

THE CHOSEN ONE

Will golf ever be the same after Tiger Woods?

BY DAVID OWEN

On a hot Sunday afternoon last May, Tiger Woods conducted a golf exhibition in Oklahoma City. During the hour before he appeared, while a large crowd baked in the bleachers, a member of his entourage held a trivia contest, with T-shirts for prizes. One of the questions: In what year was Tiger Woods born? The first guess, by a very young fan, was 1925. That's off by half a century, but the error is understandable. Woods has accomplished so much as a golfer that it's easy to forget that he's only twenty-four. In a sport in which good players seldom peak before their thirties, and often remain competitive at the highest levels well into their forties, Woods is off to a mind-boggling start. Most recently, he won the British Open with a record-breaking score of nineteen under par. After that blowout, Ernie Els, a terrific young South African player and the winner of two United States Opens, said with a resigned smile, "We'll have to go to the drawing board again, and maybe make the holes bigger for us and a little smaller for him."

When Woods eventually appeared for his Oklahoma exhibition, his entrance was appropriately dramatic. A small convoy of golf carts bore down on the bleachers from the far end of the driving range, while martial-sounding rock music blasted from the public-address system. The exhibition was the final event in a two-day program sponsored by the Tiger Woods Foundation, a charitable organization whose goal is to inspire children—especially underprivileged children—and "to make golf look more like America," as Woods himself says. Forty-two cities had applied to be visited by Woods and his team in 2000, and Oklahoma City was the first of just four cities to be chosen. Among the reasons for its selection was the existence of this particular facility: a low-fee public golf course, with free lessons for children on weekends, situated in an unprepos-

sessing neighborhood not far from Oklahoma City's unprepossessing downtown.

Before stepping up to the practice tee, Woods answered questions from the audience, whose members differed from golf's principal constituency in that many of them were neither middle-aged nor white. One of the first questions came from a junior-high-school-aged fan, who asked, "How do you maintain your personal life and your golf career at the same time?"

Woods, who was leaning on his pitching wedge, said, "That's a great question. When I'm off the golf course, I like to get away from everything, and I like to keep everything private, because I feel that I have a right to that." There was heavy applause from the crowd. "There are exceptions to that, where the press likes to make up a few stories here and there. But that's just the way it goes."

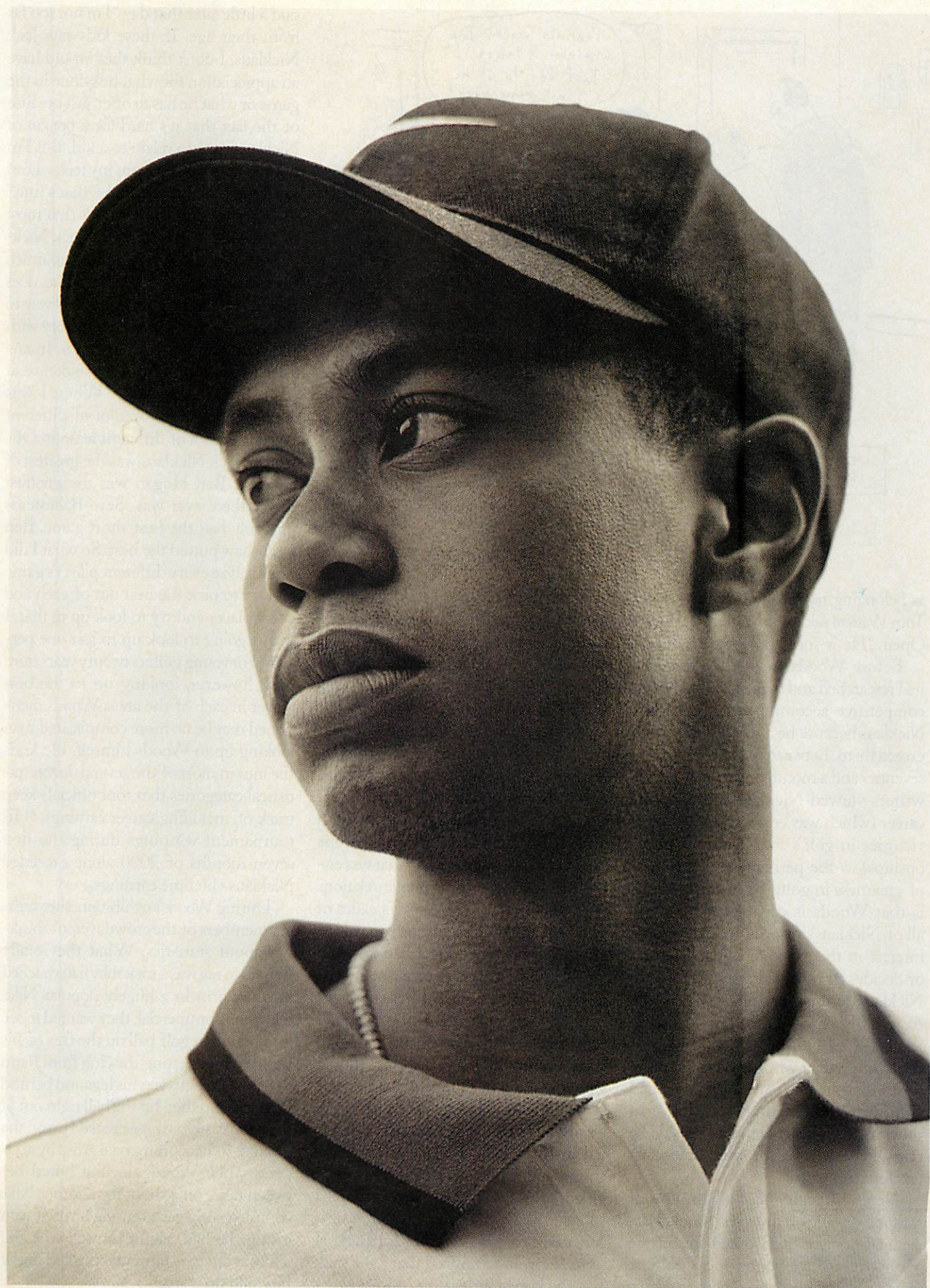
When he said that, I shifted uneasily on the small, roped-off patch of ground from which members of the press had been asked to view the proceedings. Woods doesn't think highly of reporters. Particular journalists have annoyed him at various times over the years, and photographers always seem to click their cameras in the middle of his backswing. To be sure, chilly exchanges between Woods and the press have become less frequent as he has resigned himself to the public-relations side of his job. He now knows many of the press-tent regulars by name—even by nickname—and he sometimes goes out of his way to be courteous and helpful. But he has always been impatient with people who don't work as hard as he does, and most of the questions we ask are lazy, repetitive, and dumb. (Earlier in the day, on another part of the course, an eight-year-old golfer had hit a shot that clobbered a photographer, and Woods got a big laugh by saying, "I've been trying to do that for years.")

The night before, at a fund-raising dinner for the benefit of the foundation, I had stood glumly for half an hour at one

end of a corridor with a group of other glum reporters, awaiting a promised opportunity to observe Woods's arrival at the dinner (but not, we were reminded several times, to ask him any questions). As it turned out, he arrived by a different route. Later, we were offered a chance to look down upon the evening's festivities in silence from a steel catwalk high above the crowd, a hugely unappealing prospect. I avoided that fate by managing to pass for non-media—I had had lunch at a barbecue joint earlier that day with several people connected with the foundation, and they arranged for me to fill an empty seat at a table at the actual dinner—but I never shook the slightly shameful feeling that I was unwanted and didn't belong.

Many very famous people become very famous because, for some compelling and probably unwholesome reason, they crave the approval of the rest of us. That's why they put up with the media, among other things. Even the ones who vigorously defend their privacy seem to do so in a way that attracts an awful lot of publicity, suggesting that their aversion to celebrity is more complicated than they let on. With Woods, though, you get the feeling that his fame mostly gets in the way. We intrude on his golf when he's playing golf, and we intrude on his private life when he's not. He can be a dazzlingly emotional and tele-genic performer, and he surely finds it thrilling to walk down fairways lined with thousands of deliriously happy admirers shouting his name, but he conveys the impression that he would play every bit as hard if the cameras and the microphones and the galleries simply disappeared.

That's an awe-inspiring character trait, but it's also a chilling one. Part of the fun of being a sports fan is harboring the delusion that great athletic achievements are in some sense collaborations between athletes and their rooting sections. Woods's accomplishments are so outsized that it's hard to conceive of them



Some pros once viewed Woods as overhyped; nowadays, they stop what they're doing and watch. Photograph by Michael Faye.



TAKEN OUT AT THE BALLGAME

as belonging to anyone but himself. As Tom Watson said of him after the British Open, "He is something supernatural."

Before Woods turned thirteen, he had researched and memorized the main competitive accomplishments of Jack Nicklaus because he already intended to exceed them. Between the mid-nineteen-seventies and a month or two ago, sportswriters viewed Nicklaus's remarkable career (which was crowned by eighteen victories in golf's four major championships) as the permanent benchmark of greatness in golf; the new consensus is that Woods is capable of breaking all of Nicklaus's records, unless he loses interest in the game or injures himself or decides to run for President instead. Nicklaus himself has always been one of Woods's most enthusiastic cheerleaders. In 1996, he said that Woods could ultimately win the Masters more times than he and Arnold Palmer had combined—more than ten times, in other words. That statement seemed like crazy hyperbole at the time; it doesn't any longer.

Here in Oklahoma, though, Woods wasn't focussing on the record book. Earlier in the day, he had worked one on one with twenty-five young local golfers, most of whom were members of ethnic minorities. He watched them swing, of-

fered advice, teed up balls for them, and made them laugh. The kids all looked nervous while they awaited their turns, but most were smiling by the time he moved on. One of those golfers was Treas Nelson, a high-school junior from Lawton, Oklahoma, who had just won the Class 5A Girls' State Championship; she is the first black golfer in Oklahoma to win a statewide high-school title. After she finished her session with Woods, I violated a ban on over-the-rope media fraternization—a ban that was enforced not only by roving public-relations personnel but also by Woods's cadre of Schwarzeneggeresque bodyguards—and asked her what Tiger had told her.

"He said I have the pizza-man syndrome," she told me. "I get my right hand too much like this." She lifted her right arm with the elbow bent, as though she were holding a pizza on a tray at shoulder height. "He said he has the same problem." She was beaming. Like almost all the kids who received individual instruction, she was wearing Nike shorts and a Nike shirt—goodies provided by Woods's biggest commercial sponsor. She had supplemented this uniform with a pair of Nike earrings. "I don't know if he noticed that," she said. But she hoped he had.

"I can relate to these kids," Woods

said a little later that day. "I'm not too far from their age. If these kids saw Jack Nicklaus, I don't think they would have an appreciation for what he's done in the game or what he has to offer, just because of the fact that it's hard for a person of Nicklaus's age to relate to a kid. But I'm not too far removed from my teens. I can say 'Dude,' and that's cool—that's fine."

It's only because of Woods that most of these kids even know who Jack Nicklaus is. Woods spends almost as much time studying golf's history as he does making it, and he goes out of his way to share his knowledge of that history with the youngsters who idolize him. In answer to a question from the audience at his exhibition, he said, "When I was young, I looked up to a lot of different players for a lot of different reasons. Obviously, Jack Nicklaus was the greatest of all time. Ben Hogan was the greatest driver there ever was. Seve Ballesteros probably had the best short game. Ben Crenshaw putted the best. So what I did was analyze every different player's game and try to pick the best out of each and every player and try to look up to that. I wasn't going to look up to just one person." For young golfers twenty years from now, however, looking up to the best player in each of the areas Woods mentioned may be no more complicated than looking up to Woods himself. He leads the tour in most of the several dozen statistical categories that tour officials keep track of, including career earnings. (His tournament winnings during the first seven months of 2000 alone exceeded Nicklaus's lifetime earnings.)

During Woods's exhibition, the younger members of the crowd weren't thinking about statistics. What they really wanted to see was a trick they had watched him perform in a hugely popular Nike television commercial: they wanted to see him bounce a golf ball on the face of his wedge while passing the club from hand to hand and between his legs and behind his back, and then hit the ball right out of the air as easily as if it were teed up on the ground. (That commercial arose by accident, when Woods, feeling bored between takes on a shoot for another Nike commercial, began amusing himself with a stunt he had taught himself as a kid, and the director, entranced, asked him if he could do it again.)

"I heard a rumor that this thing I did

on TV was all computerized," Woods said, as he began bouncing the ball. "It's kind of a vicious rumor." He passed the club between his legs. "Now, I don't know where that rumor started, whether it was the public or the press, but they obviously hadn't seen me do this before." He bounced the ball up high. "And catch it like this." He stopped the ball, frozen, on the face of his club, let it sit there a moment, then began bouncing it again. "Or I can start out doing it left-handed, if you want me to." Bounce, bounce, bounce. "Or go back to the right." He bounced the ball up over his shoulder from behind, and caught it on the club face in front. "Now, I didn't put this one in the commercial, because it's the hardest one—it's when you hit the ball off the butt end of the club." He bounced the ball high again, twirled the club so that its shaft was perpendicular to the ground, bounced the ball straight up off the top of the rubber grip, twirled the club back to its former position, and resumed bouncing the ball on the face. "Let's see—it took me four takes to do the Nike spot. Let's see if I can do this out here." He bounced the ball high, took his regular grip on the club, planted his feet, and, just before the ball fell back to earth, smacked it more than a third of the way down the range.

A few hours before Woods's exhibition, I sat with the all-black congregation of the St. John Missionary Baptist Church (motto: "We Strive to Be 'The Best Church This Side of Judgement'") while Tiger's father, Earl Woods, gave a guest sermon. His talk was preceded by hymns, prayers, and half a dozen full-immersion baptisms, which were conducted in a large tank that was visible through an opening in the wall above the altar. His subject was his only subject. "Tiger was not created to be a golfer," he said. "Tiger was made to be a good person, and that was first and foremost in our family." Earl is shorter and considerably wider than Tiger. He has a good preaching voice, which caught in his throat a couple of times, despite the fact that he had given essentially the same presentation dozens, if not hundreds, of times before. "Sometimes when I talk about my son, I get very emotional," he explained. "So bear with me."

Earl divides his life into two distinct phases, the first of which he now consid-

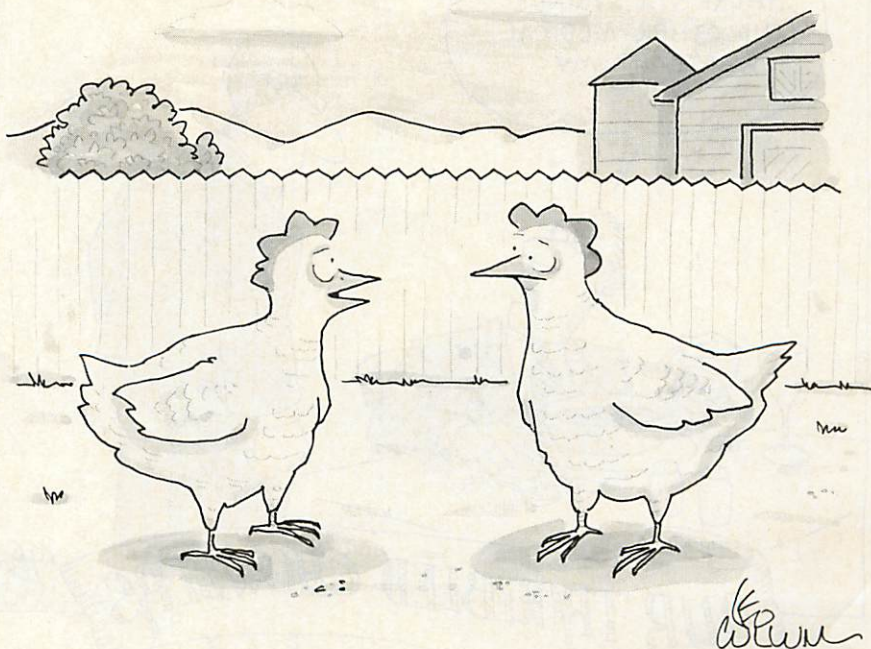
ers to have been a divinely directed training mission for the second. In the first phase, which began during the Great Depression, he grew up poor in eastern Kansas, lost both parents by the time he was thirteen, attended a mostly white high school, became the first black baseball player in what is today the Big Twelve, spent twenty years in the Army, served two widely separated tours of duty in Vietnam (the second as a Green Beret), and endured an increasingly loveless marriage for the sake of his three children, to whom he was a remote father at best. In the second phase, which began in the late sixties, he divorced his first wife, married a Thai receptionist named Kultida Punswad (whom he had met in Thailand during his second Southeast Asian tour), took up golf, and produced Tiger Woods—whose real first name is Eldrick, and whose nickname Earl had given first to a South Vietnamese lieutenant colonel named Vuong Dang Phong, who was his colleague, close friend, and protector during the war.

Earl was determined to be a better parent to the last of his four children than he had been to the first three, and after he retired from the Army, in 1974, he had more time to be attentive. His one significant distraction—other than his job, as a contract administrator and materials manager at McDonnell Douglas, in Huntington Beach, California—was golf,

a game at which he had become remarkably proficient despite having taken it up just four years earlier, at the age of forty-two. He worked on his swing in the evenings, by hitting balls into a net in his garage, and he often placed his infant son in a high chair beside him so that the two of them could commune while he practiced. "It was a way of spending time together," he told me recently. The baby, far from being bored, was captivated by the motion. One momentous day, when Tiger was still young enough not to have mastered all the finer points of walking, he astonished his father by climbing down from his high chair, picking up a club, and executing a passable imitation of Earl's (quite good) golf swing. At that moment, his father realized he was the steward of an extraordinary talent.

Earl also began to believe that the birth of his son had been—as he told the St. John congregation—"the plan of the man upstairs." Looking back on his life, he detected a pattern of trials and tests and close escapes from tragedy, and he decided that God had been grooming him all along for something big. As the child grew, Earl was struck more and more by what he described in church that day as "the charismatic power that resides in my son Tiger"—a power that he had otherwise noticed only in Nelson Mandela.

Even to someone sitting in a church



"The body is eighty-two-per-cent broth."

pew, this might sound sort of mystical and wacky—and yet the more you learn about Tiger Woods's preternatural relationship to the game of golf the easier it becomes to understand why terrestrial interpretations seem inadequate to Earl. When Tiger was still a toddler, Earl says, the child was able to identify the swing flaws of adult players. ("‘Look, Daddy,’ Tiger would say, ‘that man has a reverse pivot!’") Tiger putted with Bob Hope on the "Mike Douglas Show" at the age of two, broke 50 for nine holes at the age of three, hit golf balls on "That's Incredible!" at the age of five, and received his first autograph request when he was still too young to have a signature. Before he had learned to count to ten, Earl says, Tiger could tell you, on any golf hole, where each member of a foursome stood in relation to par. While his grade-school contemporaries drew pictures of racing cars and robots, Tiger sketched the trajectories of his irons. He came from behind to win the Junior World Championship, in San Diego, against an international field, when he was eight.

Tiger first beat his father in golf, by a single stroke, with a score of 71, when he was eleven. That same summer, he entered thirty-three junior tournaments, and won them all. ("That's when I peaked. It's

been downhill since.") At fifteen, he became the youngest player ever to win the United States Junior Amateur Championship—and then the only player in history to win it three years in a row. At eighteen, he became the youngest player ever to win the United States Amateur Championship—and then the only player in history to win it three years in a row.

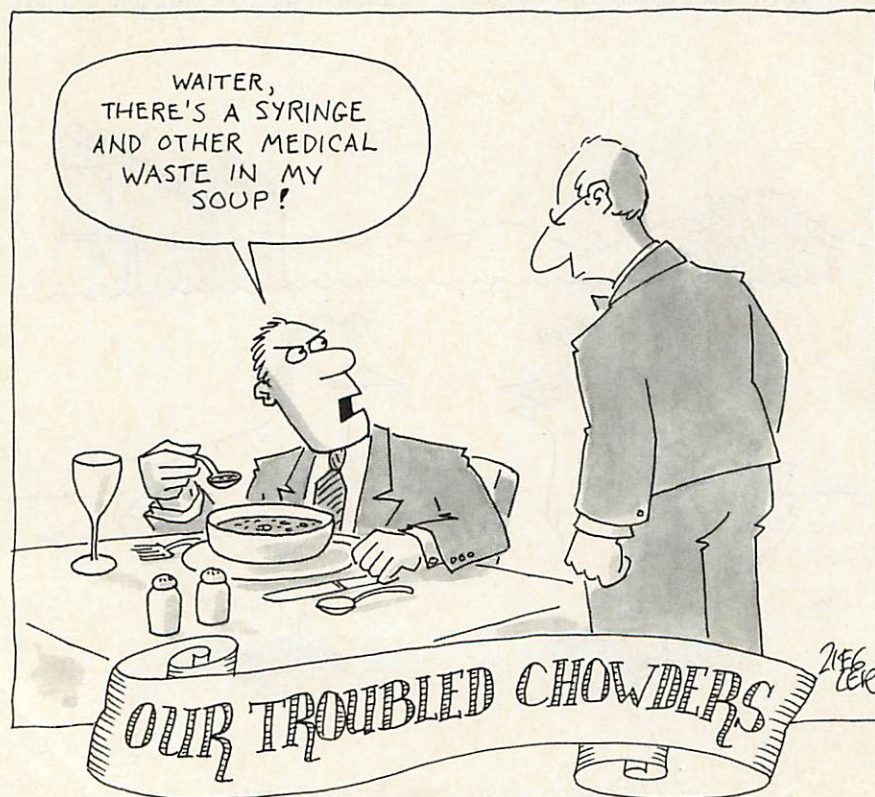
When Tiger first began to attract national attention, people often assumed that the real force behind his game must be the oldest one in modern sports: a pushy father with frustrated athletic aspirations and a powerful yearning for unearned income. In early 1998, the sportswriter John Feinstein published a short, mean-spirited book called "The First Coming," in which he compared Earl to the manipulative father of the tennis prodigy Jennifer Capriati, who burned out on the women's tour at seventeen. (She has since returned.) But Feinstein was clearly wrong. It has gradually become apparent that Tiger's drive has always been internal, and that while Earl and Kultida may have been its facilitators they were not its authors. When Tiger was still very small, for example, he memorized his father's office telephone number so that he could call Earl each afternoon to ask if the two of them could practice at the

golf course after work. Earl was a tireless (and innovative) practice companion and coach, but he believed that the initiative must always be taken by the boy.

Rather than pushing their son, the Woodses sometimes worried that his infatuation with golf was eclipsing other parts of his life. "In junior golf, I was all-out," Tiger said in Oklahoma. "My parents would say, 'You can't play, you're playing too much.' But I wanted to play every tournament, and play twice in one day." Earl repeatedly urged him, with little success, to try other sports. Kultida used golf as an incentive—for example, by forbidding her son to hit practice balls until he had finished his homework. ("My wife was the disciplinarian in the family," Earl told me, "and I was the friend.") Earl once fretted that Tiger was so focussed on winning that he had ceased to enjoy himself on the golf course. Tiger replied curtly, "That's how I enjoy myself, by shooting low scores." After that, Earl kept his opinions to himself.

Although Earl and Kultida did not force Tiger to become a golfer, they both made enormous sacrifices to help him realize his ambition. Earl estimates that the family's annual travel expenses during Tiger's junior-golf years amounted to as much as thirty thousand dollars, a sum Earl couldn't have covered without the help of a succession of home-equity loans. Kultida was an infinitely patient chauffeur, rising long before dawn to drive Tiger to distant tournaments (and reminding him to bring his pillow so that he could go back to sleep in the car). Both parents believed that their son's needs must always come before their own, and they were determined that the only impediment to his success—in golf or in whatever other field he might choose to pursue—would be the level of his own desire.

Earl and Kultida's sacrifices took a toll on their marriage; they have lived apart for several years now, although they have not divorced. Their living arrangement inevitably comes to mind when Earl says, as he did in church in Oklahoma that day, "The family is the most important institution in the world." But Earl doesn't view his own domestic situation as conflicting with his beliefs. The family as Earl conceives it is mainly a relationship between parents and their children. He told me recently, "Tiger has a mother and a father who love him



dearly, and who have always supported him and always will. He is the top priority in the family. There is no bitterness between his parents, and there is no animosity. The only thing is that we live in separate places. My wife likes a great, big-ass house, and I like a small house. That's all." Still awaiting Tiger is the challenge of raising a family of his own—an achievement, Earl says, from which Tiger must not allow himself to be distracted by his golf.

Tiger's obsession was obviously indulged by his parents, but the child wasn't spoiled. Almost from the beginning, he was made to take responsibility for his own aspirations. Starting when he was quite young, for example, he was put in charge of making the family's tournament-related travel arrangements, including hotel reservations. When he was asked what he intended to study in school, he would say that he hoped to major in accounting because he wanted to know how to keep track of the people who would one day keep track of his earnings. He went by himself to check out the colleges that had recruited him, and he went by himself when it was time to enroll at Stanford, the college he ultimately chose. (Tiger's best friends today include three former Stanford teammates: Notah Begay III, who is the first full-blooded American Indian to play on the P.G.A. Tour; Casey Martin, who is physically disabled and won a court decision allowing him to use a motorized cart in P.G.A. Tour events; and Jerry Chang, to whom Tiger quietly returned a favor by serving as his caddie during a thirty-six-hole qualifying tournament the week following his own victory in the U.S. Open.)

The real purpose of the Woods family's life style, both parents have said, was not to turn Tiger into a professional golfer but to strengthen his character. "Golf prepares children for life," Earl told me recently, "because golf is a microcosm of life." According to Earl, the truly important lessons he imparted on the golf course had to do with things like honesty, etiquette, patience, and discipline—virtues for which golf provided handy talking points. (Golf is the only competitive sport, for example, in which the players call penalties on themselves.) Earl also stressed to Tiger that his athletic gift, if he continued to pursue it, would always entail



"Honey, I still think you're the greatest."

outsized public obligations—not least because of his racial background. Tiger lived in a mostly white neighborhood in Cypress, California, and he attended mostly white schools, and he was sometimes harassed by bigoted bullies—one of whom tied him to a tree one day when he was in elementary school—but both his parents taught him to rise above such incidents and to understand that racism is evidence of a defect in the racist, not in the racist's victim. Kultida urged him to be remorseless in competition, but she also steeped him in the Buddhist tradition in which she herself had been raised.

It appears that Earl and Kultida provided their son with exactly what he turned out to need (competitive focus, immunity to intimidation, a cut-down 1-iron) at every critical juncture in his development. But I sometimes wonder whether Tiger didn't in some sense "create" his parents as much as they "created" him. From the moment he climbed down from that high chair, he seems to have been phenomenally well equipped—temperamentally, emotionally, intellectually—to exploit the physical gift that he was born with. Is it outlandish to wonder whether part of his genius didn't

lie in an ability to inspire his parents to conduct their lives in perfect harmony with his ambition?

I first saw Woods in person at the Augusta National Golf Club, in Augusta, Georgia, during the week of the 1997 Masters Tournament. He had turned pro just seven months earlier, after winning his third United States Amateur Championship, and he had dominated the tour almost from that moment. I was standing near Augusta National's first tee late one afternoon early in the week when he emerged from the clubhouse to play a practice round. I didn't see him at first, but I quickly guessed that he was near, because the crowd loitering between the clubhouse and the first tee suddenly convulsed. He was moving fast, and he was encircled by guards. "Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!" The ardor of those fans I can think to describe only as ferocious. Their supplications sounded almost angry. Woods's face, meanwhile, floated expressionless among the grimaces of his protectors.

The 1997 Masters provided Woods's formal introduction not only to many golf fans but also to some of the best golfers from outside the United States. In

the third round, which he began with a three-stroke lead, Woods was paired with Colin Montgomerie, who had played well enough the day before to have shared the lead himself for a short time. He was now tied for second. Montgomerie, who is Scottish, was (and still is) the best player on the European P.G.A. Tour, and he had been a star of the European Ryder Cup team. He had never won a tournament in the United States, but he had come close several times, and he was especially optimistic about his chances that week in Augusta.

Playing side by side with Woods, however, was a transforming experience for Montgomerie. He shot 74—a score that ordinarily wouldn't have been disastrous at that stage in a major tournament, except that Woods shot 65, and thereby increased his lead over the field to nine strokes, and his lead over Montgomerie to twelve. When their round was over, Montgomerie was taken to the press building for a postmortem, as the top players always are. He looked frazzled and discouraged as he stepped onto the stage, and he didn't wait for anyone to ask a question.

"All I have to say is one brief comment today," he began. "There is no chance. We're all human beings here, but there's no chance humanly possible that Tiger is going to lose this tournament. No way."

"What makes you say that?" a reporter asked.

Montgomerie looked at the reporter with palpable incredulity. "Have you just come in?" he said. "Or have you been away? Have you been on holiday or something?"

Montgomerie was clearly shaken by what he had witnessed at close quarters. In his encounter with Tiger Woods, he had crossed from the first stage to the second stage in the process described by Emily Dickinson as "First Chill—then Stupor—then the Letting Go." In the fourth and final round, he shot 81, a dismal score, which left him in a tie for thirtieth place. When he finished, he looked as though his body had been drained of blood.

Weekend golfers who attend professional tournaments for the first time are almost always struck by the breathtaking quality of the pros' shots, and they end up realizing sadly that pro-

SKETCHBOOK BY
GERALD SCARFE

GREEK PLAY

To: Head of Sports Programming,
NBS.

From: Department of Viewer
Containment.

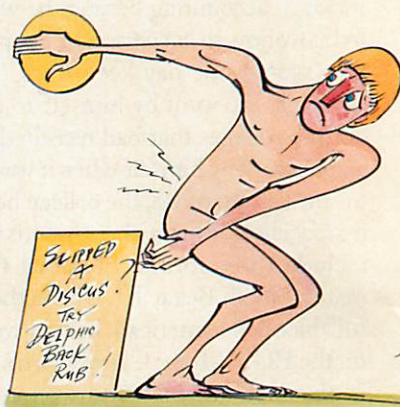
Word here is that you folks are all in a sweat about what to put up against the Olympics. Well, sweat no more. Our people have come up with a surefire winner. Every four years, some blowhard is sure to blather on about "returning to the original spirit of the Olympics"—you know, no rough stuff between nations for the duration. Well, how about returning to the original practice of the Olympics instead?

Rough stuff? You betcha. I'm talking raw, I'm talking ancient. I'm talking "Survivor" meets "Gladiator"—our network's very own *classical* Olympiad.

Boy, did they know about spectator sports in 735 B.C. For one thing, anybody caught in a false start was handed over to the Games cops—the *alytes*—for an immediate public flogging. Now, that's a solid-gold crowd-pleaser. And there were none of those wussy gloves for the boxers: just bare fists and leather knuckledusters. And, best of all—get this!—the athletes performed in the buff, lathered in olive oil. In the beginning, they wore shorts. Then, it seems, one hotshot sprinter tripped over his own boxers and blew the race. After that, it was a level playing field and caution to the wind.

It'll be red meat for the advertisers. Our research team says that, according to this old guy Pausanias, who used to cover the games, athletes swore "upon slices of boar's flesh that in nothing will they sin against the Olympic Games." Breakfast of champions, right? And don't worry about the sacrifice of a hundred oxen. We can cut straight to the broiled patties. That Olympic flame had to be there for *some* reason.

—Simon Schama



fessional golf and weekend golf, despite superficial similarities, are very different games. I had been to tournaments before the 1997 Masters, and I had even played golf with a couple of touring pros, so I had no remaining illusions about my own abilities. But some of Woods's golf shots during that tournament seemed almost as different from an average pro's shots as an average pro's shots would seem from mine. They belonged in a category of their own. David Feherty, a former tour player from Ireland, who now works mainly as a television commentator, told me recently, "I've played with just about everybody, and I think I can say now that Tiger has hit virtually every truly great shot I've ever seen. As we speak, he is deleting some of my greatest memories and replacing them with his. He simply does things other golfers can't do. He's like the Heineken in the commercial: he refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach."

Woods's swing is so powerful that it is difficult to capture on film. For many years, *Golf Digest* has published detailed photographic sequences that anatomize the swings of the game's best players—sequences that are descended in spirit from the studies of running athletes and galloping horses which were made in the late nineteenth century by the photographic pioneer Eadweard Muybridge. Since 1973, the magazine's photographers have shot their swing sequences with a high-speed camera called a Hulcher, which was originally developed, at the request of a government agency, to take stop-action photographs of missiles. The camera can shoot hundreds of high-quality images at a rate of sixty-five frames a second—plenty fast enough to break a golf swing into its constituent parts.

Woods performed for the Hulcher a few months after his Masters victory. The camera recorded fifteen driver swings from five different angles. When the prints came back from the lab, the magazine's editors discovered that only five frames among the hundreds taken during the shoot had captured Woods's swing at the approximate moment his club head came into contact with the ball—a problem they had never encountered before. "With other tour players, we almost always get a picture of impact with every swing," Roger Schiffman, the

executive editor, told me. When Woods makes his normal swing, the head of his driver moves at about a hundred and twenty miles an hour—a good fifteen miles an hour faster than the club head of a typical touring pro, and about thirty miles an hour faster than the club head of an average amateur. Between one Hulcher frame and the next, Woods's driver travelled through roughly two hundred degrees of arc, which means that a ball sitting unthreatened on the tee in one frame would be long gone by the next.

That *Golf Digest* swing sequence was photographed two days before the

THE GAME

No ball, no rules. Any one boy
On the cinder playground
Raises his hand and yells I Got It
And a few others chase him reaching
To touch him and the great
Game begins.

At first maybe four or five
Charge after him and one tags him
And yells I Got It and then more
Join the pack lunging after the new
Leader, the pursued one
Who sprints and dodges, head-feints
Nearly out of breath, writhing
Out of reach.

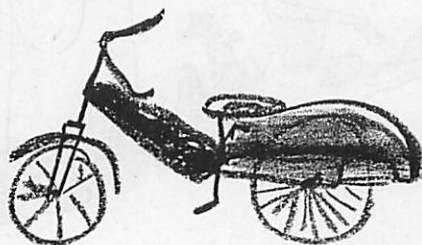
No end, no score.
Thrill of the broken-field run in football, but
Pure: no boundaries, no goal.

No teams. Aristocratic martial
Rhythm of anarchy and brilliance,
The one against the many:

I remember a heavysset boy named Carl
Who liked to keep the chain-link
Fence to his back, even
Leaning against it, side-faking or pulling

start of the 1997 Western Open, which Woods went on to win. "When he saw the pictures later, he said, 'No wonder I won,'" Schiffman told me. "He said his swing looked almost perfect." It was quite a surprise, therefore, when Woods decided not long afterward that his game required a major overhaul. With the help of Butch Harmon, a former touring pro who has been Woods's teacher since he was seventeen, Woods spent more than a year taking apart his "almost perfect" swing and putting it back together.

The eyes of non-golfers glaze over when golfers fret about their swing, as they do when offered the least opportunity. If you play golf, though, you understand the fascination. The golf swing may be the most frustrating motion in sports. It's all angles and levers and timing and voodoo, and, because it starts from a dead stop and is directed at a stationary object, it permits, and even



His chubby belly back, and every time a boy
Touched him, I Got It, Carl
Dancing tagged him back
With rope-a-dope hands I Got It
Back on the tagging arm, Carl
Unwinded at bay unyielding.

Sometimes the whole playground
Ran like one animal harrier
Streaming after you,
Challengers and thwarted in turn
Hounded and hounding, with grins
Like tired hounds.

And after the exhilarated spell
As the fox, the defiant
Scapegoat who dares all comers,

Always finally out of breath
You laugh and let yourself
Be touched, collapse thrilled
And exhausted to crouch panting
Hands on knees as you watch the herd
Speed on after the twisting shifting
Hero sooner or later always depleted
Of strength, unpetulant, capitulated
To the great ongoing
Entropy of the game.

—Robert Pinsky

encourages, a dangerous level of intellectual interference. Most athletic actions work best when the attention of the athletes executing them is directed somewhere else—on a rapidly approaching tennis ball, for example, or on the footsteps of a furious linebacker—but golf is a highly self-conscious game. As a result, golf instruction often veers in the direction of pop psychology, and the advice offered in countless books, magazines, videos, infomercials, television shows, and weeklong swing schools can begin to seem slightly oracular. (“Swing easy as hard as you can”; “Don’t be tight”; “Don’t be loose”; “You can play well with a bad swing as long as you make an even number of errors.”) Golf is so unnerving that longtime players are susceptible to a host of bizarre and virtually incurable mental disorders, among them a putting problem known as “the yips,” and a calamitous swing breakdown known as “the shanks”—a condition so devastating that many golf-

ers superstitiously refuse to utter its name.

At the Ryder Cup in 1993—which was held at a club in northwest England called the Belfry—I stood by the driving range for half an hour while the British player Nick Faldo worked on swing minutiae with his teacher, David Leadbetter. Faldo would address a ball, then sweep his club halfway to the top of his backswing and freeze; Leadbetter would modify the position of Faldo’s hands by an inch or so; Faldo would re-address the ball, then sweep his club halfway to the top of his backswing and freeze; Leadbetter would modify the position of Faldo’s hands by an inch or so. They repeated this exercise again and again and again. (The real proof that golfers are mentally unbalanced was provided not by Faldo and Leadbetter but by me: I stood there and watched. And took notes!) For most players, this sort of incessant meddling is necessary yet perilous. Faldo himself suffered a swing collapse a few years ago, and, indeed, he is

still trying to rediscover his old touch.

Woods’s dissatisfaction with his swing in 1997 therefore seemed, to an outsider, almost reckless—especially since it concerned a problem that is beyond the ability of most golfers to conceive of as a problem. I saw an example of this dissatisfaction once in a tournament on TV. Woods had driven his ball beautifully on a par-4, leaving himself just a short iron to the green—an easy shot. He swung, and his ball soared through the air, and, sure enough, it ended up just a few feet from the hole. (He later sank that putt, for a birdie.) But Woods reacted as angrily as if he had just bounced his ball off a car in the clubhouse parking lot.

He later revealed what had bothered him. He had intended to play a fade—that is, a shot that starts left of the target and curves back toward it, to the right. At some point during his downswing, however, he had sensed that his club was in the wrong position in relation to his body, so he manipulated his hands in such a way that the club head rolled over at the bottom of his swing, imparting side spin to the ball in the opposite direction and causing the shot to curve from right to left instead—a shot known as a draw. Because of the speed of his swing, and the time it takes for electrical impulses to travel back and forth through the human nervous system, that sort of midcourse correction, given its end result, is almost impossible to comprehend. In any event, Woods didn’t like having to rely on his hands to twist his club into the right position, so he decided the time had come to tighten up his swing. That process took more than a year, and it coincided with the only relative dry spell in his career thus far—a period, which ended late in 1999, during which he won only a tournament or two. Since then, he’s won roughly half the tournaments he’s played in.

I won’t bore you with the details of how Woods and Harmon did it—and the details are definitely boring—but the process included hitting thousands upon thousands of practice balls, enduring countless hours of tedious drills, and adding several brick-size slabs of muscle to what was already a virtually fat-free physique. Woods has always loved to practice, and he is a fascinated and deeply analytical observer of his own swing. “He is the best student I ever

had," Harmon told me recently. "He is like a sponge—he soaks up information, and he always wants to learn and get better." That notion is deeply disturbing to other tour players, who had more than enough trouble with the old Woods—the one with the allegedly terrible swing. Even worse, Harmon describes his student as "a work in progress," and they both say that the Woods we have seen so far is only seventy-five per cent as good as the Woods they both believe we will see at some point in the future—and probably sooner rather than later. "He can get a lot better," Harmon told me. "Scary thought."

"I've worked countless hours," Woods himself said shortly before his Oklahoma exhibition (during which he demonstrated a new low-flying shot with his driver which he and Harmon had spent a year developing specifically for the hard fairways and high winds of the British Open). "People have no idea how many hours I've put into this game—and they don't really need to know, either—but I've put in a lot of time and a lot of effort. My dad always told me that there are no shortcuts, that you get out of it what you put into it, and that if you want to become the best you're going to have to be willing to pay your dues."

In paying his dues and becoming the best, Woods has changed almost everything there is to change about golf. The conventional wisdom among sportswriters used to be that the P.G.A. Tour had become so deep in talent that no modern player could hope to dominate it the way Palmer or Nicklaus or Watson did in the sixties and seventies and eighties, or the way Snead or Nelson or Hogan did in the thirties and forties and fifties. Now, though, Woods becomes the favorite in any tournament simply by signing up, and professional golfers all over the world have begun lifting heavier weights, eating healthier food, and going to bed earlier, in the hope of becoming good enough to be considered second best. "He's in their heads," the sportswriter Tom Callahan told me. Callahan recalled the corrective eye surgery that Woods had last year. "The first thing he said afterward was 'The hole looks bigger.' Now, if you're Davis Love, is that what you want to hear?" More than a few pros once viewed Woods as danger-

ously overhyped; nowadays, like most of the rest of his awestruck admirers, they tend to stop what they are doing and watch—perhaps thinking ahead to a day when they'll be able to brag to their grandchildren that they once got personally whopped by the "Chosen One" (as the tour player Mark Calcavecchia called him at the British Open).

Woods has also changed golf's public image, which has suffered for decades from the game's suburban association with saddle shoes, cigars, and miniature electric cars. "Golf was called a wussy sport when I was growing up," he said in Oklahoma. "You weren't supposed to play it unless you were a wuss." No longer. Twelve-year-olds who used to dream only of becoming professional basketball players now sometimes decide that they might like to give the P.G.A. Tour a try, too, at least in the off-season. Tubby middle-aged hackers now stand a little taller at cocktail parties, because Woods, miracle of miracles, has made golf seem kind of cool. When a teen-age checker at my local grocery store discovered that I played a lot of golf, her eyes lit up, and she asked, "Have you met Tiger?" Woods has even taken the most shameful aspect of the game's long history—its legacy as a decadent pastime for white people with too much time on their hands—and turned it inside out.

Between 1934 and 1961, the constitution of the Professional Golfers Association of America—the direct predecessor of the modern P.G.A. Tour—explicitly limited that organization's membership to "Professional golfers of the Caucasian race." The Caucasian-only clause was not some esoteric historical artifact; the rule merely formalized a policy that had always been followed, and the P.G.A. apparently bothered to put it on paper only after discovering that a light-skinned black man had managed to work as a club pro since 1928. The P.G.A. methodically fought efforts by black players to overturn or circumvent the rule, and it didn't amend its constitution until it was forced to do so by the Attorney General of California, who threatened to ban tour events in that state and to encourage other Attorneys General to do the same. The pressure for change did not come from the white pros of that era; the vast majority of those men were

happy with their world the way it was.

When Tiger Woods was born, in 1975, the Caucasian-only clause was no more distant in time than the stock-market crash of 1987 is from today—and the mind-set that had fostered it was very much a part of the landscape of golf. One winter in the early seventies, when I was in high school, someone from the Midwestern country club that my parents belonged to asked me to suggest other young people who might be invited to the club's upcoming Christmas dance. I in turn asked what would happen if my list included the names of one or two of the three black members of my high-school class. Shortly afterward, the dance was cancelled.

Less than nine months before Woods's birth, Lee Elder became the first black golfer to play in the Masters. Elder's appearance at Augusta has been celebrated ever since as an early milestone in the drearily slow enlightenment of white Americans, but it did not herald a new generation of black golfers. Like most of the few other black tour players of that time, Elder was a veteran of the old United Golfers Association, golf's equivalent of baseball's Negro leagues, and his athletic prime was mostly behind him. (He was already forty-one.) A black player named Calvin Peete, who was born in 1943 and took up golf too late to have been involved with the U.G.A., became one of the truly dominant players on the P.G.A. Tour in the eighties, a decade during which he won more tournaments (eleven) than any player except Tom Kite. But Peete was virtually the end of the line; Woods is the only black member of the P.G.A. Tour, and he is the first in a very long time. In the past fifteen years, only one African-American golfer has won a P.G.A. Tour card by way of the tour's qualifying "school" (actually, a notoriously arduous six-day tournament). That was a now forgotten player named Adrian Stills, who qualified in 1985. "We're a dying breed," Lee Elder told me last month.

Why did the black presence on tour shrink to the vanishing point between the mid-seventies and the mid-nineties, just when one would have expected the opposite? Pete McDaniel—who is the author of "Uneven Lies," a cultural history of black golf in America, which will be published this fall—recently told



"Kellanay seems to be making real progress with his split-fingered fastball."

me, "It was the golf cart. The rise of the motorized golf cart marked the beginning of the end of minority golf, especially among African-Americans, because golf clubs that had carts didn't need caddies, and most of the black professional players had come from the caddy ranks." Golf carts, in addition to being a typically American response to the threat of mild physical exercise, eliminated what to golf clubs had been the unappealing necessity of maintaining on their premises large pools of mostly young, mostly disadvantaged workers. As carts displaced caddies, kids whose families were excluded from private clubs lost their principal avenue of access to the game.

Of course, a world in which a handful of black men managed to claw their way into mostly marginal professional careers as a result of having lugged the weekend baggage of wealthy whites was hardly a utopia. The real problem with golf in America, as far as race is concerned, is not that caddying declined as an occupation but that the game, over the course of more than a century, has only grudgingly made room for more than a privileged few. Given the inexorability of the cultural forces at work, it seems almost unbelievable that Tiger Woods emerged as a golfer at all, much less as a golfer who has a decent chance of one day being re-

membered as the greatest of all time. As Earl says, his son is the first "naturally born and bred black professional golfer"—the first whose initial exposure to the game did not come through the service entrance. For Woods simply to have earned a tour card and kept it for a couple of years would have made him a pioneer. Doing what he has actually done moves him into the category of myth.

Woods's own views about race are attractively complicated. He dislikes being referred to as "African-American," because he regards that term as an insult to his mother—and so does his mother—who, after all, is Asian. Earl's ancestors were black, white, American Indian, and Asian, and Tiger once referred to his own ethnicity as "Caublinasian," a word he made up in an effort to suggest the diversity of his genealogy. He often seems inclined to concentrate on golf and let American race relations look after themselves, but he has invested a great deal of his increasingly scarce and valuable time in reaching out to disadvantaged children through his clinics.

Woods has been conducting clinics for young golfers since he was in high school, when he and Earl set up exhibitions in cities where Woods was playing in tournaments. The clinics ended when Woods was at Stanford, because the Na-

tional Collegiate Athletic Association held that they were in violation of a rule concerning individual college athletes and public exhibitions. (Earl and Tiger had several running battles with the N.C.A.A. during Tiger's two years in college, and Earl says those battles contributed to Tiger's decision to turn pro shortly after the beginning of what would have been his junior year.) After Woods left the aegis of the N.C.A.A., late in 1996, he and Earl established the Tiger Woods Foundation to continue their mission.

The foundation has been accused by some of creating unrealistic expectations among children who have limited opportunities for becoming even recreational golfers, and virtually no chance at all of becoming touring pros. ("You wonder if it's false hope," a skeptical sportswriter said to me recently.) What good does it do—the critics have asked—to introduce an inner-city kid to a game that, for all practical purposes, can't be played in an inner city? And, indeed, if the goal is to turn more members of ethnic minorities into golfers, a simpler approach might be to concentrate directly on transforming ghetto youngsters into middle-aged Republicans—the kind of people who seem to take up the game as a matter of course. There's a public-service commercial on television which shows a black child using a hammer to drive a tee into the pavement on a dark urban street, so that he can tee off in his neighborhood. Well, exactly.

Although it's true that playing on tour is an unreasonable ambition for almost everyone—the P.G.A. Tour has only a hundred and twenty-five fully exempt playing spots, and many of those are locked up by golfers whose careers will ultimately be measured in decades rather than in years—earning a different kind of living in the world of golf is within reach for many. Unlike most other spectator sports, golf is played by millions of non-professionals, whose needs are served by a large industry that comprises equipment manufacturers, clothing retailers, agronomists, golf-course maintenance workers, travelling salespeople, teaching professionals, scuba-diving golf-ball recyclers, and others—even journalists. Within that industry, there is now a widespread conviction that if golf is to grow significantly as an economic enterprise it

needs to extend its reach far beyond white suburban males. Woods's foundation, in connection with its clinics and exhibitions, conducts seminars for children and parents in which such job opportunities are described and explained. Woods himself has estimated that as many as five per cent of the children who pass through his foundation's programs will one day end up in jobs that are somehow connected with golf. That seems like a lot, but who knows?

Even for kids who have no interest in golf-related careers, the game as a pastime has virtues that its more grotesque attributes have often obscured. Golf has a work ethic (the driving range and the practice green), a dress code (no jeans or T-shirts), and a tradition of etiquette based on personal responsibility and consideration for others (replace your divots). Spectator behavior that is tolerated and even encouraged in other sports—the frantic waving of plastic-foam tubes in an effort to fluster free-throw shooters in basketball games, for example—would be considered grounds for arrest at golf tournaments, where fans are expected to keep even their shadows under control. Aspiring golfers who set out to be just like Tiger Woods may never make it to the tour, but they will inevitably end up learning something about what it takes to find and keep a job more demanding than that of filling orders at a drive-through window. “The first thing they learn is to play by the rules,” Earl told me, “and we have a lot of knuckleheads in prison today who never learned to play by the rules.”

White golfers also tend to underestimate the emotional impact that Woods's racial background has had on non-Caucasians. For upper-middle-class white fans, a big part of Woods's appeal is that he seems to negate racial issues altogether—he's just Tiger, the best golfer in the world. I've seen sixty-year-old white chief-executive officers with their own personal jets who were as excited as a ten-year-old kid would be about having a chance to see Woods in person. Their excitement was genuine, and, to the extent that such a thing is possible, it was colorblind. When white golfers do think about Woods's racial background, it's often with a sense of relief: his dominance feels like an act of forgiveness, as though in a single spectacular career he could make

up for the game's ugly past all by himself.

For many of the young players I saw in Oklahoma, though, Woods's appeal had everything to do with race: the color of his skin was the bridge they were crossing into the game. Dennis Burns, who works for the Tiger Woods Foundation and is one of a handful of black American golf professionals (the kind who give lessons and work at golf clubs rather than play on tour), told me, “Kids walk away from Tiger's clinics with a sense that here's a guy who looks like me and has done it. It's a feeling of confidence—and it doesn't just have to do with golf.” Children generally admire great athletes for most of the same reasons they admire cartoon superheroes: the constraints of the adult-ruled world don't seem to apply. But, for teen-agers who are outside America's cultural mainstream, Woods has meant incalculably more. He is the fearless conqueror of a world that has never wanted anything to do with them.

A lesson in fearlessness may be what professional golfers need as well. Woods has upended their universe. Ernie Els has finished second to him five times now, twice in major tournaments. Els is one of the very nicest people on any golf tour—and he has made nothing but generous, flabbergasted remarks about Woods—but surely it must have occurred to him that if Woods had spent four years at Stanford and then

gone to graduate school, he himself might today be considered the best player in the world. He and the other young golfers who used to contend for that position, including Phil Mickelson and David Duval (who briefly supplanted Woods at the top of the world rankings around the time that Woods was making his big swing change), have to wonder if their moment in golf history passed before it arrived.

Superb athletes fascinate in part because they seem like proxies for ourselves in a metaphorical battle with the eternal: broken records are death-negating acts. Even Woods's most lopsided victories have been thrilling to watch, because his efforts have seemed so effortless—as though he had found a way to win the game that can't be won. But will we feel the same way five years from now if no player has stepped forward to challenge him? Nicklaus had the considerable advantage during his career of being chased and, not infrequently, elbowed aside by other great players, among them Arnold Palmer, Billy Casper, Gary Player, Lee Trevino, and Tom Watson. Woods's principal rival, so far, has been the record book. If that doesn't change, then those of us who can only watch—sports fans, television commentators, sports reporters—may someday come to view his triumphs with the same dispassion that he seems to feel toward us, until the passage of time erodes his powers and makes it all seem like a contest again. ♦

