



PLAYING WITNESS TO TWO OF THE GREATEST

By Kerry Schmidt 07-24-2005

Every era/generation has seen a small number of athletes that have been called “the greatest,” or acknowledged as at least one of the best ever.

Like last week’s column, who is “the best” is/has been many a beer hall discussion. Just touching on a few.

The 20’s-30’s had Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Lou Gherig.

The 40’s-50’s had Ted Williams, Stan Musial, Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays, who in my opinion was the greatest all around baseball player ever. He excelled in each of the top 6 statistical areas of the sport.

The 60’s and 70’s gave us, again in my opinion, the greatest heavyweight boxer ever, Muhammad Ali. Also, Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell and Joe Montana, again in my opinion, the best QB ever.

Also, from the mid 50’s to mid 60’s. the greatest NFL running back ever, Jim Brown.

The 80’s saw Bird and Magic as they elevated the NBA to stardom.

Then in the 90’s, you had Michael Jordan, Barry Bonds and a couple others.

Yes, I left out some names, but you get the idea.

Two athletes of yesteryear are ones about whom there can be no doubt that they were the greatest ever in their sport. Hockey’s Wayne Gretzky and WR Jerry Rice, both of whom set so many records, most of which likely will never be touched.

Today, in the current era/generation, we are extremely privileged to witness two athletes who likely will go down as the greatest ever in their sport.

Probably, but still up for argument, at least until an era turns into a generation, we are blessed to watch Eldrick “Tiger” Woods. But in the sport of cycling, no one in their right mind can disagree that Lance Armstrong is Gretzky and Rice together in his sport.

Press time for this column is Thursdays, so that leaves just three more days left before Lance claims his 7th consecutive Tour de France, with the ceremonial ride into Paris.

As his closest rival, Ivan Basso said after Thursday’s 18th stage, “It is not possible to beat him. Every time I try to out climb (pass Armstrong in the steep mountain ascents), he just pulls away. He is unstoppable.”

Imagine this. Riding a bike some 2,500 miles over 22 days, with five of those days spent climbing up steep (some are 18% grades) mountains, then carefully racing down hill at speeds exceeding 65 MPH, only to then have to climb up to over 8,000 feet again.

The combined level of strength and endurance required for this is literally immeasurable. Attesting to his dominance, he received his third consecutive ESPY award last week as the “Best Male Athlete.” No one else has ever done that.

Making this feat even more unbelievable, the temperature last weekend was nearly 100 degrees, with high humidity, and TV showed a thermometer on the asphalt registering 142 degrees!

And least we forget, nine years ago Armstrong was given less than a 20% chance to live after being diagnosed with testicular and brain cancer.



Plus, in no other sport are fans one of the most dangerous obstacles. In the mountain stages, thousands line up barely inches away from the climbing riders, and many jump out and wave flags in front of them, much like a bull fighter. I watched one “fan” repeatedly slap a rider on his gluteus maximus as he struggled up the mountain.

Concentrating to the max while physically maxing out.

Armstrong truly will go down as the greatest ever in the sport of cycling, and all other riders, while revering him as the greatest, will be glad he is gone, because as one said, “Next year, someone else will have a chance.”

Tiger Woods.

The book is still open, only because Jack Nicklaus’ records still stand. But barring some unseen circumstance(s), I cannot vision that when Tiger hangs them up, that he will be the best ever.

Now don’t write in and say I’m knocking Nicklaus. Hey, I’m nearly 61, so I’m in his generation, not Tigers’

Tiger took the PGA apart in 2000. He won 9 of the 18 tournaments he played, including three majors, then he won the Masters in 2001 for what is now known as “The Tiger Slam,” four majors in a row, albeit not in the same year.

He then went into what some idiot writers called a slump. During that time, he failed to win a major in two years. But he also set a record of 143 tournaments making the cut, he spent over five years as the No. 1 rated golfer in the world and was the top money winner every year except 2004, when Vjay Singh took the honor. Note: Tiger played nine fewer tournaments than Singh.

So, there never was a “slump, and he now looks like the Tiger of 2000. None other than the “Great One” himself, Nicklaus, said after watching Tiger win the British Open by five strokes, “I have to say that is the best I have ever seen Tiger Swing.”

The “Big Five” of golf today are Tiger, Singh, Ernie Els, Retief Goosen and Phil Mickelson.

The youngest of them at 29, Tiger has won more majors than all of the other four combined! Of the 35 majors he has played, he has won 10. That’s 29%. Nicklaus won 18 in 157 starts, for 11%.

His four top contenders have won 9 majors combined in 187 tries, for a whopping 4.8%. Woods has never missed a majors cut, and when tied or leading after three rounds, he is a perfect 10 for 10.

So maybe he did “come back to the pack,” as one writer said, but now, “He has again raised the bar and it is up to the others to see if they can keep up,” said Peter Dawson, CEO of famed home of golf, the Royal & Ancient Club.

Most say a golfer’s prime years are their 30’s. If so, and projecting Tiger’s stats into the next 11 years, he will win 26 majors, and only God knows what else.

Of course, we cannot predict Tiger’s future. Armstrong’s we can. He will retire after Sunday, and virtually everyone says his “7-straight” is untouchable.

Thus, the honor we have been graced with to watch Armstrong is over.

But we will have the joy of watching Tiger for many years to come.

To be able to say we saw the entire careers of two individuals who were the greatest ever at their sport, well, as Dick Vitale would say, “That’s awesome, baby!”