The lessons of the Tiger story

What goes wrong when the universe revolves around an athlete

I USED TO THINK THE lowest form of human interaction was sports talk radio, but I was wrong: It's golf talk radio. On Monday morning of Masters week, I drove from Atlanta to Augusta to attend Tiger Woods' pretournament press conference, and for most of that 150-mile trip I listened to a call-in program on a satellite station devoted to golf. Tuning in felt like doing due diligence, because Woods and his sins were among the principal topics. But the discussion consisted mostly of ignorant speculation in response to questions that either couldn't be answered or were going to be answered that afternoon, and I was reminded of something I've often noticed during political campaigns: The only thing more infuriating than a complete idiot is a complete idiot you agree with. I kept angrily switching to the Grateful Dead channel—anyone out there remember the set list from the Dead's 1986 New Year's Eve show, in Oakland?—and suffered a golf-threatening injury when I snagged my right middle finger on an air-conditioner vent while trying to jab the radio's power button.

Is Tiger Woods sufficiently sorry that he has destroyed his marriage and his family, lost tens of millions in endorsement deals, trashed his competitive schedule, and successively slept with and ticked off an unknown but possibly sizable fraction of the population of the earth? Maybe not. But, if not, what are you and I supposed to do about that? Golf fans have legitimate grounds for being upset with him, because his mystique as a competitor was founded partly on the idea—promoted relentlessly by his late father and endorsed by some who followed him, including me—that he was not only a better golfer than you or me but also a better person, on-course expletives notwithstanding. Beyond a certain point, though, indignation seems gratuitous. There was a common feeling, before and after the press conference, that reporters haven't been "tough" enough in their questioning. But piling on is overrated as a journalistic strategy, and Woods will eventually have to answer to an authority higher than the Golf Writers Association of America: his children. If that doesn't make him tremble, the sports desk of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel is unlikely to.

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THE DIGEST

DAVID OWEN

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protect him; inside the press tent, the most common complaint is that Woods never told anybody anything. Veteran sportswriters often feel nostalgic about the days when reporters and tour players caroused together, and everyone knew who everyone else was sleeping with, and golf tournaments felt like joint productions of the players who competed in them and the reporters who covered them with one eye closed. Nowadays, tour players are more likely to travel by private jet than to carpool with reporters, and they do their misbehaving on a scale that's tough to match on a sportswriter's per diem. That's not necessarily a loss.

It's hard to make most men think of "sex addiction" as a problem, but living a lie, in any form, taxes the soul, and it's not impossible that Woods feels relieved to have been outed. He's such an unearthly talent that we should never presume to guess what he might be thinking, on any subject, but I would rather be viewed as the latest Wilt Chamberlain than as the next Nelson Mandela: The expectations would be easier to handle. Since his return, his golf has often seemed erratic, even ordinary, as though someone had slipped kryptonite into his golf shoes. At the Players Championship, a neck injury caused him to withdraw during the final round, and the next day he and swing coach Hank Haney parted company. But Woods might eventually gain from the whole sorry experience. Throughout his career, he has managed to turn setbacks into raw material for new achievements, and we'd be suckers to bet that he won't do that now.

In 2006, Woods showed me around the men's grill-room in the clubhouse at Isleworth, the gated golf community where he lives. He pointed out its many man-friendly amenities, among them a pool table, a Ping-Pong table, numerous pinball machines and video games, a true-rolling artificial putting green, a miniature basketball court and a long row of leather easy chairs, which were lined up in front of a flat-screen TV that was hanging above a fireplace. "There are a lot of divorces here," he said, and we both laughed. Ha! Who knew? He has now fouled his nest, as my late father would have put it. But that's his and his family's problem. If there's anyone other than Woods who might gain by meditating on his troubles, it's parents who—inspired by his remarkable life, perhaps—entertain serious athletic ambitions for their children. Ask any pushy sports dad whether he would be happy for his son or daughter to achieve superstardom, and he'll undoubtedly say yes. But striving for supremacy, in any endeavor, is a morally treacherous proposition. Great athletes become great in part by learning to coldly exploit the weaknesses of others, and by treating their own desires as global priorities. What we usually refer to as an athlete's "sacrifices"—the pre-dawn wake-up calls, the endless, lonely hours in the gym or on the range—are really acts of narcissism, carried to a sweaty extreme. One of Woods' many appealing characteristics, pre-scandal, was that he seemed at least moderately concerned about the world beyond his accomplishments. His current situation is a useful reminder that being a good person, no matter how many advantages you seem to have, is as difficult as it looks.

Billy Payne, the chairman of Augusta National Golf Club, gave a press conference the day before the tournament began, and he concluded the prepared portion of his remarks with some sharp words for Woods, who, he said, had let down everyone. "We at Augusta," Payne said, "hope and pray that our great champion will begin his new life here tomorrow in a positive, hopeful and constructive manner, but, this time, with a significant difference from the past." The old ladies I play bridge with—who don't follow golf, necessarily, but do pay attention to Woods—thought that Payne's remarks were appalling and condescending, but I kind of liked what he said. The Masters chairman has become something like the alpha grown-up of men's competitive golf, and if the best player in history needs a spanking, Payne might as well be the one to give it. At any rate, Augusta National had virtually been accused of giving sanctuary to a sex offender, by allowing Woods to use the Masters as his re-entry to competition, so Payne probably had to say something.

Phil Mickelson graciously pointed out that he and everyone else in golf, including everyone in the pressroom, owes a major debt to Tiger Woods. Even a couple of months of professional golf without Woods' participation was tough to take; what would 14 years have been like? Mickelson's victory, five days later, was a stirring one, and was morally satisfying and deeply deserved. But every victory has a context, and the context, even there, was Tiger Woods. The Onion's post-Masters headline was "Nation Collectively Acts Like It Was Rooting For Phil Mickelson All Along."

A few hours before Woods' press conference, a Masters patron approached an employee in the main tournament golf shop and reported, with alarm, that his wife had disappeared. The two had entered the shop together to buy souvenirs, he said, but she had wandered off, and he hadn't seen her in more than an hour. The employee alerted other employees, and the man continued to search. Then, as the employee was about to call in more reinforcements, the woman reappeared. She had been with Tiger Woods, she explained. He was playing a practice round, and she had joined his gallery and lost track of the time. I spent much of Masters week doing essentially that same thing. As I followed Woods, I felt saddened, intermittently, for his family's sake. But still, as always, I was grateful and amazed. ♣