

CASE STUDY: Tiger Woods

"Achieving Peak Performance: Taking High Performance to the Next Level"

Originally published in the March 2002 Issue of Link & Learn.

The following case study, developed by Linkage, Inc., portrays Tiger Woods as a best practice example of achieving peak performance - taking high performance to the next level. This case study may be utilized as an individual or group exercise. Following the case study, you will find questions for thought/discussion. If this case study is employed as a group exercise, the group facilitator should assign teams or individuals to a focus area for discussion following the reading of the case study. As individuals read the case, these focus questions should be kept in mind.

"The driving force in my life is to get my game at a level where I'll be able to compete in each and every tournament I tee up in, for the rest of my life."

- Tiger Woods

Creating Tiger Woods

Tiger Woods is considered the single most dominant athlete in any sport and arguably (apologies to Michael Jordan!) the most recognizable athlete in the world. Woods did not stumble accidentally upon such fame and power. On the contrary, his entire life has been spent in preparation for record-breaking victories on the golf course. When Woods was 13, he researched and memorized golf-legend Jack Nicklaus' main competitive accomplishments - he already intended to exceed them. Enormous success followed Woods through six straight U.S. Amateur Championships and U.S. Golf Association Titles. When he had exhausted the possibilities of collegiate-level golf at Stanford University, Tiger made the decision to turn pro in 1996. Earl Woods, Tiger's father, had his son practice alongside him from an early age; but his most important role was that of cheerleader. Earl built a high floor under Tiger's self-confidence with consistent encouragement, assuring him that he had been chosen for great things. The spiritual teachings of Kutilda (his mother) were a key contribution to Tiger's sense of inner peace during competition. In a 1996 issue of Sports Illustrated, Tiger commented, "I like Buddhism because it's a whole way of being and living. It's based on discipline, respect, and personal responsibility."

Tiger's impact on the professional world of golf was immediate. He turned pro in August of 1996 and immediately signed endorsement deals worth \$40 million from Nike and \$20 million from Titleist. He won two of the eight tournaments in which he competed that fall. However, he fell into an undistinguished set of performances for the winter/spring 1996-97 season that placed him at the bottom of the PGA Tour. Then, in his first attempt as a pro at the famed Master's Tournament in 1997, Tiger blew away his closest competitor by 14 strokes and walked away with an unprecedented 18 under par victory. The entire golfing world was completely aghast; the margin was unheard of, the victor was 20 years old, and the new holder of the coveted green jacket was, for the first-time, of Asian and African descent. Nothing like this had ever happened before in this tradition-steeped game.

This enormous win resulted in new levels of fame for Tiger and a gust of fresh air for the staling sport. Immediately after the tournament, Tiger jumped on a plane to attend openings for two new All-Star Cafes. He sat for interviews with famed American celebrity interviewers, Oprah Winfrey and Barbara Walters, among others. Tiger signed endorsement contracts for staggering amounts of money with American Express and Rolex, among others, and skyrocketed into the slot of 5th highest paid athlete endorser. His agent, Hughes Norton of International Management Group (IMG), was completely besieged with requests for all over the world.

Neither was Team Tiger immune from the public eye. Tiger's caddy, Fluff Cowen, was as much a celebrity as Tiger. Brash and outspoken, Fluff never turned down a request for his insights.

Tiger's father interviewed with many people and promoted his book, *Raising a Tiger*. Even Norton, his agent, was often quoted on TV and in print. Anyone who knew anything about Tiger was making money off of him.

A Time of Transition

"Nobody ever remembers who finished second at anything."

- Jack Nicklaus, 1960 U.S. Open

Not long after his world-renowned victory, and amidst the whirlwind of fame, Tiger called a meeting of his team. He had reviewed Golf Digest's swing sequence photography, considering his swing "almost perfect" yet deciding that his game required a major overhaul. Dissatisfied with his swing, he realized that he would not only have to make changes to his game, but to his mental approach as well. He also recognized that his style of emotion-based play was not going to carry him through to the realization of his single goal - to win more major golf tournaments than anyone ever before. As Mark Soltau of CBS Sports commented, "When he is on, he's unbeatable. When he is not on, he's vulnerable just like any other player."

These vulnerabilities prompted Tiger to make some tough decisions. People had already called him the best golfer in the world. The members of Team Tiger were basking in the glory of what they had helped create. Yet Tiger knew that his skills were not yet so superior that he was in the best position to win every tournament he teed up in. He also recognized that the demands of his celebrity status were distracting him from the practice he needed.

"No one becomes the best in the world in any competitive field without harboring a certain level of inward ruthlessness."

- David Owen, *The Chosen One*

The Reconstruction

In September 1997, Tiger enlisted a new coach, Butch Harmon. Harmon brought with him a coaching team with varied and novel experiences and expertise - specialists on strategy, short game, putting, and course management. A video specialist contributed to the new Team Tiger by taping all of Tiger's tournaments and practice sessions to ensure consistently high quality, and assembling a video library of all known video records of champions playing golf on the courses where Tiger would be likely to play. These recordings were then analyzed for strategy and course management suggestions.

Harmon and his team worked with Tiger for more than a year to break down all the mechanics of his swing and completely rebuild it. This process included countless hours of tedious drills and practice shots. They started all over, asking, "What do we need to do to change this?" They focused on aligning and synchronizing his upper and lower body. During this transition time, Tiger's game suffered. The media and public began to wonder what had happened - the young star's playing seemed to worsen as time went on. Even more distressing, there was a growing consensus that Tiger's earlier victories could be chalked up to luck.

Tiger's slump in the 1998 season (he won just one official PGA event and finished fourth on the PGA Tour money list) brought negative press and diminishing support. He was labeled a disappointment. Yet he felt positive, believing that he was making the kind of long-term investment required to seriously challenge the legacy of Nicklaus. His comments during this period reflected his sense of growth and improvement: "I think my ball flight's improved. I'm able to play in conditions I've never been able to play before."

In 1999 Tiger's game began to improve dramatically. He was driving with increased control, his iron play was crisper, and his putting and sand saves were more consistent. With the help of a new nutritionist and personal trainer, Tiger added 20 pounds of muscle to his lean frame in order

to increase his power on the course. Despite innumerable queries, Tiger kept all aspects of his weight training and fitness routines top-secret. When all was said and done, this work took 10 yards off his distance, but upped his accuracy incredibly. He reintegrated some of the fundamentals from his childhood practice. It seemed to be only a matter of time before it all started coming together for him. He had achieved balance not only in his golf game but also in his disposition. Physically and emotionally he appeared in control of his game and his temper.

Beyond golf techniques and temperament, Tiger initiated other changes as well. Earl Woods had been an extremely influential factor in many aspects of his son's life and career. In a strong move for independence, Tiger broke from his father's coaching and began making all of his own decisions pertaining to his game and business. Next, Tiger replaced his agent with Mark Steinberg, also of IMG. Finally, he ousted larger-than-life caddy Fluff Cowen in favor of one of his friends. These new people on Team Tiger maintained a low profile and were much more reluctant to speak to the press. Tiger announced the end of his weekly press conferences and pared down his public appearances. All of these moves indicated that Tiger was making an attempt to remove distractions in order to focus the necessary attention on his game.

The changes clearly paid off; in 1999, Tiger recorded 16 top-ten finishes in 21 PGA Tour starts and made the cut in all 21. He recorded eight PGA victories overall, including the final four official tournaments of the year and was voted PGA Player of the Year and AP Male Athlete of the Year. He earned a record \$6.6 million in PGA Tour winnings alone, nearly double the second-leading money-winner, David Duval, who earned \$3.6 million.

The New Tiger

"For most of his professional career, Woods has been at or near the top of the ranking in a statistical category that the PGA Tour calls, "bounce back," which is a measure of how likely a player is to make a birdie or better immediately after making a bogie or worse - an indication of the player's resilience and ability to refocus following a disappointment. Woods "bounces back" roughly a third of the time, a remarkable achievement."

- David Owen, *The Chosen One*

"What was important was history and the chasing of a record."

- Tim Rosaforte, *Raising the Bar: The Championship Years of Tiger Woods*

The end of the 1999 season was all about Tiger wanting to continue improving. He didn't want to lose his momentum, his edge. Harmon said, "Tiger doesn't sit on what he's done." Tiger's turnaround on the greens is largely attributed to Harmon, who after months of coaching concluded that Tiger had too many technical thoughts running through his head which had taken the feel out of his stroke. Harmon told him, "...just go putt, and putt like you did when you were a kid. Get your motion back." Rosaforte adds, "He was not afraid of taking it deeper, of pushing himself...there was too much fun in being the Michael Jordan of golf, dealing with the pressure on a week-to-week basis better than anybody else had ever dealt with it."

Fellow golfers commented on the "new" Tiger before anyone else. Not only was his game steadily improving, he was much less volatile on the course and friendlier with his peers. Yet, his occasional explosive intensity provides an insight into his competitive mind - Woods plays each shot as though it were the most important. In Tiger's words, "The game's still elusive...is it easier? I'm not putting myself in the trouble that I used to because my swing has improved...You start to put yourself in situations where you're not in the same old predicaments."

In the 2000 season, Tiger put it all together. At the age of 24, he had arguably the greatest single year ever in the history of golf, as he set or tied 27 PGA tour records and clearly placed himself among the game's greatest ever. He opened the year with his fifth and sixth consecutive PGA Tour victories (the longest streak since Ben Hogan in 1948). He won the U.S. Open by 15 strokes, the largest margin of victory ever recorded at a major tournament, and became the

Tiger's all-time career money leader. At the British Open, he became just the fifth player in history to complete the career Grand Slam with a 19-under 269, the best score ever at St. Andrews. He joined Ben Hogan (1953) as the only two players to win three majors in one season. As Tim Rosaforte noted, "in the millennium season, Woods played golf year-round with the passion of a football or basketball player in the playoffs."

The winning continued; in April 2001, Tiger won the Masters again, becoming the first golfer ever to be reigning champion of all four majors simultaneously. He had five tour victories that year, nine top-ten finishes, and was in the money on all 19 tournaments he entered.

Time will tell just how long Tiger Woods can dominate his sport. As golf-great Tom Watson commented, "He has raised the bar to a level only he can jump. He is something supernatural." Yet Watson and others risk missing the point with words like "supernatural." Surely, Tiger has unusual gifts, as his early years make clear. But a closer look at his story, especially in the critical years of 1997-1998, reveals many other factors and ingredients beyond god-given gifts that have allowed him to achieve peak performance.

DISCUSSION/THOUGHT QUESTIONS

Focus Area One: The Leader Within (Personal Development)

1. What key values guide Tiger Woods as a professional?
2. What is his leadership point of view? What leadership message is he communicating?
3. What lessons does Tiger's case study hold for you in achieving peak performance?

Focus Area Two: Leading Change (Change Leadership)

1. Do you consider the Tiger Woods story a case of incremental change or transformational change? Why?
2. What criteria did he establish to measure success?
3. Construct a change process model based on the case. Identify the steps or stages involved.
4. What lessons does this case study hold for leadership in the midst of change?

Focus Area Three: Leading Teams (Team Leadership)

1. What were the strengths and weaknesses of Team Tiger?
2. In assuming the mantle of a leader, what team/organizational issues did Tiger wrestle with?
3. What specific steps did Tiger take to build a more successful team/organization around him?
4. What lessons does this case study hold for team leadership?

Focus Area Four: Driving Quality (Performance Improvement or Continued Leadership Development)

1. Compare the "new and improved" Tiger to the old Tiger. What operational changes did he make to improve the quality of an "almost perfect swing."
2. Everyone saw that Tiger was enormously successful. What drove his personal sense of urgency for improved quality?
3. What lessons does this case study hold for leading quality initiatives?

Quotes in the Tiger Woods Case Study are taken from several print sources including:

The Chosen One. Owen, David; Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001.

Raising the Bar: The Championship Years of Tiger Woods. Rosaforte, Tim; St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000.