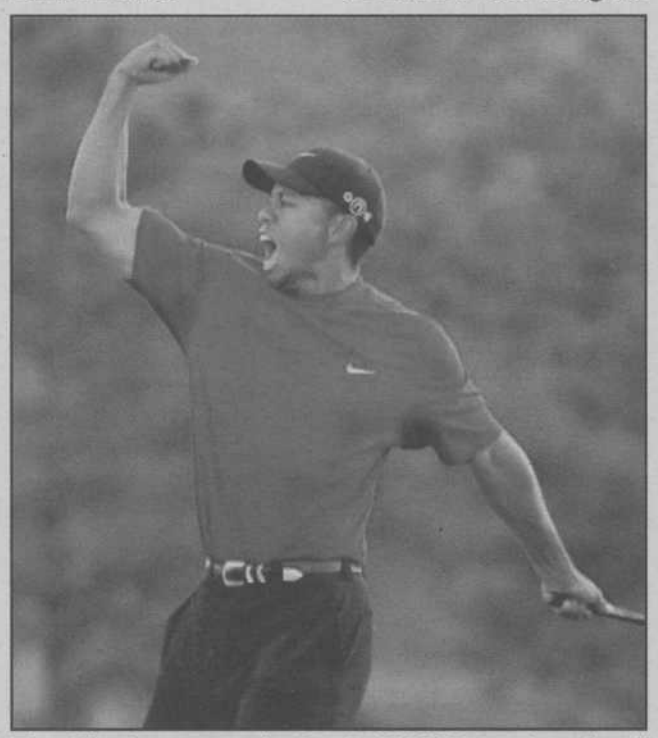
Woods claims Masters in dramatic fashion

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — Tiger Woods is the Masters champion once again, turning back a surprising challenge Sunday with a shot of sheer magic and a birdie putt to win a playoff he never expected.

A spectacular finish of birdies and bogeys finally ended when Woods produced the most important shot of all — a 15-foot birdie putt on the first extra hole to capture his fourth green jacket and finally put away the gritty Chris DiMarco.



Tiger Woods reacts to winning the 2005 Masters in a playoff with Chris DiMarco on the 18th hole during final-round play of the tournament at the Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Ga., on Sunday. It's his fourth Masters' title.

Woods knew it was over when the ball was a foot from the hole, taking two steps to the left as a smile creased his face and his right fist punched the air with fury.

Everything else about this Masters was up in the air to the very end.

First came the most improbable birdie on the par-3 16th, when Woods skipped his chip shot up the slope and watched it crawl 25 feet down to the cup, where it paused for 2 full seconds before dropping.

"I would rank that as one of the best ones I've ever hit," Woods said. "It turned things around. It was pretty huge."

Then came an even bigger surprise. The greatest closer in golf, who had never lost a third-round lead in a major, looked like a first-timer at Augusta National, making a mess out of the last two holes to finish with two bogeys and allow DiMarco one more chance.

Woods made sure that was all he got.

DiMarco came up short of the green, just as he had in regulation, and chipped up for a tap-in par. He took his hat off and ran his hand through his hair, crouched and kept looking up at Woods and down at his feet, afraid to watch, perhaps knowing what was about to happen.

When the ball disappeared, DiMarco walked slowly over to Woods and congratulated him.

Woods closed with a 1-under 71 and won for the second time in a playoff at a major, wrapping up a long and bizarre week at Augusta National that included two rain delays, an eagle putt that Woods rolled off the green and into the creek, a record run of birdies to get back into the contention and, finally, the fight of his life.

It showed at the closing ceremony, where he cried while dedicating this Masters victory to his father, who was too ill to leave his hotel room.

"Every year that I've been lucky enough to win this tournament, my dad's been there to give me a big hug. And today, he wasn't there," Woods said, his voice cracking and his eyes filling with tears. "I can't wait to get home and see him, and give him a big bear hug."

Woods never needed so many heroics to win his previous three Masters.

DiMarco was responsible for that.

"This was one fun victory, but also a lot of work because I was playing with one heck of a competitor," Woods said. "Chris has got no backoff in him. He'll come at you ... and that's what he did today. He put up a heck of a fight."

Woods emerged from this battle with his ninth major, tied with Ben Hogan and Gary Player, halfway home to the standard set by Jack Nicklaus. He joined Nicklaus (six) and Arnold Palmer (four) as the only players with at least four Masters titles.

Still, this didn't look like the same player who won his first eight majors.

At times Woods was simply brilliant, especially when he made up a four-shot deficit in just two holes when the third round resumed Sunday morning. He tied a Masters record with seven straight birdies on his way to a 65, giving him a three-shot lead going into the final round.

But he made the kind of mistakes rarely seen from Woods in the final round of a major — a three-putt on the fifth hole from about 25 feet, a poor bunker shot on the 13th. All of them raising DiMarco's hopes.

"Anytime you can make him hiccup a little bit, you know you're doing something right," DiMarco said.

Ultimately, all that mattered to Woods was having defending champion Phil Mickelson slip the green jacket over his shoulders in the Butler Cabin, and being a major champion again for the first time in nearly three years.

For DiMarco, it was the second straight year he saw the winning putt on the 18th hole at Augusta National. He played with Mickelson in the final group when Lefty rolled in an 18-footer from about the same spot as Woods.

His consolation was a 4-under 68, and a steely performance that kept fans on edge to the end.

"I was ready to win," DiMarco said. "I will be ready to win next year. I certainly feel like I can."

Both players finished at 12-under 276.

Woods won for the third time this year and returned to No. 1 in the world ranking, silencing critics. For now.

"I hope we put on a good show for all of you," Woods told the assembled crowd.

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