

Will this new year be Tiger's best tee party?

by Tod Leonard

With Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson, the world's top two ranked players, extending their vacations, the winners-only Mercedes Championship opened the 2008 PGA Tour season.

TIGER ON THE PROWL? - More than any other year in his professional career, Woods seems destined to do what no other player of the modern era has done -- win all four majors in one calendar year. CNS Photo by K.C. Alfred. A look at some critical questions going into the new year:

WILL TIGER WIN THE SEASON GRAND SLAM?

More than any other year in his professional career, Woods seems destined to do what no other player of the modern era has done - win all four majors in one calendar year. And as good as the Tiger Slam was in 2000-01, when he held all four major trophies, winning them all in one season would stand as the greatest accomplishment thus far.

Look at the venues and it seems wholly possible.

Woods has four green jackets, but hasn't won at Augusta since 2005. For him, that's overdue.

Then comes the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, where he has won three straight Buicks and five overall. Imagine if he wins this year's Buick and is going for his fifth straight win at Torrey come June. Incredible.

Royal Birkdale in England is the British Open stop this year, and in '98 - in his seventh major as a pro - Woods finished third, behind buddy Mark O'Meara, who beat American journeyman Brian Watts in a playoff. Missed short putts in the howling wind on Friday and Saturday seemed to doom Woods, but he fired a 66 on Sunday and missed the playoff by a single stroke.

With a twinkle in his eye, Nick Price said that day, "He will mature. If he continues to improve, he's going to be a pretty good player by the time he's 30."

Funny now, given Woods' 13 major titles.

August's PGA Championship at Oakland Hills outside Detroit seems to present the largest obstacle, because Woods' experiences there aren't exactly favorable. As the reigning U.S. Amateur champion, he shot a 76 and 77 among his rounds in the 1996 U.S. Open and tied for 82nd. The U.S. Ryder Cup team lost by a record margin at Oakland Hills in 2004. Still, he's a totally different player 12 years later, and the echoes of European soccer songs may only serve as motivation.

To be sure, it seems fairly absurd to be expecting a Grand Slam, even by Woods. But that's where he has put our expectations. The guy is showing no signs of letting up, and after the birth of his first child last summer he seems happier and more focused than ever.

He won seven official PGA Tour events in '07, including four of the past five he played in capturing the inaugural FedEx Cup. He tied his personal record for lowest scoring average (67.79), and his margin over runner-up Ernie Els (1.50 strokes) was the largest between Nos. 1 and 2 since at least 1950.

When Woods, who turned 32 recently, opens the season in the Buick Invitational, he will be one victory shy of tying Arnold Palmer's 62 career wins. If he were to win the season Grand Slam, he'd be one short of Jack Nicklaus' record 18 majors.

At this point, every shot is worth watching.

WHAT WILL MICKELSON DO?

It's always the juiciest question, isn't it? And after yet another eventful season filled with triumphs and a small bucket of controversies, Phil Mickelson continues to be the most compelling player in the game.

The '07 recap: Mickelson wins three times on the PGA Tour and once in China, including two biggies: his first Players Championship and the Boston stop in the FedEx Cup.

A great year, except it's never that simple for Philly Mick. He left good friend and coach Rick Smith for Butch Harmon; he sarcastically criticized the U.S. Open setup after injuring his wrist in the deep rough during practice; and after he won a scintillating duel in Boston, he expressed unspecified displeasure with the tour, and then skipped the penultimate FedEx event in Chicago.

Mickelson will kick off his season at Torrey Pines, where a competitive finish might do wonders in his preps for being the U.S. Open's hometown favorite. He's won the Buick three times, but not since the South Course was redesigned.

Mickelson's best chance to win a fourth major continues to be the Masters. He tied for 94th at Oakland Hills in '96 - his worst four-round finish in the U.S. Open. Phil is 37 now. The next three years figure to be critical to the depth of his legacy.

THE BIG FIVE - MORE MYTH THAN FACT?

While Mickelson has climbed over Jim Furyk to get back to No. 2 in the world, Els was the quietest money runner-up in recent memory. The Big Easy didn't win, and though he finished fourth in the British and third in the PGA, he continued his confounding inconsistency with a missed cut at the Masters and a 51st in the U.S. Open. He's 38. Will he ever have the monster year everyone once expected? Probably not.

Vijay Singh had his big year in '04, with nine wins, and he won twice in '07 while turning 44. But he's fallen to No. 10 in the world, and with the kids coming up he may have reached his peak.

The steepest plunge has been by Retief Goosen, the two-time U.S. Open champ who has plummeted to 26th in the world rankings. The once formidable ball-striker ranked an astonishing 194th on the tour in greens in regulation.

THE NEXT BIG FIVE?

Our guess as to the next three players to rise to challenge Woods and Mickelson, who aren't going anywhere:

- Rory Sabbatini's cocky antics continue to get under Woods' skin, but that's not a bad thing for fans. Superman needs a villain, and Sabbatini keeps rising to the task. What a great end to the season he had, with five Top 10s in his past six starts.

- Adam Scott is No. 7 in the world, and if he takes the next big step his promise has showed for years, he's in

the Top 4.

- Still only 26, England's Justin Rose is showing all the makings of a player in it for the long haul. Splitting time between here and Europe, he played only 16 times on the PGA Tour and had seven Top 10s. He has become a player to watch in the majors.

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