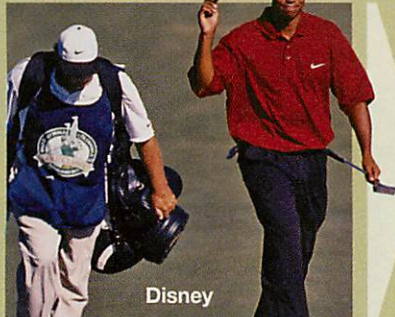


TIGER'S PRO VICTORIES BY YEAR

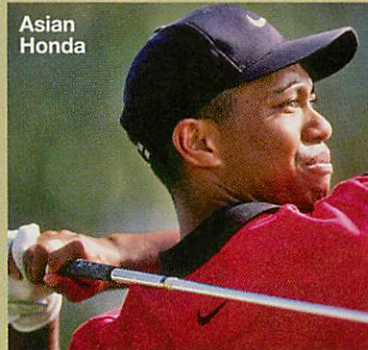
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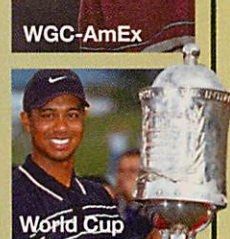
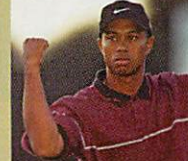
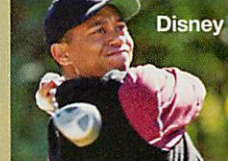
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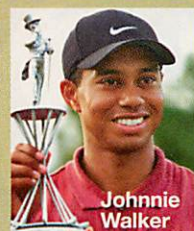
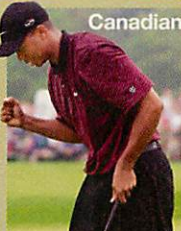
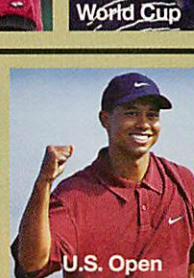
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1999



2000



GETTY IMAGES (30) • AP (8) • J.D. CUBAN (6) • STEPHEN SZURLEJ (5) • DARREN CARROLL (4) • MATTHEW HARRIS (2) • CHRIS STANFORD (1) • RUSTY JARRETT (1) • MICHAEL O'BRYON (1)

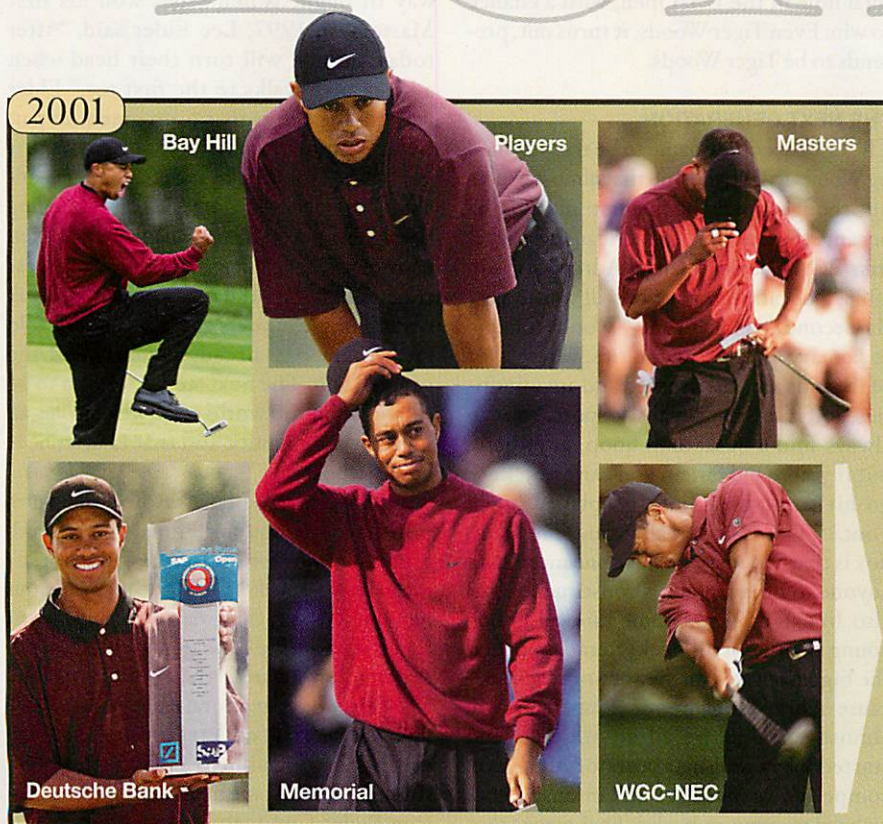
Tiger

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By David Owen

In his first decade as a pro, he changed the game. Now what does he do?

2001

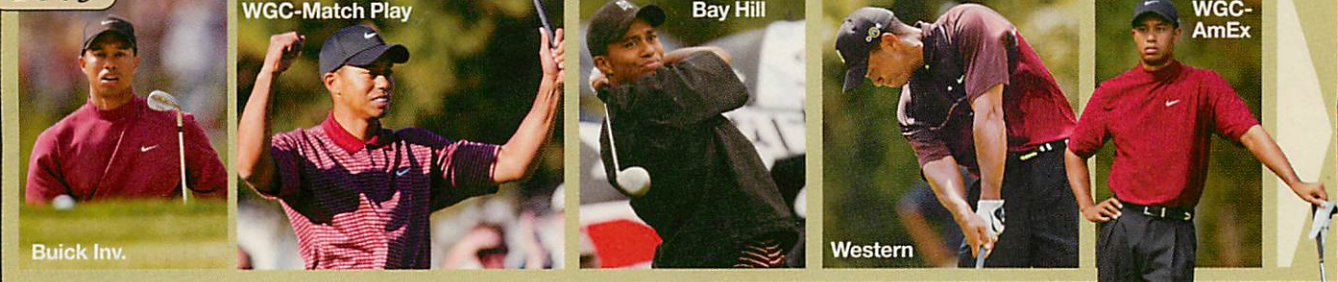


A TELLING MEASURE OF HOW DRAMATICALLY Tiger Woods has changed golf during the 10 years since he turned pro is the many ways in which he now seems old-fashioned. The game's most recent equipment revolution was fueled in part by the yearning of lesser players to catch up to him, yet his irons have the same specs as the irons he used when he was 14, meaning that his 9-iron has more loft than Phil Mickelson's pitching wedge. Woods' miles-long drives have been a major contributor to the obsession with distance off the tee, but he will surely be remembered less as a power hitter than as a shotmaker, a species once thought to be extinct. His work ethic, in the gym and on the practice range, is responsible for the hardened pectorals and diminished social lives of his competitors, yet he has managed to build a fulfilling private existence, and has found the time to take two-week ski vacations with his wife and various childhood buddies, to dive without scuba tanks above the Great Barrier Reef, to spearfish off the Cayman Islands, and to bungee-jump in New Zealand,

2002



2003



as well as to compete in tournaments all over the world, to help run a major charitable foundation, and to assemble a portfolio of business interests worth hundreds of millions of dollars. When his career began, he was notable for the educated respect he paid to his athletic forebears—Nicklaus, mainly, but also Palmer, Hogan, Nelson, Jones and others, whose battlefield tactics he had studied since childhood, and whose deadliest weapons he has borrowed for his own arsenal; nowadays, history-minded youngsters think only of him.

Last November, I attended a big junior tournament in Georgia. Every talented teenager in the field was a child of Tiger Woods: The best players, boys and girls, played his game, with big drives, dazzling approaches, creative recoveries and fearless short games, and they looked like athletes because he looks like an athlete. (Nicklaus, early in his career, was called Fat Boy, Fat Jack, Blob-o and Whaleman.) On the PGA Tour last year, players named Charles Warren, Wes Short Jr. and Jeff Brehaut missed a combined 36 cuts, finished in the top three just three times among them—and won more than a million dollars each. They owe their jumbo mortgages to Woods, who is the main reason that the tour's total purse today is 3½ times the size it was in 1996. When teenage LPGA stars Paula Creamer and Morgan Pressel strut before the television cameras, announcing that victory is

the only outcome that interests them, they are channeling Tiger Woods. The effect extends to Woods himself. On "60 Minutes" last March he said that when he plays alone, for fun, he likes to imagine that he's on the final hole in the U.S. Open, with a chance to win: Even Tiger Woods, it turns out, pretends to be Tiger Woods.

THE NEXT GENERATION

The last part of the game to be transformed by Woods will be the one that almost everyone thought would be the first: In 1996, he became the first black American to earn his first PGA Tour card since Adrian Stills in 1985; a decade later, we're still waiting for the second. "It takes time," Woods told me in January. "In the inner cities, where a lot of the kids are underserved and are minorities, golf is still not a realistic sport. You can always find a basketball hoop, anywhere, but if you're in Harlem you can't say, 'Let's go hit some balls; let's go play Winged Foot.'" This is undeniably true. The paradox is that Woods, who has done more than anyone to broaden golf's constituency, has also, by extending the game's appeal among young people of all backgrounds, pushed the biggest prizes further out of reach. Because of him, the game's next superstars will almost certainly be gifted athletes who started early and had years of high-level competitive experience and intensive specialized training, as he did. That means that

the next Tiger Woods is more likely than ever to emerge from the world of private clubs and sports academies, rather than from the inner cities or the caddie yards.

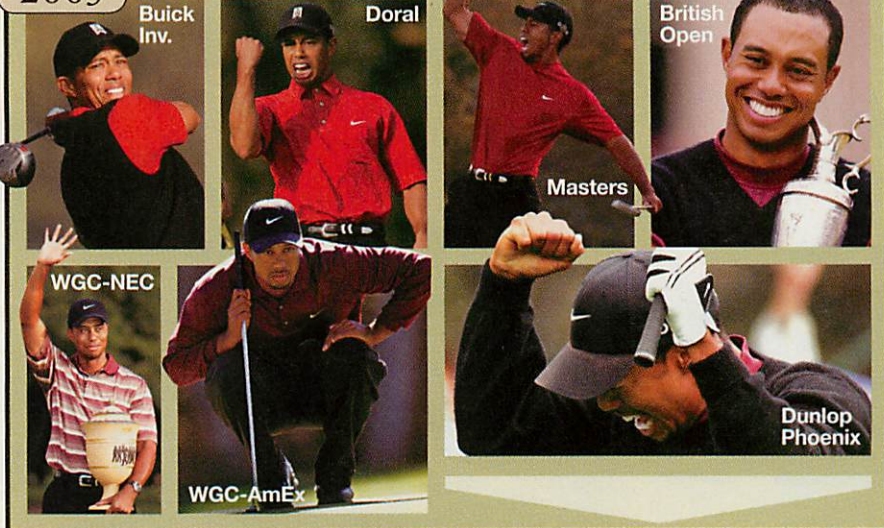
Even so, Woods has cracked golf all the way through. When Tiger won his first Masters, in 1997, Lee Elder said, "After today, no one will turn their head when a black man walks to the first tee." Elder was talking about that tournament in particular, but his comment applies to all first tees. Post-Woods, the indefensible is considerably harder to defend. Truly changing the ugliest parts of American country-club culture will take time—but it will take less time than it would have taken if he hadn't come along. Six years ago, Earl Woods told me, "Tiger has already transcended the game of golf. The next step is for him to be someone on the world scale who makes an impact on humanity, and that is what he is going to be doing."

"The Earl of Woods," as he sometimes called himself, was never one to make modest predictions for his son, but that doesn't mean he was a flake. Of all the many lessons he taught Tiger, the greatest was his insistence—which he repeated virtually from the cradle onward—that outsize natural gifts carry outsize moral obligations. How many other great athletes (or their parents) can honestly claim to believe the same thing? In 1993, some members of the American Ryder Cup team threatened to boy-

cott a pre-tournament visit to the White House to protest President Clinton's tax plan, which increased the top marginal income-tax rate to 39.5 percent. That's what passed for social awareness among professional golfers in the pre-Tiger era. Woods, in contrast, seems determined to leave the world a better place than he found it, and not just for himself. He is also that rarest of modern sports superstars, one whose athletic records and private life are untainted by even the rumor of scandal. The worst his critics can say is that he has a penchant for swearing after bad shots and placing the occasional wager, and he employs an overzealous caddie. Earl Woods also often said, "As good a golfer as Tiger is, he's a better person." Given how good a golfer he is, that almost has to be a stretch—but who knows? Earl wasn't wrong about a lot.

Mainly, of course, Tiger's gift to the rest of us has been his golf. For 10 years, he has dominated the game in a way that, at this stage in its history, ought to be mathematically impossible. (On the World Golf Ranking, the difference between Woods' points average and that of the No. 2 player exceeds the points average of all but three players—meaning that Woods has enough points to simultaneously be ranked as both the best and fifth-best golfers in the world.) Even his record during his two so-called slumps—the months-long periods when he was renovating his game, treating history's best swing as a tear-down—would constitute a highly respectable lifetime career for the vast majority of the guys who have ever played on tour, because even when Woods is struggling he manages to make cuts, contend in the majors and win the occasional tournament. Comparisons across athletic generations are always unfair—there is simply no way of guessing how Hogan or Nelson would have played if they'd been born in 1975, or what Woods' record might have

2005



been if his principal rival had been Paul Runyan, the tour's leading money-winner in 1934—but they're irresistible nevertheless. Here are two historical facts to think about: Nicklaus played most of his career at a time when professional golf was a comparatively tiny game (the world's best players in his prime were mostly American, whereas 14 of the 20 top golfers in the world today were born outside the United States), and he rarely had to endure the suffocating public attention that has followed Woods from the beginning (only a small fraction of the shots that Nicklaus struck in his PGA Tour career were even shown on TV). Yet Woods has been so dominant that sportswriters have sometimes accused his rivals of not trying hard enough.

Can it really have been a decade? In 2000, at an event in Oklahoma City sponsored by his foundation, Woods looked back on the opening day of his professional career. "That first tee shot is always difficult, I'm telling you," he said, before a crowd that consisted mainly of children.

"When I first turned pro, I'll never forget, in Milwaukee, I teed up my golf ball, put my club down, and thought: *I'm fine, no big deal, I can do this.* I took the club back, and, I swear, it felt like it took about 15 seconds for that club to get to the top

of my swing. It was so heavy. I have never experienced anything like that in my life. But I got through it, and, luckily, my ball went out there 330."

And so on, for 10 unforgettable years. 🏌️

Contributing Editor David Owen writes a monthly column for Golf Digest and is the author of The Chosen One: Tiger Woods and the Dilemma of Greatness.

2004



2006

