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Floyd Landis and Tiger Woods

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Floyd Landis and Tiger Woods
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Victory in sport is often no more than the application of skills by an athlete at an extremely high level of efficiency. This is true at nearly all levels of any game. However, in highly competitive situations little things often make a major difference in the outcome. At the elite levels of sport there is a very fine line between victory and defeat, and between flawless and flawed performances. Any intrusion into the concentration of the athlete can be a distraction of major consequence.

In fact, the ability of the elite athlete to concentrate on the task at hand, to be completely focused or locked in, is one of the major differences between these athletes and ordinary mortals. Anyone who has played any game or sought to achieve a high level of performance at any task, knows that maintaining a high level of concentration is one of the most difficult things to achieve.

I mention all of this because if you watched the two major events that concluded Sunday in Europe, The Open and the Tour de France, it was concentration as much as anything that the winners were able to display along with their high skill levels.

If you were a candidate for hip replacement surgery, if you were having difficulty walking and found it painful to mount a bicycle, how likely would it be that you would be riding in the Tour de France, let alone winning it? Floyd Landis not only won this grueling three week event, but he won it with all the symptoms described here, and he won it after a total meltdown on Wednesday which seemingly took him out of contention.

In what is being termed one of the greatest performances in Tour history, Landis was able to resurrect his chances for victory on Thursday in a grueling ride through the Alps. Then on Saturday he took the yellow jersey for the last time, securing victory in the process. His ride down the Champs-Elysees on Sunday had to be sweet amidst the pain. It was also a tribute to his ability to concentrate through the pain and overcome all the other obstacles in his way.

On Sunday, at about the same time Landis was taking his ride down the legendary Paris boulevard, across the English Channel

near Liverpool, two golfers were experiencing very similar emotions as they played the final holes of The Open at Hoylake. Tiger Woods finished first and Chris DiMarco finished second in the 135th Open. It was Tiger's second consecutive Open Victory and his eleventh major championship.

What these two golfers shared on this day was the fact that they were both grieving the death of a parent: Woods his father, DiMarco his mother. Many of those watching this great match of skill and total concentration have been through this common and difficult human experience and have some idea of what was involved for both men.

Chris DiMarco, who is described as normally a very emotional golfer, played this final day with complete calm and concentration. The only emotion he displayed came on the fourteenth hole when he drained a fifty-foot putt to save par and keep the pressure on Woods. He talked earlier in the week about how he felt his mother's presence on the course, and the way he played on Sunday made you feel that DiMarco just might turn out to be a man of destiny.

In the end destiny was trumped by genius. Instead, DiMarco was a very good golfer playing at a very high level. All the old cliches can be applied here as DiMarco used the adversity he faced to increase his focus rather than lose his concentration. It was a remarkable performance.

The man DiMarco was chasing and nearly caught was dealing with the emotions he has carried with him since his father's death. Tiger Woods talked frequently on this weekend of his father, what it meant that his father was not at The Open, and what a central place Pops had played in his life, both on and off the golf course.

Watching Tiger Woods on the course, you would never know he was dealing with anything other than the next shot. It was vintage Tiger. Total and complete concentration broken only by the insistent cell phone photographers who seemed determined to break Woods, and at some points seemed very close to doing so.

Early on it seemed as if it was going to be a less tense day as Sergio Garcia, playing alongside Woods, folded on the front nine, and Ernie Els dropped back by five strokes early on the back side. Then, suddenly, there was DiMarco pulling to within one stroke when he birdied the 13th while Tiger was bogeying the

12th. It was the only slip of the day by Woods, who then birdied the next three holes to settle the issue.

As the day neared its end, Nick Faldo talked a bit about his feelings after he had won The Open. He mentioned that when it was over he could feel the adrenaline draining out his body, and felt his shoulders drop about a foot. After Tiger Woods made the last putt to win, he put his arm in the air and let out his first smile of the day. He then embraced Steve Williams, his caddy and friend, and began to sob uncontrollably. It was as emotional a scene as I have ever seen on a golf course. Faldo's comments foretold the moment, and we all saw the emotions flow.

What Tiger Woods and Chris DiMarco and Floyd Landis showed on Sunday, and for many of the preceding days, is what is often called the price of victory. They displayed a remarkable ability to put all the emotional and physical pain out of mind and fully concentrate on the task at hand.

These were achievements by extraordinary athletes on an ordinary Sunday afternoon, revealing athletic greatness. It is why we watch and keep coming back to sport. We know that the human capabilities will be stretched to beyond limits, and in the process we will witness the best of human possibilities.

Everything else is clutter.

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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