

SPORTS

Woods in next-to-last group for Masters' 1st round

By Doug Ferguson

AP Golf Writer

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Another day at Augusta National brought Tiger Woods closer to the very reason he came to the Masters.

He turned his head from side to side so he could make eye contact with fans as he walked off the green. He looked more at ease as he tried to make good on his pledge to be a better person.

But as much as Woods talks about repairing his image from a sex scandal, he ultimately will be judged by the number on his scorecard.

"Why do you think he's here?" said Jack Nicklaus, whose 18 majors remains the benchmark Woods is chasing. "I don't think he's here for his health or anything. He's here to play golf. That's what he is. He's a very good golfer. It's the first major of the year. He's taking large steps to get his life back in order, and he wants to play golf."

"He's excited about wanting to play, and I think that's great for him. And I think that's great for the game."

Each day brings Woods closer to Thursday, and the start of a Masters where he commands more attention than usual.

Even a routine practice round with old friend Mark O'Meara turned surreal when Woods crouched on the 10th green and peered into his cell phone. It looked ominous. Only three weeks ago, a porn star who claims to have had a three-year affair with Woods released on her Web site what she said were salacious text messages from Woods.

Turns out he was using it to videotape O'Meara.

"He was helping me with my putting," he said. "I had a loop in my putting stroke. He wanted to film my putting stroke."

The audience will get even larger Thursday, courtesy of a



Barton Silverman/The New York Times

Tiger Woods is pictured at the 2009 U.S. Open Championship in Farmingdale, N.Y.

starting time at 1:42 p.m. Woods will be in the penultimate group for the second straight year, joined by K.J. Choi and Matt Kuchar. It fits perfectly into ESPN's live television coverage that starts at 4 p.m.

Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer, who have 10 green jackets between them, were surprised when Woods chose not to play before the Masters. No one goes to Augusta National without knowing what to expect.

Along with rust from not having struck a meaningful shot since winning the Australian Masters on Nov. 15, Woods has accumulated plenty of emotional baggage from the scandal.

"It's a very stressful course to play when you're in a major championship," British Open champion Stewart Cink said. "It's a really difficult test, and it comes at you with every shot. If your game is up to it, and your

mentality is up to it, then you can succeed and you can play well and have some confidence.

"But if you are wavering in any way, the course just identifies that and it just spits you out."

Woods has never come to Augusta National with so many questions about his game. He twice sat out for nine weeks before the U.S. Open, missing the cut in 2006 after his father died, winning in 2008 at Torrey Pines after knee surgery.

Winged Foot is not one of his favorites. Torrey Pines is like his own playground. Augusta National is somewhere in between. Despite being a four-time champion, Woods has won only once in seven years as the course has been revamped.

"I don't think anybody expected him to play well in the 2008 U.S. Open," Phil Mickelson said. "I don't think anybody out here will question his ability to

perform at the highest level, even though he has not competed in however many months. So I think from a player's point of view, we expect to see the same player that we have always seen."

Woods apologized to players on Monday for having to answer so many questions about him while he was in seclusion. His hope was that they would be left alone, but it wasn't going to happen this week.

Just about everyone who sat before the media fielded questions about Woods, mostly about how he would play. Just like the previous three months, when Woods' silence created a void that was filled by rumor and innuendo, no one had any answers.

The players are just like everyone else, curious about Thursday and the rest of the week.

"We've spent 15 years underestimating what he can do," Geoff Ogilvy said. "I have 100 percent confidence in his ability to win the tournament. I'm not saying he's going to, but I think he can."

Steve Stricker will have to look over his shoulder to find out. He's playing in the group ahead of Woods the opening two rounds.

"His personal life is totally different from his golfing ability, although looking back, you wonder how he competed at such a high level with all of this stuff going on," Stricker said. "It's actually scary to think if he gets his mind a little bit freer and uncluttered that it could be better. That's what is going to be interesting to watch, as a fan and as a player."

Even so, few other golf courses require so much precision on every shot, especially when it's as hot and dry as it has been all week.

And this break is more emotional than physical.

Tight competition at World Synchro Championships

By Cesar Piotto

Special to the Aspen Daily News

The 9th Aspen World Synchro Championships took place on Aspen Mountain on Monday. Teams from all over Colorado comprising participants from eight different nations competed in three categories: open alpine, women's alpine and snowboard.

The event took place on the North American run above Bonnie's restaurant and saw precision, high-end technical skiing put together with music. The format of the competition was four judged passes consisting of one mandatory ski school figure plus three original passes. Each pass was judged on technical elements, dynamic skiing, synchronicity and degree of difficulty.

After the third pass, scores for the top three teams were close to tied with the final placing coming down to the last run. In the final pass, the Aspen Demo Team executed a clean run and held on to first place and the World Synchro Championship title for 2010.

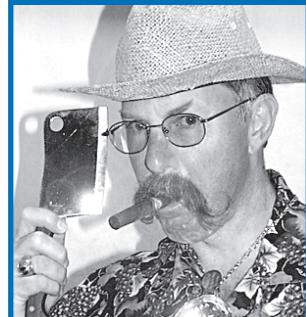
Following are the full results of the competition.

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| OPEN ALPINE | |
| 1st place | Aspen Demo Team: Phill Le Roux, Trent Jones, Hernan "Tito" Franco, Matt Wylie, Nick Hill, Santi Mazza, Tanja Heller, Cesar Piotto |
| 2nd place | Snowmass Team Diva: Kelly Beirsto, Karina Alder, Jenny MacArthur, Nico Rienaecker, Jacqui Horton, Nicole Marx, Maca Carluccio |
| 3rd place | Telluride Ghostriders: Matt Fraiser, Georgina Chapman, Neville Leel, Kim Macken, Steve Blackband, John Balmain, Shayne Marion, Peter Steiner, Willy Glasnig |
| WOMEN'S ALPINE | |
| 1st place | Snowmass Team Diva |

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| 2nd place | Aspen Team Diva: Robynne Ross, Cindy Leuchtenburg, Ginny Creak, Jill Dorken, Sam Sidwell, Megan Harvey, Barb Hurwitz |
| 3rd place | Telluride Misty Maidens: Chloe Merry, Ella Hardman, Gaby Eilon, Sarah Walls, Madison Waller, Megan Field, Jenna Hatch, Cristina Candido, Heather Baltzley |

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| SNOWBOARD | |
| 1st place | Snowmass Village People: Mariana Martins, Mario Zulian, Bernardo Benevenuto, Guido Vadaccino, Graeme Morris, Karl Dunham, Marco Olm |
| 2nd place | Telluride Snowboard: Howard Denton, Philip Cooper, Anna Dutch, Michael McGill, Juan Kaczorkiewicz, Leandro Peralta |

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