

Thursday, April 10, 2008

## **Mind games? Tiger wins those, too**

**Experts agree the 4-time Masters champ tougher mentally than anyone he meets**

**BY KEVIN MANAHAN**

Star-Ledger Staff

AUGUSTA, Ga. -- As the sun set on Augusta National Golf Course three years ago, the greatest golfer of this generation was on the verge of doing something he never had: blowing a major championship. With crowd-stunning back-to-back bogeys on the final two holes, he had slipped into a sudden-death playoff with Chris DiMarco.

Tiger Woods was choking.

But then, as dusk and thousands of fans enveloped the tee box at No. 18, the first playoff hole, Woods quieted his mind, refocused on his game, and hit two near-perfect shots to set up a winning birdie.

It's a scene that has been repeated thousands of times. Woods, in a trance-like state, shuts out the noise and distractions and pulls off the most difficult shots under the most intense pressure. Ask sports psychologists around the world and they agree: He is the most mentally tough athlete of this era.

But how does he do it? How does he remain unflappable while playing one of the most mind-bending games with the largest and rowdiest galleries just a few feet away? How has he kept from wilting on the way to winning 86 professional tournaments worldwide, including 13 major championships? How does he continually stare down and intimidate opponents, especially in the final rounds of tournaments?

Some point to his late father, Earl, a former Green Beret who played military mind games with his son to toughen him. Others point to his mother, Kutilda, and her strong Buddhist background, which stresses a peaceful mind, meditation and being in the moment.

But others are convinced it's something else.

"He puts himself in a zone," sports psychologist and hypnotist Pete Solana said. "With the self-hypnosis he was taught when he was younger, he can clear out his mind of all negative thoughts and distractions and think only about this shot, right now. Self-hypnosis is a major tool, and Tiger has learned how to use it. He is light-years ahead of everyone else."

As the Masters begins today, Woods has five victories this year and has won a remarkable 54 percent of the tournaments he has entered over the past two years. Woods has called winning the Grand Slam -- capturing golf's four majors in one calendar year -- "easily within reason." No one has looked this unbeatable since Byron Nelson won 11 consecutive tournaments in 1945.

Woods sidesteps questions about his early mental training, but he has acknowledged that, as a teen, he was counseled by Jay Brunza, a Navy clinical psychologist and hypnotist hired by Earl Woods. Brunza, who no longer works with Tiger Woods, also caddied for him in the amateur ranks, and the pair won 33 times in 39 matches. Brunza rarely speaks to the media and could not be reached for this story.

When Brunza first started working with Tiger Woods, he told USA Weekend in 1992: "Tiger is so advanced mentally, it's scary. He is far ahead of anything I've seen."

Solana and others believe the mental keys are self-hypnosis, the ability through a cue or code to put yourself into a state of heightened concentration. After years of observation, Solana theorizes Woods uses a series of slow blinks to achieve this state.

And Solana, who worked with Yankees outfielder Paul O'Neill at the end of his baseball career, said there's a reason Woods is hesitant to talk about it: "If you had discovered the secret, would you give it to the other golfers?"

Woods, when asked about his mental training this week, gave a convoluted answer about visualizing shots. He joked about the mental games his dad would play with him and how he quickly learned to disregard them with a heightened focus he learned from Brunza.

"It was fun to me," Woods said. "It was frustrating at first because I didn't understand how to deal with it. But I just had to figure it out. My dad used to pull all the little tricks. It got to a point where it was amusing and we would laugh about it. He would try it, and I would hit better and better shots."

Deborah Graham, a sports psychologist who works with pro golfers Lee Janzen, Mark Calcavecchia and Jerry Kelly, said her clients usually tell her the same thing after playing with Woods: "They say, 'You know, my golf game is as good as Tiger's, but his mental game, his focus, his ability to be in the moment is the difference. How can I be like him?'"

Graham and her husband, fellow psychologist Jon Stabler, have tested the mental makeup of hundreds of touring pros. The exam includes hooking golfers to a heart monitor during a round and noting when they become flustered and relaxed. They have not examined Woods, but still have come to this conclusion: "If we could create the perfect physical and mental profile, it would be him," Graham said.

"He is the perfect physical and psychological storm," she added. "Look how everything has come together for him. He has good genes. He is playing the game he was meant to play at a time when the equipment and technology allow him to be incredibly good."

"He was born to two dynamic parents who helped him become great and lent him part of their personalities. ... Golf suits his personality, and he has the composure to handle his greatness. He is the total package."

Dr. Joseph Parent, author of "Zen Golf" and "Zen Putting," says Woods, with his mother's Buddhism, has found a way to dive beneath the surf.

"He gets to the quiet place beneath the waves," Parent said. "The waves, which are his emotions or the distractions, haven't stopped breaking, but he lets them pass by without getting caught up with them."

In the meantime, Woods is sending more and more of his fellow pros to the therapists' couch, looking for ways to beat him. Because he has raised the level of play, they have spent more hours in the gym and more hours on the practice range. They have hired and fired swing coaches. They are eating better, drinking less. But still they are coming up short.

So, golfers who once snickered at sports psychology are turning to people like Graham and the game's most famous mind guru, Bob Rotella. But they are decades behind Woods, who began his mental training as child. Listen to Els, the latest to sit on Rotella's couch: "I've never seen anything like Tiger. He's a step above. It's a treat just to play with him, just to see how he goes about his work."

Rotella, who has titled his latest book "The 15th Club," said more golfers need to put Woods' self-confidence in their bag.

"He's not the best guy off the tee, but he's the best at getting the ball into the hole," Rotella said. "He just knows he is going to win."

"And they need to stop thinking about him, because he's not thinking about them."

*Kevin Manahan can be reached at [kmanahan@starledger.com](mailto:kmanahan@starledger.com)*