

Of Tiger's Tale

Tiger Woods is bigger than the game. Or so we've been told for the last decade.

So when his SUV crashed into his neighbors' tree, an accident that unleashed a barrage of tabloid stories, a sad and bewildered golf industry assumed the worst: The sport was doomed without its flagship.

I say, not so fast.

If you could turn back the clock and return life to the pre-Nov. 27, 2009, state of affairs, it would be a no-brainer, right?

Not exactly.

Golf will not take a huge hit from Tiger's downfall. The sport might even benefit in weird ways.

Consider what Tiger has done for the game and the golf industry. Yes, PGA Tour purses have climbed, television ratings have soared (at times) and best of all, Tiger delivered a cool factor that attracted all generations. Here was a passionate, successful and athletic man from something other than the white-bred world erasing many stereotypical images in a sport thought to be inhabited by several million Judge Smails.

But has the sport really changed for the better since Tiger turned pro in late 1996? Aren't there still a bunch of Smails running around trying to protect the elites' warped stance that golf is a sport for the privileged? And aren't these the same elite who are often determined to cling to wasteful and empty values like wall-to-wall turf, 50,000-square-foot clubhouses and ornamental nonsense that only adds frivolity to a sport in need of more sensible direction?

GOLF WILL NOT TAKE A HUGE HIT FROM TIGER WOODS' DOWNFALL. THE SPORT MIGHT EVEN BENEFIT IN WEIRD WAYS

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



Tiger allowed the corporate world to openly embrace golf, but that came with demands for a golf experience light on value and heavy on experiential theatrics, which did little to grow the sport.

Worse, there was a growing sense both within and outside the golf world that it was business as usual, with Tiger paid lavishly to enable elites to highlight the sports' diversity when all they really wanted to do was hide behind an illusion and protect some imaginary cult of the establishment.

The number of golfers has remained stagnant during Tiger's career, and while there's no doubt that more kids are interested in golf, the opportunities for them remain limited despite programs like The First Tee.

Only now in a Great Recession are public courses offering better deals. Clubs with little concern about the future are now offering affordable membership opportunities as the next generation has been struggling for reasonable access to courses. But equipment is more expensive than ever.

If you're under the age of 30 and not living off of someone else, golf is still not a very welcoming sport. And maybe it never will be, but the last 14 years of Tiger's reign certainly didn't do much to make an impact.

There's little doubt the industry asked a lot of Tiger and perhaps that burden helped fuel his extreme behavior. Mercifully, that weight is now gone and the sport will never ride his coattails like before. From the PGA Tour to the everyday muni, golf will have to thrive on its playing values, increased affordability and its timeless strength as the most unique recreational sport known to man. And with looming water issues and calls for environmental compatibility, the industry will have no choice now but to act more sensibly.

Oddly though, Tiger has created an opportunity. Woods' accident gave golf a bizarre kind of mainstream appeal that didn't exist before the accident. In the aftermath of Woods' downfall, the world of golf has been part of the national conversation. Suddenly, we're part of something huge, something real and something worth paying attention to.

It took a wacky Shakespeare-meets-Dickens-in-the-vein-of-Quentin Tarantino boondoggle to make that happen.

What a weird world we live in.

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