



# Tiger

BURNISHED

# BRIGHT

By Greg Sushinsky

*Tiger Woods lines up a putt on the first green during the final round of the 2000 US Open*

**THE IMAGE** of a not yet three-year-old Tiger Woods putting against Bob Hope on the Mike Douglas TV show was something startling that we filed away for later. It was our first glimpse of Tiger Woods demonstrating his head start on trying to master the impossible game of golf. But child phenoms appear now and again, they make the news for a moment, then they either fulfill that promise or they don't, usually outside the limelight. There was plenty of time for Tiger Woods, as a youngster growing up in America with its infinite distractions of video games and the mall, girls and goofing off, or perhaps a love for studying (it could happen), to simply burn out and lose interest in hitting that little white ball.

Not so with Tiger Woods. Tiger the tyke learned to hit a golf ball before he could walk, shot a 48 for nine holes at age three, and submitted himself to the game in a way that few adult golfers do. As for the child phenom disappearing, Tiger himself didn't let it happen. Whether he was beating other kids and courses at age 8, routinely, appearing on TV's *That's Incredible*, or featured in *Golf Digest*, it was natural to wonder whether this massive talent and surprising dedication was going to translate one day into a PGA career.

Well-schooled by his father Earl, a retired army officer who served in Vietnam, as well by Tiger Woods' own remarkable drive and self-discipline, Tiger began to show his adult abilities in a major way by age 12 when he won the Junior World Championships, his first of six, including four consecutive from 1988-2001. Or maybe it was when he became the youngest U.S. Junior Amateur Champion, at age 15 in 1991, and went on to become the only multi-winner by winning again in '92 and '93. He competed in his first PGA event in 1992, the Nissan Los Angeles Open. The young Tiger had not been deflected from his mission.

If it hadn't been clear before that spate of teenaged Tiger wins, it was now, for this was no media creation or curiosity. The precocious Tiger child from the early days of media exposure while barely out of toddler-hood, had declared himself a man-child golfer who was in rehearsal for an eventual takeover of the PGA.



Amateur Tiger Woods, age 16, tees off at the 11th hole during the 1992 pro-am portion of the Los Angeles Open

Tiger's takeover campaign was in earnest, yet still in its early stages. Even in that period, honors piled up for Woods. He was named Southern California Amateur Player of the Year in '90 and '91 and *Golf Digest* Amateur Player of the Year in 1992.

Tiger's achievements grew exponentially in 1994. He won the U.S. Amateur Championship, the youngest golfer to ever do so. He made the American team for the World Amateur Golf Championships and enrolled at Stanford in the fall. It was clear for anyone who questioned whether Tiger the wonder-child would grow bored, distracted or burned out on golf — it wasn't happening. Tiger was more likely burning out young opponents than himself.

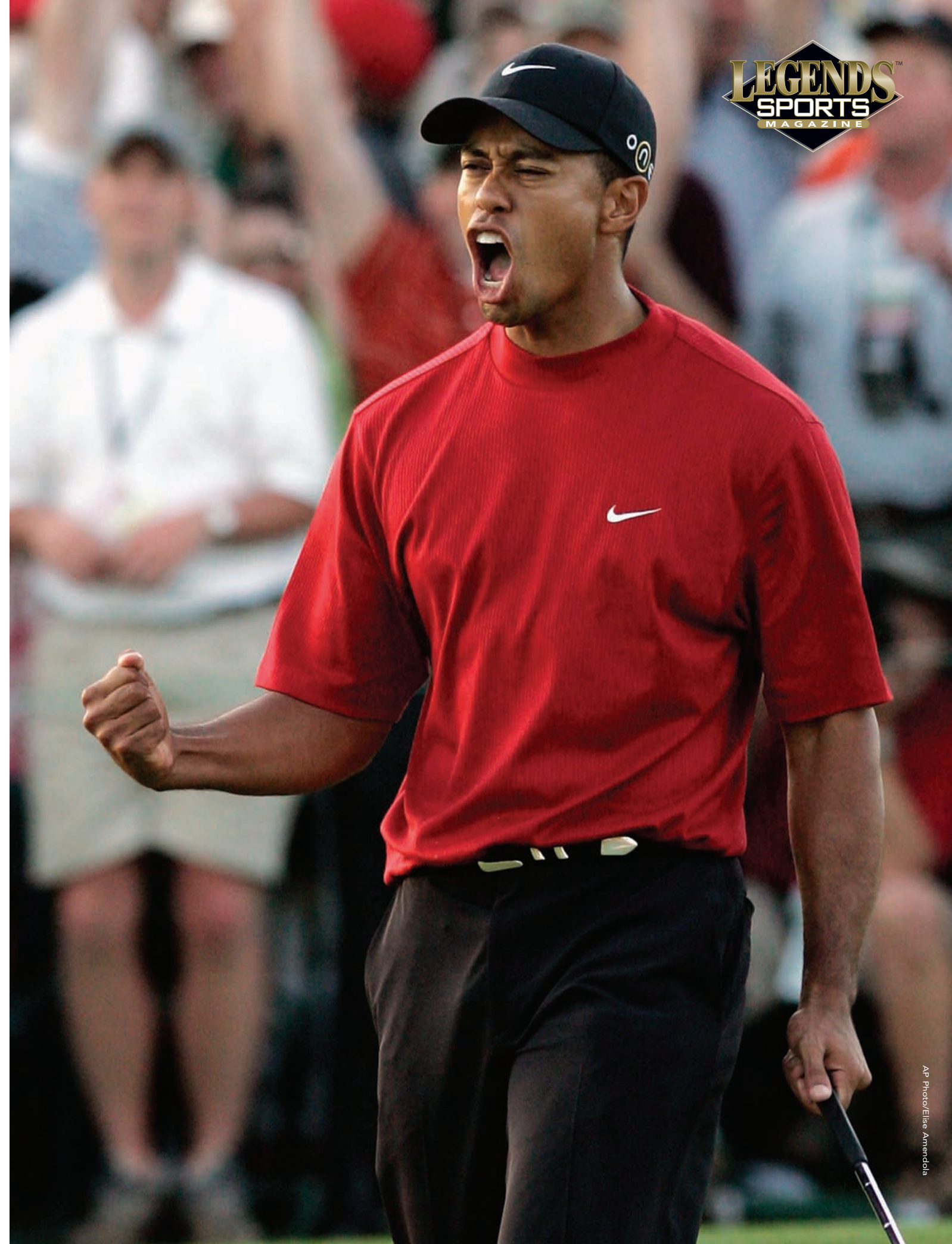
Tiger continued to grow his game. In 1995, he successfully defended his U.S. Amateur Championship, and played his first PGA major, finishing in a tie for 41st at the Masters. In '96, not yet 21 years old, Woods won his third U.S. Amateur Championship, tied the amateur record for aggregate score at the British Open with a 281, and turned pro in August of that year — more of a confirmation than a decision.

In an unprecedented move for any

golfer, and for a neophyte pro in any sport, Woods immediately signed endorsement contracts with Nike and Titleist totaling \$60 million. With the eyes of the sports world on him, Tiger's entry into professional golf became a landmark event. While some decried it as over-hyped, others felt it was a much needed injection of energy into a moribund sport. Although his first event, The Greater Milwaukee Open, saw him post only a 60th place, Tiger got two wins that year and qualified for the Tour Championship.

Despite such modest results in his initial PGA season, Tiger displayed the trademark style that would continue to carry him to unprecedented heights. His long driving was augmented by a fine iron game, and his short game was well beyond his years, not only in accuracy, but more telling, he seemed undeterred by pressure. All these attributes showed the culmination of the talent and dedication he had fashioned since his early childhood, when with whatever impulse seizes greatness, he grabbed a club with the passion for the game and started striking the ball.

Professional honors already came to Woods from his brief 1996 pro season, as he was predictably named PGA



Rookie of the Year, and not so predictably, Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year. Golf is not a sport associated with mania, with its upper class origins and its reserved, conservative traditional culture, but Tiger-mania gripped the sport. Not since Arnold Palmer, whose powerful strides charged across the greens surrounded by Arnie's Army of fans in the 1950s and '60s, had a golfer so captured the imagination of the sports world. And although Tiger did not evoke that loud loyalty and near worship that Palmer had when he exploded onto the scene, Tiger was creating something much rarer: awe.

Perhaps everything else had been, while not unimportant, a prelude, when in April of 1997 Woods arrived at Augusta National for the Masters. Amid expectation and pressure, though perhaps mainly self-imposed, he announced, "I came here to win." He then proceeded to demolish the course and the field in one of the most stunning wins in sports history. Woods finished with a twelve-stroke victory — a record margin for the Masters that still stands — where he carved up the course for an

18 under par 270. Tiger wasn't merely a player — he was a force.

Winning brought further scrutiny, along with controversy about race and ethnicity. Woods' Masters victory was the first for a person of color, and although there had been African-American pros such as pioneers Charlie Sifford, Lee Elder and few others on the PGA tour, many wanted Woods to carry the banner in a drive for more black participation in what has been a historically exclusive sport. But Woods, whose father is part African-American, part Chinese, and part Native American, and whose mother is Thai, instead identified himself with his self-coined "Cablinasian," and refused to solely identify himself as black. "I'm proud of my heritage. I'm not a Great Black Hope, I'm just me," he said.

Despite other controversies around Tiger, such as his crude racial and sexual remarks in a GQ interview, Woods has maintained a shield around his private life and has been careful with both his game and his image. He has established several charities and youth projects to help disadvantaged and

minorities and works on these mostly in the background.

Tiger announced his greatness with the '97 Masters, and with three other tournament wins that year but only one in '98, the time was a period of adjustment for Woods and his game. Critics called it a slump, and maybe it was by Tiger standards, but his off-game was still awfully competitive. He was re-tooling his swing with his then personal coach, Butch Harmon, as Woods the young man who had dominated the Masters was still physically filling out, so his swing mechanics needed to be adjusted to his growing physique.

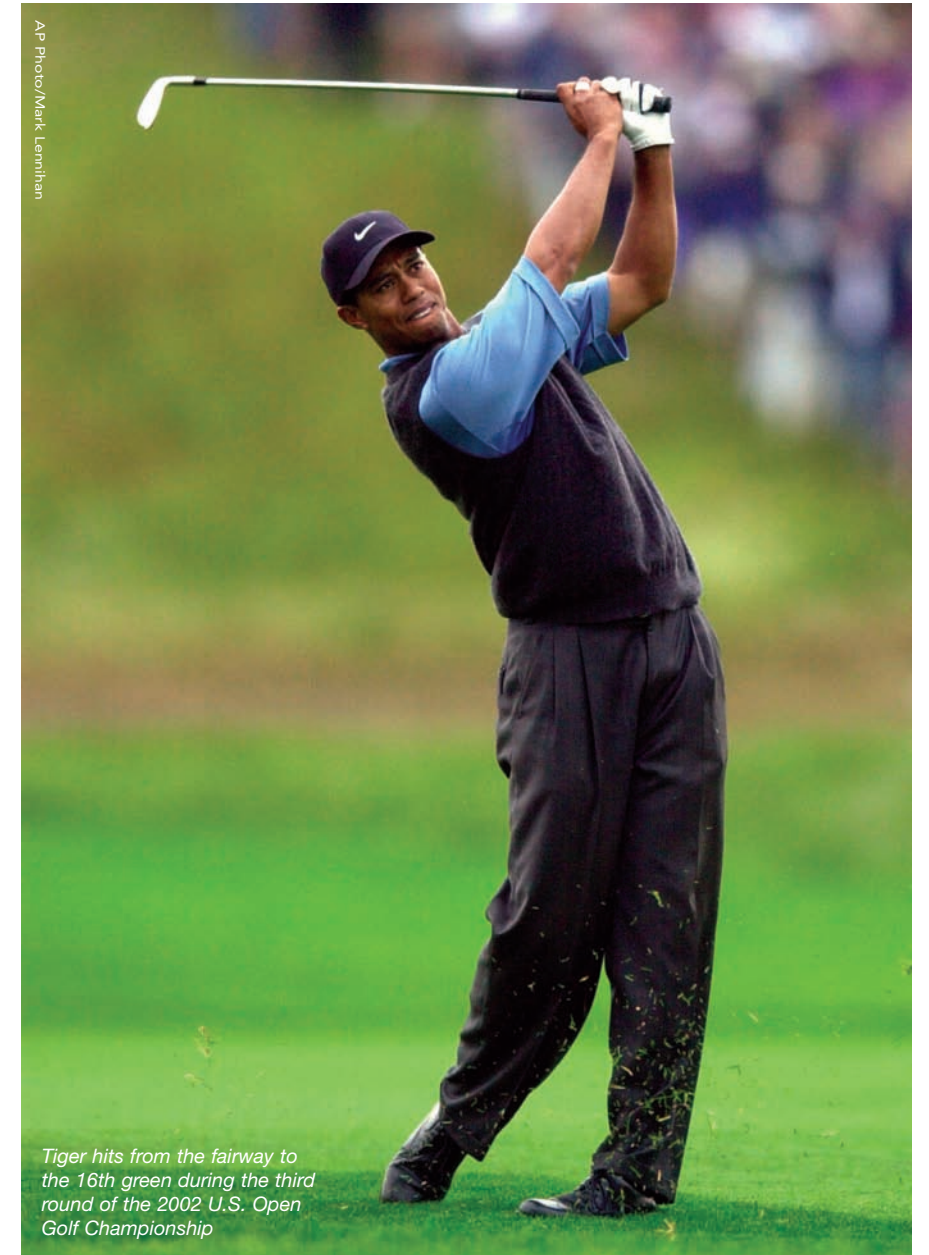
If '98 was a slump, Woods broke out in a big way in 1999. He won his second major with the PGA Championship, and capped off the year by winning the last four tournaments. He won eight tournaments in all and earned over six million dollars, a record for the tour. He was named PGA Player of the Year, AP Male Athlete of the Year, led the Ryder Cup team to victory, and won the Showdown at Sherwood, significant as the first primetime live network golf event. Tiger showed a Jordan-esque

type of pull in the media as he golfed his way into the awareness of mainstream America.

Whatever Woods and Butch Harmon did to adjust his swing, or whatever else Woods had done, he went on a rampage of winning the next few years. He won eleven majors from '99 to '02, which included a fifteen stroke win in the U.S. Open in 2000, the largest margin of victory ever in a major, and an eight stroke victory at St. Andrews in the British Open that year, as he shot a 19 under 269 to give him his first Grand Slam. He won his second straight PGA and joined Ben Hogan as the only other golfer to win three majors in a single season.

The next year continued Tiger's assault on the game, with another Masters win, giving him the four majors simultaneously, though not in the same year. New golf parlance deemed it a "Tiger Slam." He had four more tournament wins in 2001 and earned PGA Player of the Year honors for the third year in a row.

Along with his prodigious wins, Tiger had fashioned a signature playing style. He had a long game, with accuracy off the tee, as well as iron play that set him up well on the greens, with a great short game. His style is reserved, even cautious, with consistency its most dangerous element — more like Nicklaus than Palmer. In his tournament victories the pattern was similar as he would usually play well from the first tee of the first day, and enter the final round in the lead. Absent was the drama and electricity of Palmer's early days when he would hit a bad shot, make a spectacular recovery, then charge from behind. Woods didn't need to. His electricity of performance was steadier, colder, more lethal. He was a course killer, subduing Augusta National as no one had before, as he smashed the course while he crushed his opponents. In a sport more often suited to the subtlety of victory, Woods was unique. Even though his game could be subtle, his execution of it was decisive, swift, deadly to opponents. Although he had some close victories, his routs often deprived golf purists of the desire to see the dramatic individual confrontations on the



AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

Tiger hits from the fairway to the 16th green during the third round of the 2002 U.S. Open Golf Championship



Craig Jones/Getty Images

Tiger Woods is presented with his green jacket by Hootie Johnson after winning the 2002 Masters Tournament

final day, the final holes. His fault, they felt, was that he was too good.

With his second consecutive Masters win in 2002, Woods now had won three Masters titles by age 26 and further established himself as not merely a winning golfer, but a great one. Some began to wonder whether with tremendous success as a young pro, he would lose interest. The questions more revolved around how Tiger would fare in the history of the sport than whether he would win a current tournament. This seemed premature when in 2003 and '04, Woods had a couple of un-Tiger type years, neither winning nor challenging in the way we'd become used to.

Changes followed, as Tiger switched

swing coaches from Butch Harmon to Hank Haney, along with a notable personal change as Woods married Swedish model Elin Nordegren. As far as his game, Tiger was less worried than his critics, when he worked on adjustments following the effects of knee surgery in 2002, and felt his game would return better than ever. "I love to compete. It's the essence of who I am," he once declared.

The years since have only reaffirmed Tiger's place in the history of the game, as he has showed not only a brilliance of talent and constancy of effort and approach, but a continued burning desire to submit himself to his own crucible for greatness. ◆