



BY
ROHIT BRIJNATH

DID YOU MISS THE MAN IN RED?

No chance. No way. Not for a single pitiful second did I miss Tiger Woods at the Masters. He's old news, a has-been, a balding father who sends out pathetic tweets from the Masters that say "Pretty cool that at dinner tonight 3 of us sitting next to each other have won a combined 14 Green Jackets". Who cares about him? Apart from the minor fact that I watched the practice swing he tweeted 246 times, but then that's just journalistic curiosity.

I tried not to miss Woods at the Masters but for the minor fact that no one can talk about golf for seven straight minutes without mentioning his name.

Talk Jordan Spieth's putting and everyone remember Woods. Consider Bernhard Langer's age and people say there's hope for Woods. See any kid who makes three straight birdies and commentators start drooling about The Next, New and Nicer Tiger.

Discuss the length of the Augusta course and you end up discussing Tiger-proofing. Reflect on the fitness of McIlroy, Fowler, Johnson, Day, Scott – all a long-run away from the Heineken-toned physiques of Kenny Perry and Mark O'Meara – and you think of Woods.

You talk Steve Williams... actually, let's not.

Even on the radio in the US – I only heard this later – they were still talking about Tiger's women and karma. Yes, Woods was an idiot, a jerk, a low-life. But beating up a guy with the same club is just plain dull.

I did not miss Tiger Woods at the Masters because it's 2016 and he's 40, which coincidentally is how much he shot on the front nine of the first round of the 1997 Masters. I did not miss him except to con-

sider that I wasn't getting up every morning at 3am in Singapore to watch the tournament like I did when he was around. Jason Day's game has a powerful music, but Woods was Wagner and who slept when he played?

I did not miss Woods except briefly at the first tee which was when golf used to go gaga at his sight. This wasn't just about popularity, it was about progress. As a sport, golf has been uniquely and unabashedly backward in its treatment of African-Americans and women. Augusta National admitted its first black member as late as 1990 and the power and symbolism of Woods' victory in 1997 is beyond overstatement.

I did not miss Woods because I was following Spieth, whose intensity is magnetic. He's also fascinating because – as I wrote last year – the American media was turning a real young man into a fantasy comic-book hero. A sort of can't-miss, aw-shucks, perfect-mannered, sorted-out, clear-thinking golfer with the receding hairline of the preternaturally wise. Maybe they were trying to create...well... an anti-Tiger Woods.

Worship is accepted in sport but sainthood is plain silly. Deifying a young kid – he's twenty-bloody-two – leaves him no room to be his imperfect self. Spieth is charming, likeable, engaging, he's also been, in recent times, tetchy, had a rough word with his caddie, made errors, missed a cut, hit a 79. Of course he has for he's a human athlete, under construction, under pressure and under scrutiny.

And so I wasn't missing Woods but the problem is that even when he is not competing, he's in the competition. Spieth was leading comfortably on the final day when he sank at the 12th. And the first thing people said was: It never happened to Tiger Woods. He got wet but still won, he never sank the first 14 times in Majors when he was in the lead after the third-round or sharing it. Of course, in the 15th time, he did fail. The choker.

But still Spieth makes the Masters thrilling because he didn't have his "A" game but nevertheless thought he could earn a "W". That's self-belief, and desire, and chutzpah, and together it's riveting. There are athletes in every sport who stumble, who say it's not my day, next week we'll

try, next Masters we'll push, but Spieth never gives up on his day. He will be a great player because he simply doesn't care to just be good. Just like you-know-who.

Anyway, by the end of this stirring Masters, no one surely was missing Tiger Woods. The grace of Spieth had been so fine, the nerve of Danny Willett had been so strong. This year had everything, even style. On the 18th green, the Englishman removed his white sweater and revealed a green T-shirt.

Nice, classy, appropriate.

But it made you think: Wasn't there a fellow who used to wear a red one?



photo: Action Images