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Call Me When He Wins Eleven

By: Nathan Crace Date: March 19, 2003

Records are made to be broken. That's how the old saying goes anyway. But most golf enthusiasts believe that there are a number of records that may not only be unbreakable, but also untouchable. Of course, we used to think that about the Grand Slam. Okay, yeah, I know Tiger Woods won the last three in one year and the Masters the next. I myself like to believe that the "Grand Slam" is all four majors in a calendar year. Then again, he did have a nice collection of hardware from the Masters, British Open, U.S. Open, and PGA Championship on his mantle—all at the same time. But there are other records that were thought to be safe too that are now being threatened by Tiger. Most notably, Byron Nelson's streak of 113 consecutive cuts made on Tour. Yes, I did say 1-1-3. But if Woods makes the cut at this year's Bay Hill Invitational, he will have survived 100 consecutive cuts and be only 13 behind Lord Byron. This is one of those sneaky Cal Ripkin-like records that no one thinks much about until it is about to be broken, but it speaks volume for a player's longevity and intestinal fortitude. And other than Jack Nicklaus in his prime, no one else is in triple digits and no active streaks are even sniffing the century mark. The closest active streak is Davis Love—at 22.

This record, however, will likely be lost in the media blitz of two iconoclastic happenings at the 2003 Bay Hill. First, it will be the first time in 2003 that Ernie Els and Woods will face each other in stroke play. After Els got knocked from the World Golf Championships/Accenture Match Play Championships in the first round, the golf world has been nearly salivating waiting for the two to square off one on one. Secondly, both Jack Nicklaus (the first time since 1995) and the tournament's host, Arnold Palmer, will be playing at Bay Hill. This may very well be the last time the two will be in the same field on Tour. Evidently, Nicklaus is using the Bay Hill as a litmus test of sorts for his game to determine whether or not the 2003 Masters will be his last or whether the 2002 Masters was.

So the stage is set for the showdown at Bay Hill: two legends stepping down and two others moving ahead. But let's get back to records being broken. It would appear that barring some unforeseen mental insanity that might strike him in the first or second round of any given tournament this year, Woods is poised to break Nelson's 113 mark before much longer. However, there is one other streak that Mr. Nelson put together in the season of 1945 that is legendary and seems unfathomable to be broken. That was the year that Byron Nelson won 18 tournaments in one year—including 11 in a row! His closest competition during the streak was a playoff victory over Sam Snead in the Charlotte Open and two wins were by double-digit margins. The streak also included the PGA Championship, but some say his streak should only count as ten because it began with a "team event"—the Miami Four-Ball, which he won with partner Jug McSpaden. A win is a win. Another notable Tour record set by Nelson in 1945 is Most Consecutive Rounds Under 70 (19).

Some critics are quick to point out that 1945 was also the last year of World War II and that the reason Nelson was winning so many tournaments was because his competition was overseas fighting the war. In fact, there was no Masters or British Open (obviously) in 1945 due to the war. But even if some of the better players weren't in the field, eleven straight is still eleven straight! Now contrast that to today's Tour. Sure the players of today as a whole are better players. They have more technologically advanced equipment in their bags, personal trainers, and strict dietary regimens that their predecessors could have never imagined. But that also translates into the competition being better and tougher. A few years ago when Tiger won nearly everything he looked at, the other Tour players were at first taken aback. Then, as if a collective epiphany came over them, they realized that they too must work to make themselves better. Before long, it became evident that although Woods was far and away the world's number one player, he was human and could be beaten. And with this elevated level of play the Tour has experienced in recent years as a result, the world's top players must bear in mind that for every Tiger and Ernie, there is a Rich Beem waiting to storm a Major Championship from no man's land and a Mike Weir silently plodding along and winning tournaments left and right.

Records come and go. Streaks happen and wars at times postpone tournaments so that much more important matters can be dealt with. As I write this with my deadline two days before the first round at Bay Hill, Woods is poised to win four straight at Arnie's place. No one has won four consecutive times at the same tournament since Gene Sarazen did it 73 years ago! But, then again, that's "only" four in four years. Want to break a real record? Call me when Tiger wins eleven in a row....

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2003.