

SPORTS

Tiger now hunting for golfing's grand slam

PEBBLE BEACH, Calif. (AP) — The next stop on Tiger Woods' record-breaking run into history takes him to the home of golf.

Woods will be an even bigger favorite next month in the British Open at St. Andrews, where he will try to complete the career Grand Slam in only his fourth year of professional golf, one fewer than it took Jack Nicklaus.

That should be the least of anyone's worries.

After his historic performance at Pebble Beach, where he won the 100th U.S. Open by shattering records set more than 100 years ago, Woods was concerned more with how much he can improve than how much he already has accomplished.

"We all play golf, we all have a bug," Woods said. "We're all trying to get better somehow. I'm going to continue to work on my whole game."

The record will reflect that Ernie Els and Miguel Angel Jimenez tied for second in the U.S. Open. It should also carry a footnote to explain that the 15-stroke margin is not a typo.

Only four times has a player won a major championship by at least 12 strokes — Old Tom Morris in 1862, Young Tom Morris in

1870, and Woods twice in the last three years.

And remember, he is a work in progress.

"What do we have to do to get to him? Hit everything you can, and then hope for the best," Els said. "Who knows what he's going to do from here?"

Woods tied the U.S. Open scoring record of 272, set at par-70 Baltusrol by Nicklaus in 1980 and Lee Janzen in 1993. Woods shattered the record in relation to par, 12 under, in a tournament where no one else came close to matching par.

That sums up Woods. Right now, no one is close.

And while Woods goes after the career Grand Slam, everyone else must be wondering how many scraps he will leave for them.

Els won his second U.S. Open title in 1997 when he was 27. This week must have aged him significantly.

"You want those four. That's my goal in life, to win four of them, at least once," Els said. "But with Tiger Woods to contend with, I've got a pretty tough job ahead of me for the next 10 years at least."

What does that mean for everyone else?

They insist Woods is good for



TIGER WOODS

the game because he has raised the sport to unprecedented levels of popularity. Television ratings are soaring, and as a result, so is the prize money from a lucrative TV contract up for renewal next year.

What that does for their psyche is another matter.

"It's kind of like Texas in the old Southwest Conference," said former Longhorn Tom Kite. "You knew who was going to win before the game. It's certainly fun when you're

pulling for Texas, but it's not real exciting for everybody else."

Even with a 15-stroke victory, which broke the record for largest winning margin in a major set by Old Tom Morris in the 1862 British Open, Woods managed to provide a few thrills.

He birdied four of the first five holes on the back nine at Pebble Beach and twice saved par, once with a 15-footer on No. 16 and by nearly holing a bunker shot from the 17th. And along the way, he made more putts that mattered than anyone else.

"When he's putting the way he was this week, he's totally unbeatable," John Huston said.

Woods was so true with the putter than he never made worse than par over his first 22 holes and his last 26. "Whoever beats him has to play their best," Fred Couples said.

The victory was similar to three years ago at Augusta National, when Woods became the youngest Masters champion by finishing a record 12 strokes ahead of the field.

Back then, Woods also talked about improving. To show how serious he was, Woods slowly revamped his entire swing and raised his game to a level of dominance not seen in more than 50 years.

He has won 14 of his last 25

tournaments worldwide dating to last May, when all the swing changes finally felt comfortable. In five majors during that same stretch, he has won twice and finished no worse than a tie for seventh.

How long can he keep this up?

"It's not necessarily keeping your competitive fire," Woods said. "It's just sometimes you're going to go through streaks where you're not going to play well. Hopefully, you can get through those periods of not playing well quickly."

That hasn't been a problem. He has finished outside the top 10 just twice in his last 26 tournaments. When he's on his game, the question is not whether Woods will win, but by how many. Just two weeks ago, he won by five strokes over Els and Leonard at the Memorial.

Next up is the Western Open, a tournament he has won two of the past three years, then a journey to the Old Course at St. Andrews, where more history awaits.

Els has finished runner-up to Woods five times, more than anybody, but still relishes the challenge of meeting him again.

"I know St. Andrews pretty well, like Tiger knows this place," he said before departing Pebble Beach. "But I'll have to play out of my mind."

Isiah Thomas might get Pacers job

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The Indiana Pacers are expected to move quickly to name a new coach, and Isiah Thomas reportedly is the leading candidate to succeed Larry Bird.

The 116-111 loss to the Los Angeles Lakers Monday night eliminated the Pacers from the NBA Finals and ended the coaching career of Bird, who said all along this would be his final season with Indiana.

Speculation focused immediately on Thomas, a popular player who led Indiana University to the 1981 NCAA championship and was a 12-time NBA All-Star and Hall of Fame player with the Detroit Pistons.

When Thomas stopped playing, he became part owner and general manager of the Toronto Raptors. Last year, he bought the Continental Basketball Association for \$10 million, and he would have to sell the league if he were to become a coach in the NBA.

"There's a perceived conflict of interest, and like any other businessman you will resolve that conflict when it's there," Thomas said during the NBA Finals, in which he worked as an analyst for NBC.

"There are millions of conflicts in businesses, and people sit down at the table and they resolve those conflicts. If that time came, I will resolve the conflict, whatever that conflict may be."

Monday night, after the Pacers' loss to the Lakers, NBC analyst Peter Vecsey reported Thomas would be hired as the Pacers coach, although he did not say when an announcement would be made.

Thomas refused to confirm the NBC report but thanked his NBC studio cohorts for working with him.

Also contenders for the job were Byron

Scott, a former Pacers player who is now an assistant with Sacramento, and Rick Carlisle, a former Boston teammate of Bird and current Pacers assistant.

Sacramento, which originally gave Indiana until June 1 to talk with Scott, extended the deadline while the Pacers were in the playoffs.

"All of us as candidates have said, while the Pacers are in the heat of a championship run, we all have to respect the position they're in, whether it be Byron Scott, Rick Carlisle, myself or whoever the other candidates are," Thomas said last week.

He would not be more specific about the likelihood he would become the coach.

"I don't care if you ask it a different way, that way or around the corner, you're still going to get the same answer," he said.

He again was noncommittal Monday night.

Thomas, who was inducted into the Hall of Fame this year, led the Pistons to NBA titles in 1989 and 1990. A 6-foot-1 guard, he made the NBA All-Star team in 12 of 13 seasons and in 1996 the NBA honored him as one of its 50 greatest players ever.

He averaged 19.2 points and 9.3 assists for his career, both Pistons records, and is fourth in assists and ninth in steals in the NBA.

Bird has had a standing offer from team president Donnie Walsh to move into the Pacers' front office as director of basketball operations.

He said Monday night, however, that he was leaning toward retiring completely and returning to his home in Florida.

Bird was expected to meet with Walsh this week, and his decision could affect the choice of coach.



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