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Tiger Woods and Roger Federer

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Tiger Woods and Roger Federer
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For the past several weeks I have watched with more than a passing interest as the Tiger Woods juggernaut has rolled over the world of golf. Winning five tournaments in a row, including two majors, certainly qualifies as a juggernaut. As I marveled at this run, I began to think about this sort of dominance and what accounts for it.

Currently in men's tennis there is a similar pattern of dominance, although perhaps not as total as with Tiger. Still, Roger Federer is in a class by himself on all surfaces except clay, and even there he was oh so close to victory this year at Paris.

In thinking about these two superior athletes, who now are at the top of their game and clearly at the top of their sports, I have speculated on what sets them apart from their peers. Certainly a high level of talent must be involved, but there are many talented players who never reach these heights. Perhaps it is hard work. No one, we are told, works as hard at his game than Tiger Woods, and Federer has a work ethic second to none in tennis.

It seems to me that there are several other qualities that separate these two from the field in their respective sports. First, Woods and Federer each have the ability to lift their games at key moments in a match. If you saw the last tournament Woods won, he came out on Labor Day trailing by three strokes to Vijay Singh and paired with Singh. Woods tied Singh on the third hole and at the seventh hole took a two shot lead, a five-stroke swing in seven holes. This was not a function of Singh playing poorly. Tiger simply rolled through the front nine leaving Singh in the dust.

Similarly, this past Sunday, in the third set in game five, Federer was down 0-40 and came back to save his serve. Federer lifted his game as needed, and when Roddick served at 5-6 Federer won a love game, winning the set. He then rolled off the next five games, which made it seven games in succession, leaving Roddick standing on the court in shock. Up to that point Roddick was in the match and in fact was pushing Federer quite hard. All of a sudden the third set was over and it was 5-1 in the fourth set.

Second, both Woods and Federer are generally able to hold a lead once they have it. Fred Perry, the last great British men's tennis star, always said that the important thing was to be sure that once you had your opponent down, you put your foot firmly on his throat, making sure he never got up.

Third, Woods, perhaps more than Federer, has a creativity to his game that others seem to lack. When Tiger gets in trouble with a bad tee shot or a bad approach he seems to savor the opportunity to bring himself back by using his imagination to create shots that others could not make, even if they were able to envision such a shot. How many times have you seen Woods tack up the fairway looking like he was falling apart only to suddenly appear on the green putting for a birdie? And when all else fails Woods can create putts that others only see in their dreams. Federer's skills in this area are not as obvious, but he does have a remarkable ability to create angles in ways others cannot.

Two other notes on Tiger's creativity. He has in the last two years entirely remade his swing. This led to considerable criticism and second-guessing. Also, in the 135th Open at Royal Liverpool this year, Tiger only rarely removed his driver from the bag, fashioning a totally different kind of game for this course, winning another major in the process.

However, the great separator is concentration. First there is the intensity of that concentration. Watch Woods on Sunday in the heat of the struggle, totally focused on the moment. One would guess that a bomb could go off on the course and he would barely notice. Only the sound of a camera seems to be able to penetrate the wall of focus. In addition to the intensity, which is important, there is the ability to sustain that level of concentration without interruption over hours of play. I can't remember ever seeing an athlete so locked in for such a sustained length of time. I am exhausted just watching this amazing human effort.

Think about how you work. Think about how much you concentrate on the task at hand. Then try to imagine sustaining that concentration through an entire day at the office, or in my own case for seventy-five minutes in a classroom. I can feel myself locked in like this at times, and there are days when that concentration is there for nearly the entire class. When I finish with what I know is a really good class, I am emotionally and physically drained. I cannot imagine doing something like this over five hours, and I cannot imagine what it must take to

sustain this sort of concentration over several days, as it is clear you must be able to do in one of golf's majors.

Tiger Woods can do this, and does do this, and, if you watch carefully, you see how many of the top players can do this, but you will also see how few of them can match Tiger Woods in sustained concentration, especially when they are trying to stay with Tiger. Look for this concentration in the eyes, in the body movement and body language, and when you see it you will be amazed. You will also understand how Woods can keep winning, how he can keep grinding, shot after shot, hole after hole.

As for Roger Federer, the same qualities are there that you find in Tiger. He has great concentration that becomes burning concentration at certain stages in a match. He is totally and completely in each moment. On Sunday it was mentioned that Roddick had made a comment to Patrick McEnroe who was standing at courtside. John McEnroe, commenting on television, first expressed astonishment that Roddick would be talking to anyone in the middle of this intense match, and then he expressed dismay over Roddick's lack of concentration on the moment and the match at hand. It was shortly after this that the match turned, Federer lifted his game, and Roddick was left standing in wonder over what had just rolled over him.

It is a fact that these two men dominate their sports and both are extraordinarily talented. It is true that it would take a maximum performance for others to beat them. For me, however, the great separator is not talent. It is rather the ability to lift their game at the required moment, and above all it is their concentration that takes them into a different stratosphere.

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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