



Tiger roars again

Tiger Woods' fall from grace was as meteoric as his rise to sporting greatness. But the narrative continues, writes **Gruffudd Owen**, as the most enduring sporting icon of our time dusted off a troubled decade to don the green jacket again in 2019

With 15 Majors and 82 PGA Tour wins, a record total 683 weeks spent on top of the world rankings, and a net worth in excess of \$700 million (according to Forbes), Tiger Woods is not only one of the greatest players ever to grace his sport; he is a modern-day cultural icon, a name instantly recognisable to millions all over the world.

For all his achievements, however, one moment stands out above the rest as the epitome of the Tiger Woods story. On 14th April 2019, his winning score at the Augusta Masters finally brought to an end 11 arduous years of hardship in search of another Major victory. "It will be up there with one of the hardest I've had to win because of what has transpired in the last couple of years," Woods said at the time.

"To have my kids there, it's come full circle. My dad was here in 1997 and now I'm the dad with two kids."

Indeed, to chart Woods' long and complicated journey to sporting redemption at Augusta, one must begin by looking at the influence of his late father Earl, who introduced his son to golf in Orange County, California at the tender age of two. In their own different ways, Earl and Woods'

mother Tida played a huge part in their son's phenomenal rise to sporting superstardom. "My dad was always the person who would plant seeds and give me encouragement, but also would say things that would fester inside me that wouldn't come to fruition for a while," Woods told USA TODAY Sports.

"He was very worldly and deep in his thinking. My mum was the enforcer. My dad may have been in the Special Forces, but I was never afraid of him. My mum's still here, and I'm still deathly afraid of her. She's a very tough old lady, very demanding. I love her so much, but she was tough. There was zero negotiation."

This parental approach clearly paid off for the young Woods, as his breakthrough triumph at the Augusta Masters in 1997 came at the age of 21 – making him the tournament's youngest-ever winner, a record that still stands to this day.

"I thought I could win that week, but I didn't think I could win by 12 [shots] – that was a big ask," Woods revealed to the Augusta National Golf Club.

"It was a touching moment for us, as a family. It was one of those moments where everybody melted away, and it was just me and my

dad. That was pretty special. My mum was there too, and she was crying. Looking back on it, it's hard to believe how much that one tournament has meant to me in my life."

The impact of that win both on Woods' life and on the growth of golf cannot be overstated, catapulting the prodigy to global fame, and generating unprecedented interest and revenue for the sport. At the 2000 Open Championship, the 24-year-old Woods became the youngest-ever golfer to complete a career Grand Slam (winning all four golfing Majors), and his second Masters win a year later saw him hold all four titles simultaneously, an achievement aptly nicknamed the 'Tiger Slam'. By the time he clinched his 14th Major championship at the 2008 US Open, his status as one of the all-time great athletes – let alone golfers – was beyond dispute. "I'm shocked at how many

Left: Tiger Woods has made numerous comeback attempts following the breakdown of his marriage, but this time he looks set for good

tournaments I've won in hindsight – more than 100 around the world," Woods told TIME magazine.

"Playing through it, you really don't realise it. If you're in a team sport, you don't realise how many games you've won. It just piles up on you. You just play, you get ready for the next week, you're in that moment. You're always getting ready."

Following his 2008 US Open victory, several commentators began speculating that Woods breaking Jack Nicklaus' record of 18 major championships was a matter of when, not if. But a knee injury that Woods carried into that tournament was a portent of things to come, as the difficulty of playing through the pain barrier began to take its toll. "Before that US Open, I was playing at Big Canyon – which was my home course in Southern California – and I went out on the back nine," Woods told TIME.

"It was the first time I had played a round of golf since the Masters. I tried to play with ▶

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Above: Tiger drives across continents, teeing off on Turkey's Bosphorus Bridge
Right: Tiger Jam 2013 – the ultimate Vegas experience – raising funds for TGR Foundation

different types of knee braces, but they don't allow you to rotate. So when I went out there on my home course, I lost eight balls in nine holes. I shot 54, not long before the US Open, and I said, 'OK, you're the number one player in the world, and you just lost eight balls on a home course that you could play blindfolded. This is going to be an interesting week'.

"You never want to show your competitors that you're hurt. I don't want them to get that mental edge. You always pick yourself right back up. That's what I've tried to do my entire career: not show that I am hurt. Play through it."

That Woods actually won the 2008 US Open, let alone merely played through it, is remarkable, but a combination of serious knee and back injuries and personal issues soon caused his life to drastically unravel in a way few

could have foreseen for a man who had been so dominant in his sport. After years of underperformance and failed comebacks led to a sharp drop in the world rankings – and in his sporting status – there were predictions that Woods might never win another Major again. "Anyone can win when they're playing great golf, when they're at a level where everything is going well," he said.

"That's easy. But trying to dog out a win when it's just not there, it's really hard. It's hard on the mind. Sometimes it can be very hard on the body, when it's not working right."



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With all of this in mind, the fact that Woods finally did complete his comeback at the 2019 Masters – more than a decade after he had last tasted glory in a Major championship – makes it his greatest success in an exceptionally crowded field. Just as he had shared a ➤

touching father-and-son moment following his inaugural win 22 years previously at the 1997 Masters, so too would he relive the experience after this most extraordinary of comeback victories – albeit playing the father role this time. “The funny part about the whole thing is, I don’t remember screaming,” Woods told CBS.

“I don’t remember putting my arms up, and I don’t remember yelling. It’s one of those blackout moments. There are certain celebrations throughout my career after making putts that I just don’t recall. I guess I’m so locked into the moment.

“To see my son Charlie there with open arms, rushing at me and jumping in my arms... that’s when the emotions came flooding out. My mum was there, and she kept saying how proud she was of me, and how my dad would be so proud too if he were there. And then there’s my daughter Sam. She doesn’t like the spotlight,

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so when we hugged, I turned her away from everybody and made sure she was sheltered. We just had a little moment together.”

Tiger Woods’ resurrection at the 2019 Masters is a powerful example of triumph over adversity, and he now can look forward to being inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2021. But it would be naïve to assume that his journey back to the top of his sport is now complete. The one

Above: Former caddy Steve Williams and Tiger at the 2004 Oakland Hills Ryder Cup Below: Tiger in his famous final day red, winning the Masters in 2019 – a first Major in 11 years



frequently cited record that continues to elude him is Jack Nicklaus’ 18 Majors, and while the ups and downs of the past two decades have given him a sense of perspective on this question, there is no doubt that breaking the record remains a source of motivation. “Hypothetically, if I give myself another ten years that’s 40 Majors,” Woods said.

“The trick is can I keep myself healthy and strong enough considering what my body has been through? That’s where I need help with all my trainers and physios and workout regimes, and hopefully, I can make it happen.”

Given Woods’ track record throughout his career, you wouldn’t bet against it. tigerwoods.com

