

Seeing Green

By: Nathan Crace Date: March 23, 2008

Hard to believe it's that time of year again. Dogwoods blooming, azalea's opening up, and everyone expecting Tiger Woods to win yet another green jacket at Augusta National. I waited until Sunday evening of Doral to write this to see if Woods would continue his win streak before my deadline tomorrow morning, but the weather in South Florida had another idea in mind and now I sit here stumped liked everyone else—except that I have a deadline looming. Given the fact that Woods is now five shots back with eight holes to play when play was cancelled for Sunday, let's just assume that he will not win this week. Not that Doral is directly or indirectly linked to Augusta, but who else has been pre-ordained for a win at the Masters? How about someone who simply looks ready to win?

Ernie Els has found the winner's circle again on Tour. Will it be the Big Easy's turn in 2008? Vijay Singh looks like the Vijay of old with some excellent play befuddled by a few untimely miscues. Mickelson recorded his first win of the 2008 campaign earlier this year and could be ready for another green jacket. Of course you have defending champion Zach Johnson who always plays well in the state of Georgia anyway. And looking at other winners for the year so far, you have a mix of older players, younger players, and a slew of initial guys like K.J., D.J., and J.B.

If Johnson proved anything last year, it's that length off the tee is not necessarily the determining factor at the increasingly lengthened Augusta National. He also proved that cold and windy conditions make for an interesting week of scoring on slicker-than-slick greens with swirling winds among the Georgia pines. Remember, last year's winning total was one-over par! So who then could pull it off this year? Prior to the start of the year, Woods was quoted as saying (more or less) that he's playing well enough to win all four majors in 2008....he was dead serious and not smiling at the time, according to unidentified sources. As scary as that sounded at the time, it became even scarier when he began notching wins as the year started—an impressive streak that includes wins in three of the three tournaments he has played in this year in the U.S. plus another win overseas. And it would surprise no one if he comes from behind to overtake Geoff Ogilvy tomorrow morning at Doral.

Only an idiot would bet against Woods. So I guess I am that idiot. Not because I want to see Woods lose—I would love to witness someone win the calendar Grand Slam. But because I think 2008 is shaping up to be a year of upsets and strange happenings. Tiger's winning steak is almost too good to be true. Winning every time he tees it up. Coming from behind to beat the field. Almost willing the ball into the hole to make it happen. What if it were all some great conspiracy theory to keep television ratings up? All it would take would be the entire Tour staff and all of the players to be in on the deal.....

So what really is happening? Planets seem to be aligning and everything else is falling into place. So why then would I pick anyone other than Woods to win? Simply because the planets are aligning and everything is falling into place. It's too easy. I also think it would be too easy to say that Mickelson, Els, or Singh will win. I'm an underdog type of guy and I also think that this year we are in for another surprise. I think it will be one of the afore-mentioned initial guys. J.B. has the length, and D.J. the drive, but I'm looking this year to K.J. I think it's Choi's turn to continue the long tradition of international champions at Augusta. He has the game and—more importantly—the patience. This is not his first Masters, he's familiar with the layout and nuances of the course, and he knows when to go for it and when to throttle back. Oh, and he has a swing as smooth as a spring breeze.

So how good are my predictions? Lately, not too good. But there was a time when I could pick 'em now and then. I literally embarrassed myself with my picks for all four majors prior to last's year's season—something I had always told myself I would not do because it's way too far down the road to pick the winner of the PGA Championship in January. This year, however, has a new feel to it. It could be the way the NCAA Tournament is going, it could be the Presidential election, or it could just be global warming. For whatever the reason, I have no problem picking Choi for his first major—wrapped in a green jacket. I guess we'll know in a few weeks. Of course, I do not suggest that anyone use this information to place a gentlemen's wager because, well, that would just be stupid to use my gut for your bets. And for those of you keeping score at home...don't. Enjoy another year of golf, shake off the rust and the cabin fever, and absorb—if only through your television screen—the wonder that is The Masters!