



BY
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Tiger Woods reacts to his birdie putt on the 15th during the second round of the Masters.

18.

It's one of those numbers in sport which doesn't need to be explained. It's a sort of shorthand for greatness and an abbreviation for the outstanding. It's the golfing equivalent of 20 in tennis (Roger Federer's Grand Slam singles titles), 8 at the Olympics (Michael Phelps' golds at a single Games) and 11 in basketball (Bill Russell's NBA titles). It's almost mythical stuff.

18 stands there triumphantly and mockingly because it's the ultimate symbol of golfing challenge. It's akin to 24, the Grand Slam titles owned by Margaret Court which Serena Williams, on 23, is chasing. It's the cousin of 7, the formula one championships won by Michael Schumacher which Lewis Hamilton is pursuing.

18 belongs to Jack or Mr Nicklaus or the Golden Bear or whatever moniker you prefer as long as you don't call him Ohio Fats. He's history with white hair, he's grace with a gentle paunch, and he's the 79-year-old winner of 6 Masters, 4 US Opens, 3 British Opens and 5 PGA Championships. 18 Majors is extraordinary because apart from two men – Woods and Walter Hagen – no other player has won more than even half that number in the 159-year history of the Majors.

18 was an achievable target once, a legitimate conversation, a well-known obsession, but then it died as a debate because the only chaser was

stuck on 14. He hadn't won a Major in nearly 11 years and he was a 43-year-old man in such awful pain that he needed treatment to manage his medication. The inspiring had become the tragic.

And then this month, Tiger Woods gave us, himself and his game an extraordinary gift. He patiently won No.15 and it has revived talk of No.18. It's a gift because a sport always needs a talking point and golf in recent times hasn't really had a central one. It was a game in search of a story, a declining sport that has again – even if temporarily – been resuscitated by Woods. 18 is going to bring out the numbers.

18, to be reasonable, is a feat that's probably too far but that misses the point. It's not about whether he gets there, it's about something for golf to wake up for again. Watchers want a simple thing, they wish to be part of a journey towards the sporting impossible. And they trust this man because he's taken them there before, to the boundaries of that impossible.

18 is far-fetched but so was winning 7 consecutive US PGA Tour events in a competitive era. 18 is absurd but so was 142 consecutive events without missing the cut. 18 is fanciful but so was winning four Majors in a row. 18 is ridiculous but so was winning a Major in 2008 on one leg while using clubs as a walking stick.

18 has become believable and that's what exceptional athletes do. They make you believe. They turn people giddy. People who now say that Federer went 17 Slams without a victory and then in 2017-18 won three of the next five Slams and so why not Tiger? People who say that these young guys lack that Genius DNA that Tiger does.

People who insist that the US Open is at Pebble Beach and he's won a Major there before

and the PGA Championship is at Bethpage Black and he's won there, too. It's not really logical because it's only the same venue, no longer the same Tiger, but emotion always beats reason in sport.

But 18 has a major issue and we can distill this also into numbers. It's 43, his age. It's 13, the years since he last won two Majors in the same calendar year. It's 8, the number of surgeries he's had through the years. It's 6, the number of terms we've come to associate with him (ruptured ACL, strained Achilles tendon, bulging disk, back spasms, pinched nerve, spinal fusion). It's 1, which is, well, one lousy body.

In short, the man who ensured no one laughed when the word "athlete" was attached to a golfer, who brought fitness to the fairways, is now being defeated not by another human but by his own frailty. His body was part of his weaponry, now it's constantly launching a mutiny.

And so 18 is about many things but also luck. Because nothing, not length down the fairway, not experience, not smarts, not prayer, not intimidation, not mid-iron invention, not competitiveness matters if his body doesn't hold.

This then is the brilliant unknown, this is untravelled territory and yet this is the very uncertainty which makes his adventure so appealing. Woods can't practise too much, can't play too often, can't swing too hard and yet must win when it matters. Whoever said 18 was going to be easy.

"I really haven't thought about that yet," Woods said about Nicklaus' record after he won the Masters. In fact in his entire press conference after he won, on the subject of Majors, he never mentioned the number 18.

Probably because he was thinking of 19.