

8-30-1996

## Tiger Woods Turns Pro

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

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Tiger Woods Turns Pro" (1996). *On Sport and Society*. 212.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/212>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
AUGUST 30, 1996

By the time Mozart was twenty he had several symphonies under his belt and was the toast of the European music world, so I suppose that the accomplishments of Eldrick Woods at age twenty are not all that fantastic. Nonetheless "Tiger" Woods is the toast of much more than the golf world as he turns professional this week.

For those who were lucky enough to watch any of the final eleven holes of the U.S. Amateur Championship last Sunday, you know that you were watching one of those memorable and extraordinary moments in sport. You know that you were watching an event of historic dimension and an athlete of exquisite talent. You were watching an artist perform a feat that had never been done before, in a way that was replete with drama. You were watching the very best that sport can offer: an athlete achieving near perfection in a less than perfect world.

No matter what else Tiger Woods accomplishes in his career, Sunday's achievements will be remembered for generations to come. When you realize that Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, and the legend himself, Bobby Jones, were unable to win three U.S. Amateur Championships in a row; that Tiger Woods was the youngest ever to win a U.S. Amateur and Junior Amateur title; that Tiger Woods has a better winning percentage in match play than Bobby Jones; that Woods has won eighteen matches in a row; and when you realize that he won several of these by coming from behind on the final day; you begin to get a sense of the magnitude of these achievements.

As I tried to digest all of this it struck me that the Tiger Woods story contains three major characteristics of the contemporary sporting scene. First, and too often forgotten these days, we saw the highest qualities that sport can offer, the reason that in the end sport appeals to so many. We saw the great athletic performance. The aesthetic beauty of the golf swing at near perfection is a wonder to behold. The fire and competitiveness of a championship athlete battling overwhelming odds captures the best of the human spirit. And the combination of charisma and of youth have nearly universal appeal to humans struggling hopelessly against the ravages of time, a triumph over the finite. This is why we go to sport, why we care about it at all.

The second story is from the darker side of modern sport: The power and impact of money. Throughout the past week there has been considerable discussion of whether Tiger Woods would or even should turn professional. Of course in one sense he has been a professional since he was three, meaning that golf has been the central feature of his life, the primary activity. However in the sense of being eligible for prize money and endorsements he has remained an amateur. Now he is going pro.

For the past several weeks Phil Knight has been quoted about the earning potential of Tiger Woods. Last weekend Mr. Knight, founder and corporate head of Nike and one of the most powerful people in sport, followed Woods around the course. Stalking his prey, Knight was ready to offer millions, ready to do, as he said, "whatever it takes" to bag his Tiger. We now know what it takes, as Woods has signed a five-year forty-million dollar endorsement deal with Nike. Swoosh!

Titleist followed with a three million dollar deal to endorse golf balls, and no doubt many more will be forthcoming. So Tiger Woods has become a multi-millionaire before winning any money on the fairways and greens. Like all great modern athletes he is now a commodity to be marketed, and the management and marketing people are lining up to represent him.

On Tuesday The New York Times wrote an editorial under the title "Golf's New Tiger," one more measure of the impact of Woods. One line struck me as quite significant: "It seems particularly fitting that the leading candidate for golf superstardom is black ." Indeed, and what does that mean and what does it signify?

We know that in ethnic background Woods is Thai on his mother's side and African-American on his father's side. It is more than a little instructive that The Times did not write that Woods is Thai, or that Woods is African-American, or that Woods is oriental in appearance. The Times wrote that Woods is black.

Color remains a defining term in American society. It is a descriptor of choice in an article about a great new golf talent. In part this is the result of the fact that African-American golfers have suffered severe discrimination in this sport. Still it points out how important color remains in defining who we are in this society. Woods' color supercedes his ethnic identity, his athletic ability, and in fact obscures both.

These are the joyful, the bleak, and troublesome meanings of this remarkable story of a twenty-year-old rising star. 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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