Tiger Woods, Ken Griffey, and Tom Landry - Charles Schultz and Sport

2-14-2000

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Three men, three stories, three sports, one early in his career, one at mid-career and one at the end of his life: Tiger Woods, Ken Griffey Jr., and Tom Landry. All three were in the news this week, and all three have made a heavy impact on their sports. On Saturday a fourth man joined the list.

Tiger Woods came onto the professional golf tour like a thunderbolt from a long anticipated storm. Woods had built a mythic biography even before he turned professional, then when he demolished Augusta National in his stunning Master's victory the myth started down the road to legend.

Over the past several months Tiger Woods has put his "new and improved" swing on display and reeled off six straight PGA event wins, some in spectacular fashion. None was more spectacular than the victory at Pebble Beach last Monday coming from seven strokes behind in his last seven holes to win by two. The eagle on the fifteenth from 97 yards out was a sight to behold. Oddly, in our world of overloaded communications much of the nation was unable to see this most spectacular of comebacks as local CBS affiliates chose Oprah or Rosie or some other staple of afternoon television over the golf coverage.

Woods is now the dominant force that many predicted he would be, and he is only 24 years old and at the beginning of his golf career. It is frightening to contemplate if you are a professional golfer, but Tiger's best years may still be in the next two decades.

In this sport that first acquired its grip on the general public with the rise of Arnold Palmer and the coming of Jack Nicklaus, finally a new star has emerged who once again shines above the crowd. Arnie first brought the masses to golf, and now Tiger is expanding the masses into new social classes.

Ken Griffey Jr. made news of a different kind this week by signing a nine-year contract with the Cincinnati Reds for $116.5 million much of it in deferred compensation. Griffey, a superstar at mid-career, has sent shock waves through major league baseball. First, he signed for about one-third less than he could command on the open market.
Seattle had already offered $148 million for eight years. Second, he has moved to what is termed a small market team that normally could not pay big money to superstars.

In Cincinnati Griffey brings new life to a franchise rich in baseball history that has been struggling in recent years. He brings class to a franchise that has been mired in dog doo-doo, literally and figuratively. He is playing for his hometown, always a refreshing concept. He brings a breath of fresh air to a sport desperate for good news, and he brings his considerable talents to the East where they will no longer be seen only by night owls and West Coast residents. It is also nice to know that it isn't always just the money that counts.

Tom Landry, the third of the big names in the news, died on Saturday after a long battle with leukemia. As coach of the Dallas Cowboys for twenty-nine years, the first twenty-nine of their existence, Tom Landry made his mark as an innovator in the game, and as one of the great football coaches in the history of the National Football League. It was Landry, as much as anyone, who made the Dallas Cowboys into America's Team. Some rank him just behind George Halas and Vince Lombardi among the great coaches in NFL history.

The numbers are impressive. After a winless inaugural season as an expansion team, the Cowboys put together an NFL record twenty consecutive winning seasons, including 13 divisional titles, 18 playoff appearances, and two Super Bowl wins in five games. Through it all Tom Landry stood like a statue on the sidelines; faceless, humorless, and wearing his hat.

As a defensive genius Landry created all the defensive innovations of the past four decades. The flex-defense and the defensive secondary innovations like the nickel and dime packages were from the mind of Landry. On the other side of the ball he brought considerable creativity and innovation to the Cowboys. His multiple formations and variations on the shotgun offense confused defenses. He took basketball and track stars and turned them into game breaking pass receivers.

For those of us who had developed a considerable distaste for Dallas, the Dallas Cowboys, the Dallas cheerleaders, and all that Texas swagger embodied in the tag "America's Team," Tom Landry was the man you loved to hate. His very
stoicism was an affront. His highly visible association with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the clean 1950s look, were more than those of us who were transformed by the Sixties could tolerate. Everything seemed to have changed in American life except Tom Landry. What was particularly irritating was the knowledge that indeed he was a great coach, with great teams, that would keep on winning.

Finally a note on a fourth man whose life and career ended this past weekend. Not an athlete or coach, Charles Schulz through his marvelous "Peanuts" comic-strip characters taught us as much about sport philosophy as anyone in our time. He penetrated the hokum and lucre of sportsworld. He could see sport from the perspective of all those of us whose sports dreams had failed to materialize, and he often spoke volumes about the essence of sport.

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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