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Tiger Woods

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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There is a character in Thomas Klise's 1974 novel, *The Last Western*, whose name is Willie. The young man was born in New Mexico, became a baseball pitcher with a supernatural pitch, and was of multi-racial origin. As he developed his athletic skills he quickly achieved perfection, which vaulted him into the public limelight and superstardom. Shortly the public tired of his perfection, being bored by it. He was cynically manipulated by greedy sports owners and ultimately the public turned on him.

Tida Woods, the mother of the new golf superstar, says that Tiger "has African, Chinese, Thai, American Indian, and European blood. He is the universal child." When she took Tiger's astrological charts to Buddhist monks in L.A. and Bangkok, they told Tida that her son has "wondrous powers." He too is manipulated by the new greed embodied in Phil Knight and Nike, and that too could be his downfall.

The parallels may end there, but I was struck by the similarity this weekend as life seemed to imitate art.

Who could go through this past weekend without having sensed that the sport of golf was passing through a historic moment both on and off the course? On the fabled fairways and greens of Augusta a twenty-one year old golfer was redefining the game as played at the Masters. The course which has inflicted so much pain on so many over the years, was humbled by this young man who has been a professional for less than a year. Like Jack Nicklaus before him, he has taken the game of golf to another level.

It was the largest margin of victory in the history of the Masters, the lowest score, the best middle thirty-six holes, the best opening and closing fifty-four holes, the most under par on the back nine-16, the most three's in a Masters-26, and Tiger Woods is the youngest champion to win a Masters or any of the majors. He has people seriously talking about a grand slam possibility.

If all of that were not enough, because of the peculiarities of racial definition in America where if you look black you are black, Woods is the first black to win a Masters and win a major; this on a course where until six years ago there were no black members. For many at Augusta National this must have been

a week in which the mint juleps lost some of their jolt, and the artificially colored water looked less blue. Some no doubt took the lack of dogwoods and azaleas at this tournament as a sign, in this region where nature speaks to man in many manifestations. The blossoms came a bit early this spring, except in the case of Tiger Woods who blossomed just at the right moment.

If Tiger Woods had achieved this victory at such a young age it would have been considered remarkable, if he had done so with such a dominant game it would have been considered remarkable, and if he had won this tournament as an African-American it would have been considered remarkable. That he did all three gave this event a power over and above any of those singularly, the total being greater than the sum of its parts.

But still there is more. Tiger Woods not only became the first African-American to win at Augusta, to win a Masters, but did it two days before the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Jackie Robinson's entrance onto the stage of major league baseball. It was good to hear Woods speak of the significance of Robinson's effort for himself and all black athletes, and to hear him thank the pioneering black golfers like Charlie Sifford who never was allowed to play Augusta, and Lee Elder who was the first black to play there.

It was less encouraging when many commentators and writers made the claim that Tiger Woods' achievement at Augusta was comparable to Jackie Robinson's achievement in 1947. A lack of historical perspective, combined with the hyperbolic tendencies of sports writers, no doubt led to such comments along with the coincidental timing of Woods' fete.

Make no mistake, there is no comparison. What Robinson did was much more impressive and significant. Jackie Robinson cracked a major racial barrier, he was subjected to pressures and abuse not experienced by Woods, and he lived in a society which constantly made demands on his dignity as a human being, on his very humanity.

No doubt Tiger Woods has experienced racial insults and physical threats, including death, and no doubt those will increase with his notoriety. However it is not likely that Woods will ever endure the pain and loneliness that Robinson endured especially in those first two years.

The one parallel that is clear is that Tiger Woods like Jackie Robinson has an opportunity to break new ground, and to pass from celebrity to hero, to be someone whom we would like to emulate, someone we would like our children to emulate. If he does this, he will be worthy of all those comparisons with Jackie Robinson and more.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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