

A distracted Tiger gives opening to Lefty

MAY 5, 2010 - 11:02PM

Woods' personal distractions will allow Mickelson to claim number-one spot

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On April 8 — after a 144-day layoff — Tiger Woods returned to competitive golf at The Masters Tournament as the top ranked player in the game. However, as Woods left the hallowed grounds of Augusta National, whispers began to swirl that Phil Mickelson might soon usurp the number one world ranking.

Amid the azaleas and Georgia pines that tower over Augusta National Golf Club, Mickelson found his groove thanks to back-to-back eagles on the 13th and 14th holes of Saturday's third round, holding off Woods and a host of other elite players to capture his third green jacket.

With Woods beginning the 2010 PGA Tour season outside the ropes, it was hypothesized that Mickelson would take advantage of Tiger's absence by dominating the West Coast Swing. Woods' sabbatical also gave Lefty a golden opportunity to inch closer to being ranked first.

Despite these rumblings, Mickelson failed to take advantage of the early season opportunities and recorded only one top-10 finish prior to his masterful triumph at the season's first major championship. Only then did those rumblings return.

Lefty, like Tiger, had been dealing with his own personal difficulties. Nearly a year ago, Mickelson's wife Amy was diagnosed with breast cancer, as was his mother Mary Mickelson. Although the past 13 months have been tough for Phil and his family, Masters week was extremely special because for the first time since the 2009 Players Championship, the entire Mickelson family was together

at a PGA Tour event. It must have recharged him emotionally knowing that Amy and the kids were waiting at their rental home after each day of preparation.

Tiger's family, however, was away in Sweden while he competed at the Masters. How much that weighed on his performance at Augusta National remains uncertain, but after he finished tied for fourth at The Masters, the majority of the golf community viewed Tiger's return to the Tour as a success.

Nonetheless, watching him plod his way around Augusta National, it was evident that elements of his game were rusty. While it is difficult to determine if the Tiger's off-course debacle had affected his game — Tiger is known for his invariable demeanor on the course — it is clear that he just didn't play to the level that was expected, while Mickelson's off-course difficulties have served as a motivating factor to become a better golfer and family man.

At Augusta National it was obvious that Tiger was fighting both his swing and his inner demons. This was particularly evident in his next start at the Quail Hollow Championship. Hitting only six fairways in two days, Woods missed his first cut in a non-major tournament since October 2005. His two-day total of 153 was the highest 36-hole total he has ever scored as a professional. It is apparent that Tiger is struggling with his confidence and is having a tough time coming to terms with his personal struggles.

Lefty has crept close enough to Tiger's hold on the top ranking that a win this weekend at the Players Championship, combined with Tiger Woods finishing outside of the top five in the tournament, Mickelson would claim the title of best player on the planet for the first time in his career.

Even if it doesn't happen this weekend at the Players, it is inevitable that Woods will be supplanted by Mickelson as the world's number one sometime this season.

The dynamics of the PGA Tour have shifted in part because of how the sport's two greatest players have been able to deal with off-course issues. While Tiger continues to struggle to find his game, Mickelson's consistent play and ability to reconcile his off- course distractions this season will be rewarded and he will be able to place World's Best on his resume.