

Woods is No. 1, but only on golf course

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Tiger Woods says he's back, and the statistics certainly agree. He's winning again, sometimes even dominating. He's happy on the course. He's happy off the course. His next tournament is the Masters, the major he always is most likely to win.

It would be wrong, however, to say that he has come all the way back to where he once was, to the moment right before his image and his career fell off a cliff in late 2009. Tiger might be No. 1 again on the golf course, but he'll never be No. 1 again in our hearts.

Not that he cares, or that he even should care anymore. It appears that Tiger is finally, completely, being Tiger. He's no longer trying to be something he was not, the good family man and wonderful guy with all the mainstream endorsements. All those companies without a direct association to sports dumped him, and he's probably the better for it. He clearly doesn't miss the money, and he can be who he wants to be, date who he wants to date, and live exactly the way he wants to live.

This, to Tiger Woods, is the ultimate win-win. He spends time with his two children, he's seeing Olympic

skiing gold medalist Lindsey Vonn and he's winning again on the golf course. I'm guessing he didn't spend one minute worrying about the recent *Forbes* poll that rated him third on the list of the nation's most disliked athletes, right behind Lance Armstrong and Manti Te'o. He probably also doesn't care that research firm Marketing Arm announced that consumers ranked Tiger's truthfulness 2,735th among about 3,000 celebrities, on a par with Mike Tyson.

Crash-landing into this landscape is a new ad from Nike, the one company that we can be sure will always stand by Tiger. Nike boldly reminded us of just how bullish it is on its client Monday night after his ascension to the world No. 1 ranking by putting out an online ad featuring a picture of Tiger reading a putt, adorned with this quote from him:

"Winning takes care of everything."

Leave it to Nike and Tiger to drag us right back to the moment when he ran his SUV into that fire hydrant Thanksgiving weekend of 2009 and triggered the massive public scandal that ended his marriage as well as the respect and adoration of many sports fans, particularly women. Grandmothers who used to plan their Sundays around Tiger's tee time might not appreciate such a dismissive, devil-may-care ad alluding to the ruination of one's family life, but that's vintage Nike, and vintage Tiger, too.



SAM GREENWOOD, GETTY IMAGES

Tiger Woods won the Arnold Palmer Invitational on Monday.

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They are going to do exactly what they want to do, and they really don't care what Grandma thinks anymore, if they ever really did.

Tiger also doesn't much care for being a role model to your kids anymore, if he ever really did. We know this because he continues to swear into open microphones on live TV at golf tournaments. He knows exactly what he's doing, and he keeps on doing it. He's much happier that way.

If Tiger is finally being honest with us about who he really is, it's time we became more honest about him and

evaluated him in the context of other recent well-known misbehaving sports figures. Rehabilitation by comparison might be a sad commentary on our sports world today, but it's also our reality. Less than two years after Tiger's self-induced fall from grace came another sports scandal: the terrible case of child rapist Jerry Sandusky at Penn State. Several months later, Armstrong's lies started to unravel. Right after his downfall came another awful saga: Oscar Pistorius' fatal shooting of Reeva Steenkamp.

Just like with Tiger, these stories transcended sports and moved right to the front page and the lead of the evening news. It seemed like it was one after another: Tiger, Penn State, Lance, Oscar. But these stories are not at all alike. In this company, Tiger's transgressions don't appear so bad, do they? What he did ruined his marriage and family life, and disappointed and surprised many of his fans and endorsers, but, in the end, that's really his problem, not ours.

We look at Tiger these days with knowing eyes. The unhealthy adulation many showered upon him as some kind of gift to the world, a theme his late father publicly launched in the 1990s, is long gone. We know better now. He's a terrific golfer, nothing more, nothing less.



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