

Golf world needs Tiger

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As much as a number of fans have relished Tiger Woods' personal and professional demise, the golf world needs him.

Woods is the Babe Ruth, the Muhammad Ali of golf. He set the golf world on fire when he won his first of four green jackets, symbolic of the Masters champion. He was 21 years old and smothered the field by a whopping 12 strokes.

For years he dominated the game. When he showed up on the first tee, everyone else was playing for second. Some players publicly acknowledged it to be true.

After accruing 14 major titles, Woods' house of cards fell on top of him like an avalanche. He was labeled an adulterer. His marriage dissolved. He lost valuable face time with his two young children. He was mocked by late-night comedians.

He is now 36 years old, beset in recent years by a variety of health issues. His knee. His Achilles. His head.

He parted ways with longtime caddie, Steve Williams. He split with swing coach Hank Haney, whose book on Woods was recently released and paints him in some unflattering lights. There is a pornographic movie released early this week that features three or four of the girls Tiger allegedly cheated on his wife with. They reveal more of whom the real Tiger Woods was, far from the Teflon-coated image constructed by his close circle of management and PR types.

He seemed rejuvenated three weeks ago when he won on the Tour for the first time since 2009, winning the Arnold Palmer Invitational by five strokes. Was this the real Tiger? Or was it fool's gold?

Augusta National will go a long way in deciding the answer to those questions this week. It can bring even the best golfers in the world to their knees.

Woods has not won a major since the 2008 U. S. Open, which he won basically on one leg at Torrey Pines.

Woods enters a comfort zone at Augusta. It is his favorite course in the world. He knows the greens and danger spots equally well. His game appeared sound coming into this week, but golf is a sport that provides unexplained surprises just when you think you have it conquered.

The Masters champion must hold up through the final nine holes on Sunday. Even the best have tripped and fallen on their way to the green jacket ceremony. Greg Norman felt Augusta National's wrath two years in a row.

The Australian could not stop a 46-year-old Jack Nicklaus from getting his sixth green jacket as Nicklaus caught fire on the back nine on Sunday to win the 1986 Masters. Norman returned the following year, only to lose in a playoff when homegrown and raised Larry Mize sank an improbable chip-shot on the 11th hole in a playoff, leaving Norman in shock.

Based primarily on resume and the recent win at Bay Hill, Woods has been installed by Las Vegas wiseguys as the favorite in this impressive world-class field.

Eyes will be on young Irishman Greg McIlroy to see if he can overcome a monumental Masters meltdown a year ago. They always wonder which Phil Mickelson will show up. Names such as Lee Westwood and Luke Donald are expected to be on the daily leaderboards that dot the course.

But the story will be Tiger Woods. Whether he succeeds or falls short, it is his story we all want to read.

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