

Tiger, Joe and Jack

As Tiger Woods seeks to change his public image, he can learn lessons from two legendary athletes



BOB LATHAM

The return of the world's number one golfer and estranged husband (the latter title having more contenders than the former), freshly back to pro golf from sex rehab, certainly provided the leading story line to this year's Masters. I, like many, tuned in to see how Tiger 2.0 would differ from the original version. I certainly did not see any difference in temperament, as Tiger Woods struggled at times to find his rhythm (insert your own joke here).

It was hard to resist considering, once the tournament was over and Woods had finished fourth, whether his domestic relations affected his emotions on the course. I don't have the answer. Nor do I know what they teach in sex rehab. However, I do know this: As Tiger Woods tries to find his way forward, there are two available examples, one positive and one negative, he might consider to see how his life could end up.

The positive example is provided by the man Woods is chasing in Don Quixote-like fashion for the all-time record of major championships: Jack Nicklaus. Nicklaus has six green jackets to Woods' four, and 18 major championships to Woods' 14. Nicklaus also had and has one of the most extraordinary relationships and devotion to family of any professional athlete of his stature.

From all public accounts, Barbara Nicklaus was part of a true team with her husband during his pro career. Nicklaus would schedule golf tournaments around his family life, not the other way around. Was his success due in part to the fact that he married the girl from Clintonville, Ohio, he met during his first week at Ohio State University, and not the supermodel or starlet du jour? Hale Irwin certainly believed so when he said of Barbara Nicklaus, "Behind every good man is a better woman." That adage, however, is being tested in a time when sports, celebrity and entertainment get mixed together. The assumption is that once you reach a certain degree of prowess in professional sports, your spouse should be somebody who has achieved equal status in the acting, modeling, reality-show category. The new adage seems to be, "Behind every great athlete is a Kardashian sister."

Now for the cautionary tale. There once was another athlete, the marquee athlete of his generation, who married a

glamorous blonde star and who, for all appearances, had everything going for him. In fact, Joe DiMaggio's 1954 marriage to Marilyn Monroe may have set the bar for modern-day athletes' personal aspirations. Even though the union lasted only nine months and was dissolved amid allegations of maltreatment by DiMaggio, it is still glamorized today.

The parallels between DiMaggio and Woods are striking. Consider this description of DiMaggio by Richard Ben Cramer in his definitive biography, "Joe DiMaggio: The Hero's Life," published in 2000: "He was revered for his mystery. We cheered him for never giving himself entirely to us." Like the pre-November 2009 version of Woods, DiMaggio

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had a carefully cultivated public image during his playing career and spent his post-playing days as the keeper of his own legacy. As Cramer noted: "The coverage of DiMaggio over sixty-five years was mostly flat because Joe would show nothing but a shiny surface of his own devising" and would

excommunicate anyone from his inner circle who would deign to reveal details of his life. Sound familiar?

To his dying day, DiMaggio was trying to find endorsement deals wherever he could—a path Tiger may be headed down if that creepy new Nike commercial is any indication. DiMaggio died a lonely death, with no supermodel, no star—aging or young—by his side, only a collection of carefully packaged memories.

Jack Nicklaus, by contrast, appears to be a fulfilled man. His extended family is close to him, and he and Barbara will celebrate their 50th anniversary this summer. There may be a lesson in that for Tiger Woods and for all professional athletes. After reading Cramer's book, I couldn't help but rethink one of Paul Simon's most inspired lyrics from the 1960s: "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you." In the case of DiMaggio and Woods—unless he gets his act together soon—the nation could do better focusing on a role model more like Nicklaus. ■

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