

I am still Tiger Woods

By Cameron Kittle
Executive Editor, University of New Hampshire

Published: Monday, April 5, 2010

Updated: Monday, April 5, 2010

When I was five years old, my dad sawed off the end of a rusty MacGregor five-iron, popped off the worn black rubber from the useless end, refastened it to the jagged top of my new club, and led me out to my backyard in Canton, Mich. to smack my first golf ball. The second those Top Flite dimples whisked into the high grass behind our house, I was hooked for life.

I practiced putting with my Papa's trusty old 10-iron on his muddy orange carpet every time we visited them in Oregon. The ball would roll into a tiny blue cup time after time again, each plop of the ball hitting the plastic producing a cheery "Oh!" from my proud grandmother. I spent hours putting on that carpet as a hopeful young 10-year-old and begged Papa for daily trips to the driving range downtown.

My parents have spent thousands of dollars on me for golf clubs, golf balls and greens fees. I've played in rain, snow, wind, hail, and sun. I remember putts like the 60-foot miracle that curved and dropped for birdie on No. 2 at North Conway Country Club; I remember shots like the 135-yard pitching wedge on No. 9 that bounced once on the green and sunk in for a birdie 3 and a front-nine 39; I remember my best score (72) and my worst (119); I remember mornings golfing across Ireland and Scotland with my dad and rainy afternoon rounds with my grandparents in Oregon.

You pick a year in my life, and I can tell you where I was golfing and how well I was playing. I am a golfer. And, in line with every young golfer of this generation, I loved Tiger Woods.

I had a poster of Tiger in my room. I went through a period where I would hit, wear and play with nothing but Nike equipment. I wore my "I am Tiger Woods" t-shirt so much as a pre-teen that it nearly disintegrated. I watched Tiger win and sulked when Tiger lost. I admired every stroke, every putt, every fist pump. Tiger was my golf hero.

And guess what? He still is.

Tiger will tee it up on Thursday for the most prestigious tournament in golf: The Masters at Augusta National. It's his first tournament in 144 days, since he declared an indefinite leave from golf to fix marital troubles stemming from infidelities to his wife, Elin. It's the media storm of the year. The best player in golf history, in sports history, is nothing more than your everyday, professional sleazeball.

Many fans feel betrayed. They feel angry, let down, disappointed, and appalled. Not me. I hold Tiger in the same regard as I once did.

Why? He's an athlete. I look up to him for his unmatched talent in golf. What he does in his personal life is none of my business.

If I want lessons on strong disposition, I remember afternoons with my late grandfathers, who served proudly in World War II and the Korean War. If my moral compass needs direction, I talk to my parents: successful, smart and happily married for 25 years. I have a collection of relatives, friends, coworkers, coaches, and teachers from

my past who have all shown me virtuous traits in different forms.

With the support system around me, why would I hold the character of a professional athlete with much regard, given the incredible track record of failures?

Sure, there are athletes that give as much of their hearts off the field as they do on, but those stories don't make headlines on page one. That space is reserved for the seemingly endless list of rapists, liars, womanizers, and drug abusers. Criminal acts of athletes point out the fatal flaw in our media-crazed environment: we worship these men and women and expect them to soar above standards that no one can possibly fulfill. And when they inevitably fail, the world ignites in fury.

Tiger Woods' legacy as a man is tarnished but his reign over the golf world remains strongly intact. And when Tiger plants a wooden tee in the firm Augusta ground, locks his chiseled hands gently around his Tour Velvet grip and fires a dimpled Nike swoosh into the dazzling green distance, I'll be the same pre-teen adolescent I once was: wishing that for just one day on the golf course I could say, "I am Tiger Woods."

Cameron Kittle
Executive Editor