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The Excellence of Tiger Woods

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If you were lucky enough to watch Tiger Woods at the U.S. Open last weekend you could not help but be impressed by the excellence of play, the poise of this young athlete, and the fact that you were watching an athlete redefining their sport.

I can't say that I saw the entire tournament or even all of Tiger's rounds. I did see segments of Tiger's game each day, and of course saw all those many highlights that have carpet-bombed our television screens for the past seven days. I did see enough to once again impress me with extraordinary character of this young athlete.

Excellence of play can be demonstrated in many ways. In modern sport excellence is found in the records, and in this U.S. Open there was no shortage of records set by Tiger Woods. Five Open records were set and four were tied. Woods became the first person to win the Junior Amateur, Amateur, and U.S. Open. He had the largest winning margin in history of the U.S. Open breaking a record that had stood for nearly 140 years. It was also the largest winning margin in a Major Championship a 101 year old record. More impressive was the fact that Tiger Woods was twelve strokes under par for this tournament in which no one else broke par.

Beyond the numbers one could see over and over again how difficult a golf course Pebble Beach is and how at times Woods toyed with it. Repeatedly the television commentators, experts and former players themselves, would attempt to analyze a shot, pointing out that you should or could not do this or that. Then Tiger Woods would step up to the ball and do precisely what should or could not be done.

In golf one of the major tests of ability comes on the green when you must make a four to eight foot putt to save par. I am not certain how many times Woods did this over the course of the four day tournament but it was often, especially on the last day when time after time he saved par in his bogie free round.

The course at Pebble Beach is a test of nerves and knowledge with its mood changes in weather and its high and

unpredictable winds. The 8th, 9th and 10th holes are particularly challenging with small greens and threatening cliffs. Over and over again Tiger Woods made the right choices as he brought to bear a high level of understanding of the game and the course. He is, as many players said later, an extremely smart player on top of everything else.

In terms of poise Tiger "lost it" only once. On Saturday morning on the 18th hole when he put his drive over the cliff and into the rocks he let loose a line of expletives worthy of a baseball dugout. He then stepped back up, hit a near perfect drive, and managed to "save" bogie on the hole.

On the course you can see his focus, the concentration he brings to his game, in his eyes and in his manner. In his interviews with the television people you can see his poise, grace, modesty, manners, determination, and confidence. The balance he conveys is most impressive for someone so young.

After Tiger Woods won his third U.S. Amateur Championship in a row in 1996 I wrote an assessment that seems to me to still be at the heart of the appeal of this extraordinary athlete. On that day "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."

Having watched the events at Pebble Beach unfold I was also reminded, as was everyone, of the dominance Tiger Woods showed at the Master's in 1997. After that championship I wrote that Tiger was taking golf through a historic moment, that he was redefining the game, and that he was taking the game of golf to another level. What is remarkable is that after winning the Master's Tiger Woods went out and remade his own game changing his style considerably, and in the process becoming an even better golfer.

He has taken his game and the game of golf to another level, and in this respect he joins a select group of great athletes who over the years redefined their sport. In golf itself, Jack Nicklaus would certainly be in that category, and perhaps Arnold Palmer. In baseball Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson are in that elite class. In hockey Wayne Gretzky redefined the style of play and the standards of excellence. In basketball Elgin Baylor took that game to a totally different level that was then elaborated by Oscar Robertson and Michael Jordan.

Indeed these moments and personages in sport are rare. Now Tiger Woods joins these elite figures. Savor the moment, drink in the excellence, celebrate the achievement. This is the essence of sport at its very best.

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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