because he's found nearly as much bad as good on the golf course he can take whatever happens in stride better than most. Whatever it is, though, he'll leave you shaking your head, one way or the other, in a thrill ride unparalleled in golf.

There is no question that the biggest recipient of Woods' fall from grace has been Mickelson. It's not just because Woods' absence theoretically gives Mickelson a better chance on the course. It's more because Woods' deep character flaws reinforce all that's good about Mickelson.

One of the lasting quotes coming out of this Masters belonged, naturally, to Mickelson. Asked to explain the difference between a great shot and a smart shot, Mickelson said, "a great shot is when you pull it off. A smart shot is when you don't have the guts to try it." He may have been talking specifically about the shot at 13 on Sunday, but more broadly he could have been talking about what it takes to live life the right way. Ironic isn't it, that it's the exact lesson that Woods need to learn far more than Mickelson?