



**Sport**

BY RICHARD BECHT

# Taming the Tiger

Can Tiger Woods control his temper tantrums in the 2009 PGA?

It wasn't in keeping with golf's genteel etiquette, certainly not in the game's traditional sense, but no one was complaining.

Fans were hooting and hollering, launching into a football-like "Let's go, Tiger!" chant at every opportunity, not to mention the usual renditions of the banal refrain: "Get in the hole!"

No wonder. Tiger Woods was back, really back, winning the Buick Open to rack up his 69th win on the US PGA Tour. Not that he ever went away, other than his convalescence after his knee surgery last year.

But after a grim exit at the British Open at Turnberry in July – when he missed the cut in a major for only the third time in his career – he was coming under intense scrutiny with barbs about his game and his behaviour. This wasn't the way it was meant to be for golf's chosen one.

Woods had returned in January with the claim his suspect knee was better than ever. The early signs were propitious as he collected a familiar seven-figure cheque in winning the Arnold Palmer Invitational in late March.

It ought to have been the ideal lead-in to the Masters, except Woods was unable to make things happen the way only he can as he finished in a tie for sixth at Augusta National.

The next two majors produced the same build-up – victory at the Memorial Tournament in June followed by another tie for sixth in the US Open and a win at the AT&T National before his demise in the British Open.

Worryingly, cracks were emerging in his general conduct. His patience was patently being tested, demonstrated by some less than exemplary behaviour on the course (throwing clubs and cursing). This much should have been understood – even forgiven – for no athlete on the planet today expects, if not demands, more of himself than Woods.

Perhaps he was irritated by the possibility that this might be one of those rare

years when he fails to win a major. Whatever it was, the Tiger everyone knew and wanted to see seemed to be missing in Woods. The man himself clearly wasn't at peace either.

His year had been anything but a poor one, with three wins and eight top-10 finishes in his first 10 tournaments, giving him a total of more than \$US4.5 million in prize money.

But the real magic returned at the Warwick Hills Golf & Country Club early this month, with the fractured Woods replaced by a steely version, the personification of an athlete focused on what he wanted to achieve. There were few histrionics, rather a calmness from a man who essentially kept his familiar fist-pump celebration in his golf bag except when he thought it was really warranted.

The win at the Buick Open leaves Woods only four short of second-placed Jack Nicklaus on the all-time list of PGA Tour winners, with Sam Snead still well

clear in top spot on 82. But the statistic that Woods covets is 18, as in Nicklaus' record number of wins in majors, a target Woods is still four short of.

He has his last chance this year to move one closer at 2009's final major, the PGA Championship at the Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, Minnesota, starting on August 10.

He'll have no chance if he can't shake off the Woods persona on show at Turnberry but he'll be everyone's expected winner if the Buick Open version turns up each round. ■

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### Top PGA Tour winners

Titles	Player	Span*
82	Sam Snead	1936-65
73	Jack Nicklaus	1962-86
69	Tiger Woods	1996-2009
64	Ben Hogan	1938-59
62	Arnold Palmer	1955-73
52	Byron Nelson	1935-51
51	Billy Casper	1956-75
45	Walter Hagen	1914-36
40	Cary Middlecoff	1945-61
39	Gene Sarazen	1922-41
39	Tom Watson	1974-98

\* Span: from first win until last win

