

Tiger Woods and the Game of Life

Golf is all about how you react when you get a bad bounce.

By Thomas L. Friedman
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Although my day job is writing the foreign affairs column for The New York Times — more Persian Gulf than fairway golf — thinking about golf and playing as often as I can is my all-consuming hobby. So like millions of others, I was awed by Tiger Woods's comeback for the ages by his winning the Masters at 43 years old. What can be learned from it?

It's hard for nongolfers to appreciate the scope of Tiger's physical and psychological achievement, after he went through four back surgeries and the global tabloid exposure of his industrial-scale marital cheating.

If I think of the news I normally cover, it would be as if Bill Clinton came back and defeated Donald Trump for president in 2020. Or, in technology, it's the equivalent of Steve Jobs founding Apple, losing Apple and then coming back and winning all four "technology majors" — the Apple desktop, laptop, iPhone and iPad — with a reborn Apple.

The biggest takeaway for me is the reminder of the truism that golf is the sport most like life, because it is played on an uneven surface and everything is on you. So good and bad bounces — and self-inflicted mistakes — are built into the game. And so much of success in golf, as in life, is about how you react to those good and bad bounces. Do you quit? Do you throw your club? Do you cheat? Do you whine? Do you blame your caddie?

Or do you say what the greatest golfers say when a bounce turns against them or their ball ends in a divot in the middle of the fairway and only a great shot will get them back into the hole? They all say to their caddie the same two words: "Watch this." And then they pull off a remarkable shot that winds through the trees, over the hill and past the sand trap, avoids the pond on the left and lands right in the middle of the putting green — which is exactly the shot Tiger hit on the 11th hole out of the trees at Augusta National on Sunday.

To do that under pressure is stunning, but it is not just luck or even pure physical attributes. It is about practice — hours and hours and hours. Gary Player liked to say, "The more I practice the luckier I get." And that is where, for me, the meaning of Tiger's comeback begins: his willingness to commit to endless hours of physical rehabilitation and then endless hours of practice. How many of us have that iron will? But the physical part is the least of it.

Last year I wrote the foreword to a golf instruction book by my teacher, in which I argued that what makes golf so difficult — but also so satisfying when you get it right — is that you have to combine four things: physics, geometry, geography and psychology. Tiger's genius on Sunday, and so often throughout his career, is his ability to master all four better than anyone else.

How so? Well, every golf swing always starts with a geography quiz: How far away is that target and how is it set in the landscape? Is it elevated? Is it on a ledge? Is it in a bowl? Is it by an ocean cliff, a stream or a pond?

Then comes the geometry lesson: At what angle and speed do I have to launch this little white ball to match, or take advantage of, this geography and get as close as possible to the hole, taking into account the wind and temperature and landscape as well?

Then comes the physics lesson: How do I move my arms and legs and shift my weight — and at what speed, torque, size of backswing, ball position and swing finish — to ensure that my little white ball solves this geography-geometry riddle and lands as close as possible to my target?

And, finally, what emotional and psychological mind-set do I need to increase the odds that my body and arms will move into the ideal launch positions — to achieve the geography-geometry solution that I've designed in my head. As any golfer will tell you, there is no greater buzz in the world than solving that puzzle with your body and watching your golf ball soar toward its intended target with the perfect geometry against the backdrop of some stunning geography.

Tiger did that several times Sunday, and you could feel the buzz, and none more intensely than on Augusta National's perilous 16th hole, where he launched his ball on the perfect arc over the water, softly curbing right to left with the terrain and then landing in the precise two-foot-diameter circle so that it would then roll 20 feet down the slope and stop 15 inches below the hole. Geography, geometry, physics and psychology all working in perfect unison.

You cannot overestimate the psychological aspect of that shot. Golf is such a head game, and if you are distracted by something, you'll never put the geography, geometry and physics together at the level needed to win in professional golf. That's why Tiger's game deteriorated so far after his infidelities had been broadcast all over the world in 2009, and even before his back gave out. You could actually see it when Tiger walked through a golf gallery back then. His eye never wanted to meet those of his fans, because he knew that they knew that he knew that they knew that he'd been a first-class jerk.

What was in his head translated into his hands, and it translated into his scores. For the better part of a decade, he could not win a major until his back was healed and he got the monkey of his own misdeeds off his back — by becoming a good father and a better person to his fans and his fellow golfers. You could see him looking everyone in the eye in the last couple of years, and it finally unlocked his fan base. It gave them permission to

root for him again, full-throated, despite all the ways he'd disappointed them. And that clearly unlocked his mind, and I am sure his body, too, so he could swing freely again.

And that leads to another way that golf is so much like life. Each and every round is a journey, and, like all of life's journeys, it's never a straight line. It's always full of crazy bounces, self-inflicted mistakes and unexpected detours, and therefore always a journey of discovery about yourself and your playing partners. And, if you love the game, it's an everlasting journey in search of self-improvement — always trying to get your geography, geometry, physics and psychology in perfect alignment.

And when you see it done at the highest level, on the toughest terrain, under the most intense spotlight by someone who had it, lost it and then got it back, you can only say: "What a privilege! I saw Tiger make his comeback and win the Masters at age 43. What a crazy, wonderful, amazing journey!"