

Tiger Woods is showing time and again that all things are possible

by Tod Leonard

Some final thoughts from the West Coast Swing as the PGA Tour packs up and heads for those flat, flat courses and all of that sand and water in Florida ...

One of the greatest rewards for fans of the Tiger Woods era is that it gives us all reason to dream. To think big. Really big.

We have already seen Woods hold all four major championship trophies at one time, so we know it's possible when he says he wants to do that in one season, win the Grand Slam.

Now, as Woods continues to roll through every bit of competition on probably his greatest run of play ever, there are other wonderful possibilities. The most fun to speculate on right now: Woods tying or breaking Byron Nelson's record of 11 straight tour wins.

He has four straight official tour wins right now, and it seems rather ludicrous to fathom getting to 11, given the level and depth of PGA Tour competition these days, and the fact that Woods competes in only the top-level events against the best fields.

But when you consider Woods won seven in a row once, and that three of his past eight official victories have come by eight shots (not including his 8-and-7 Match Play rout of Stewart Cink Sunday), and that his smallest winning margin is two, it doesn't seem so crazy anymore.

The fact that Woods survived the fickle nature of Match Play is what makes this fun, because now he's in control over 72 holes. And he's playing so far above anybody else that he is going to have to slip up for anybody to overtake him even once.

Woods' upcoming schedule is a beauty to consider.

His next outing is three weeks ahead in the Arnold Palmer Invitational at Bay Hill, where he won four straight times from 2000-'03. The following week is the WGC-CA Championship at Doral, where Woods is the three-time defending champion. Woods then takes two weeks off, and it's on to the first major, the Masters. He's won four green jackets, but has been shut down in the past two years, and two-time Augusta winner Phil Mickelson figures to have a considerable say this year.

Three weeks after the Masters comes the Wachovia Championship, the highly popular stop in Charlotte, N.C., where Woods is the defending champ. The next week, it's the Players Championship, and this one's as dicey as any of them, because Woods has won it only once, in 2001.

Mickelson is the defending champ.

So say that the incredible happens and that he wins them all. Now he has nine in a row (although we'll speculate shortly on the debate about whether the European Tour win in Dubai should count).

The next stop is Jack Nicklaus' Memorial Tournament in late May. Woods has won at Muirfield Village three times, but not since 2001.

And if he wins Memorial, and he's poised to tie the record, hello Torrey Pines! As if the first U.S. Open on the San Diego course didn't need to get any bigger, how insane would Woods going for No. 11 be?

It does seem like only a dream, when hundreds of players, clobbering thousands of shots, will have a say in all of this over the next four months. But Tiger Woods has 63 wins at the age of 32. Anything seems possible when you know that.

Does Dubai count?

Woods shot a 65 in the final round to win the European Tour's Dubai Desert Classic on Feb. 3. Should that count in his streak? If so, he's at five straight official wins right now.

The PGA Tour won't acknowledge it, of course, if Woods approaches Nelson's record, and Woods wouldn't bite on the subject Sunday.

"I'll let you handle that," Woods told a reporter.

It will be interesting to see if his stance would change. When he held all four majors and people asked if it was a true Grand Slam, Woods' view was basically, "I hold them all. Four is four."

I would bet his response about including Dubai would be: "Eleven is 11."

Certainly, Nelson's competition on the tour in '45 wasn't nearly what Woods faced in Dubai, or at his unofficial Target World Challenge, which also doesn't count. And it's interesting to note that Nelson's very first win of the streak was in a team competition. He won the Miami Four Ball with Jug McSpaden.

WOODS DRIVES RATINGS

Woods was eliminated from the Match Play on Friday last year. This year, with him playing during most of the weekend coverage, the national overnight ratings skyrocketed. The Saturday rating on NBC was up 88 percent from '07, while the Sunday number, despite the rout by Woods, was up 66 percent.

The 3.5 rating and 7 share on Sunday, however, was well below the 5.0/11 Woods pulled for his 2004 Match Play win at La Costa.

SCOTT'S TORREY TURN

Adam Scott has been like a ghost at Torrey Pines. He played the South Course in the Junior World in 1997, the year Kevin Stadler won, but had not been back as a pro for the Buick Invitational.

A couple of weeks ago, he went out to play with coach Butch Harmon to get a look as a preview for the U.S. Open. He hadn't seen any of the holes since the 2001 redesign.

"A lot has changed," Scott, 27, said. "They had already marked out some rough lines (for the Open) with white paint. It was good to see it again because it's going to be a really tough golf course. I played at 6:30 in the morning, and it was playing long."

The new tee at the par-5 13th hole that now makes it 600 yards was fenced off, but Scott echoed the concerns of some players who saw it in the Buick. He didn't like it.

"That's a brutal hole," he said. "I mean, 12 is a brutal hole, 11 is really long. (Thirteen) was the only hole I was not happy with out there. It was the only disappointing hole on the course, for what I remember being a really nice par-5 to probably not a nice one now. It's going to cause some headaches, I'm sure, if we're back on the ocean."

Scott does appreciate that the 18th is going to be played a par-5.

"I'd like to see that," he said. "I'd like to see a guy win it."

LOSING WITH CLASS

Two of the best things I saw in the entire West Coast Swing came from guys who lost in the Match Play.

On Friday, after his crushing loss to Woods when he had numerous chances to win, Aaron Baddeley showed up to talk in the media center. It was the first time I can remember a loser from anything but the final being so gracious. Good on the 27-year-old from Australia. There are players much older who could learn a lot from him.

On Saturday, after his loss to Woods, Henrik Stenson did several minutes of interviews behind the 18th green and then stopped to sign autographs. That's what you relish from a former champion.

GOODBYE GALLERY

It could never be compared to La Costa for its tour tradition, or for being spectator-friendly, and after only two years, The Gallery Golf Club said farewell to pro golf Sunday.

It was the plan all along to eventually move the Match Play for 2009 and '10 to the \$60 million Ritz-Carlton Golf Club, a 36-hole Nicklaus design being built only a couple of miles away.

Nicklaus gave media members a tour of the site last week, and it figures to be significantly different from and better than The Gallery. There won't be a three-mile hike out to the back nine, there will be more holes closer together for spectators, and the greens will be considerably smaller.

The Tortolita Course at the Ritz will be 7,850 yards, to compensate for the altitude and the thin desert air, and that would make it the tour's longest track.

Money is why the tour went to The Gallery in the first place. The Dove Mountain housing developers were willing to put up a tournament fee of at least \$1 million, and the tour made more cash because far more fans in Tucson came out than they did in Carlsbad.

Tiger Woods is showing time and again that all things are possible by Tod Leonard