

The Tiger Woods episode: Money, the media, and the “path to redemption”

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The American media is generally full of rubbish, but more rubbish has been written and broadcast about Tiger Woods and his affairs than any other subject in some time. This episode brings together many of the most deplorable elements that dominate official public life in the US at present: money, celebrity, official piety, and media prurience.

The revelation that Woods, the world’s leading golfer and one of its most prominent sports figures, has had numerous lovers is nobody’s business but his own, his wife’s and the people immediately around them. How they sort that out is a purely personal matter. Woods hasn’t committed any crimes, and the relentless media attention is reprehensible. All the arguments of tabloid journalists to the effect that “celebrities” forfeit their right to privacy is self-serving nonsense.

The issue has garnered so much coverage for several reasons, Woods’ enormous skill with a golf club probably being, in the immediate sense, one of the less significant ones. Of course, without that ability the financial interests currently bound up with his brand name would not exist, but whether he can hit a golf ball longer or more accurately than his rivals is not the issue at present.

“Tiger Woods” has existed for a number of years not as an independent human personality, but as a commodity, portions of which have been purchased by various concerns. Nike owns one part, Procter & Gamble (Gillette) owns another, PepsiCo (Gatorade) still another, AT&T owns a fourth slice, and so on. The Professional Golfers Association (PGA) Tour, the sports media, the television networks, of course, have bought their own pounds of flesh.

Woods has enriched himself over the past decade—some estimates put his total earnings at over \$1 billion (most of that in product endorsements)—but these various commercial interests have taken in vastly more than that. Now some of them, the PGA Tour and the television

networks, in particular, along with certain sponsors, stand to lose a good deal. The PGA has already suffered a drop in revenue in 2009 as a result of the recession. Nike Golf suffered a \$77 million, or 11 percent, revenue decline in the fiscal year ending in May.

Woods’ (presumably) temporary withdrawal from play will further darken the picture. When he was absent for eight months in 2008-09 due to a knee surgery, television ratings for golf tournaments fell by some 47 percent. According to Tom Wilson of the San Diego Open, “It is somewhere between 15 to 25 percent additional income from those tournaments that have Tiger versus those that don’t.” Torrey Pines, the golf course where the San Diego event will be held in late January, “stands to lose up to \$500,000,” reports CBS News.

When agreements are negotiated with the television networks on the coverage of golf tournaments, “the fact that Tiger is a member of the tour influences what networks pay,” Neal Pilson, the head of a consulting firm and the former president of CBS Sports, told Reuters.

As Michael Hiltzik noted in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Tiger’s profession is golf, but his business is the creation of a public image. A sizable economy depends on his ability to do so—the PGA tour, purveyors of Tiger-branded merchandise and the makers of golf clubs, automobiles and everything else he endorses.”

A *Yahoo!* sports blogger argued bluntly that what Woods “does on his own time is *not* his own business, not when his actions can do financial harm to those who have invested hundreds of millions in his image. That financial impact, not the ‘more mistresses or more majors?’ question, is the real story here.”

When Woods is revealed, in effect, to be a human being, this creates difficulties for his sponsors and patrons. Some may stick with him (Nike, apparently, along with EA Sports), hoping the current furor blows over—others (consulting giant Accenture, perhaps AT&T

and Swiss watchmaker Tag Heuer) will disassociate themselves. Precise *financial*, and not moral, calculations will determine each such decision.

The American media outlets play a pernicious role in building up sports stars and entertainers into larger-than-life figures. They sell airtime, magazines and newspapers by inflating fallible human beings with special skills—or sometimes no skills at all—into demigods. They always hold in reserve, however, their right to destroy such personalities, also selling products in that process, playing on the population’s ambivalent relationship to highly-paid athletes, Hollywood stars and pop musicians. Celebrity worship always contains within it elements of envy and barely suppressed resentment, which the media attempts to manipulate given the proper circumstances.

Whether the public has actually “turned against” Tiger Woods in outrage is probably questionable. A great many people wish the media would leave him alone, and consider his private life to be, in fact, his private life. A decade or more of often politically motivated sex and other scandals, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair prominent among them, has left the population less susceptible to such operations.

However, the leading print publications, tabloid or otherwise, and television networks in the US continually sink deeper into the mire. They can’t help themselves, nor do they want to, despite their occasional breast-beating. The media has economic and political motives for the pursuit of the sensational, and there is, moreover, the fact that its leading personnel (conglomerate executives, news department chiefs, television anchorpeople, leading reporters) are thoroughly corrupt and themselves obsessed with the prurient.

The other side of the coin, of course, is hypocritical piety. Sportswriters are a miserable breed in general, the most superficial and opportunist types in a superficial and opportunist profession. An episode like the current one involving Woods gives them the occasion to offer sage advice on how one should lead one’s life. Woods has “behaved badly,” he has been “dishonest, and in many ways, cowardly,” he has pursued “a massively duplicitous lifestyle,” they lecture their readers and viewers.

William Rhoden of the *New York Times* penned one of the most objectionable pieces, whose headline—“Time for Woods to Put a Face on the Apology”—sums up its general slant. Rhoden criticizes Woods’s unwillingness to this point to make a public mea culpa, which is to the golfer’s credit, and instructs him on the kind of statement he should issue: “I apologize—to my wife, to my children,

to my parents, to the PGA Tour, to sponsors, to the legion of Tiger Woods fans, who I know are stunned and disappointed. In the process of cheating on you, I have cheated myself.”

What disgusting moralizing! Who is Rhoden to offer this kind of advice?

John Paul Newport in the *Wall Street Journal* is just as absurd. In “The Tiger We Thought We Knew,” Newport writes that he, “like a lot of golf fans,” is “feeling disillusioned and betrayed by Mr. Woods.” What—was it discovered that Woods moved his ball on the 18th green during the most recent Masters Tournament?

Newport continues: “Five years ago, during the 2004 presidential campaign, I wrote a cover story for a golf magazine about Mr. Woods’s potential as a presidential candidate. Not immediately, but some distant day after he retired from golf.” The now disappointed columnist has only himself to blame for such stupid musings.

Hiltzik, in his *Los Angeles Times* piece (“Tiger Woods’ Path to Redemption has been Blazed by Many who Preceded Him”), cynically outlines the ritualistic path that popular figures in America are expected to take in order to regain popular sympathy.

“The machinery of the public apology has developed over decades, to the point where its moving parts are very well understood by practitioners and their audiences... The comeback trail for Woods has been blazed by many who preceded him; in fact, it’s been obvious almost from the first. What’s required is the public confessional. Fortunately, one thing our culture has in surfeit is public confessors.

“My prediction is that Tiger will eventually go on a national TV program and confess all... He can talk to Oprah Winfrey if he wants nurturing commiseration. Larry King for a veneer of newsiness. Diane Sawyer for condescending solicitude. Matt Lauer for sensitive, manly contrition. Barbara Walters to display inner turmoil and personal growth.”

What Woods *should* do is tell the media and the sports world to go to hell, but, unfortunately, that is probably his least likely course of action.



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