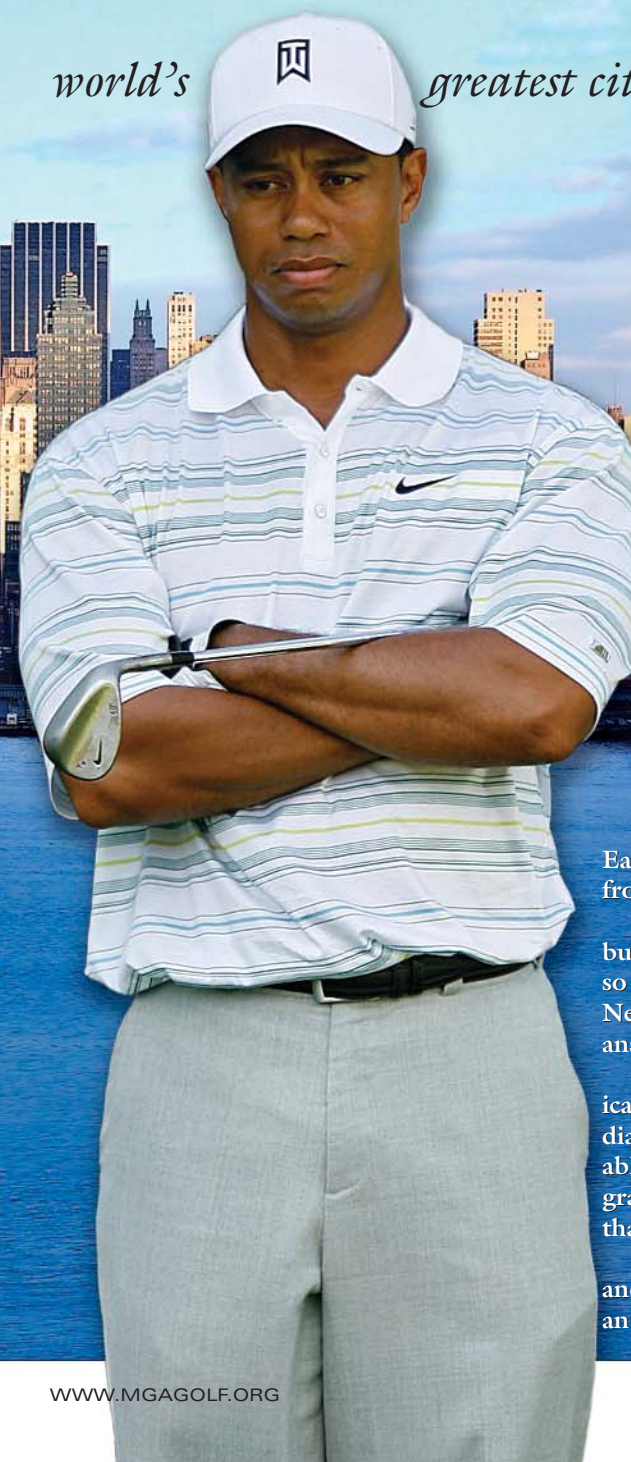


Tiger Town?

The world's greatest golfer has an up-and-down history with the world's greatest city, at least on the course

BY HANK GOLA



He's a SoCal dude at heart, a Floridian by choice and a man of the universe in any sense of the word. If not for New York, however, Tiger Woods might not be what has put him at the top of the world – a golfer. Had the late Earl Woods not been a U.S. Army officer stationed at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, he might not have played his first round of golf on a dare and then fell in love with the game on the well-worn fairways of Dyker Beach, LaTourette and Fountain Green Golf Course at New Jersey's Fort Dix. The toddling Tiger might not have been watching from his high chair as his dad pounded balls, or even have had the wherewithal to ever step on a golf course. Earl Woods once said of Tiger, "let the legend grow." It isn't a stretch to say the legend started in the shadows of the Verrazano Bridge.

"He shamed me into it," Earl Woods was saying a few years ago as he recalled

how a fellow officer dragged him to Dyker Beach sometime in the early '70s. "You had to have a set of clubs to tee off, and I didn't have a set. I walked the first hole with my buddy and played out of his bag the rest of the round. I shot what would be the highest round I ever shot, 94 for the last 17 holes."

Papa Woods said he was so golf-clueless at the time, he mixed up the 6- and 9-irons. And because his friend told him to hit down on his irons, he kept burying the clubhead so deeply in the ground his arms vibrated.

"At the end, he thanked me for the most entertaining round of golf he ever had,"

Earl said. "He told me his stomach hurt from laughing."

Everyone knows the rest of the story, but here's the question: If New York ever so humbly begat Tiger's legacy, how has New York contributed to that legacy? The answer is the same: ever so humbly.

Yes, there was Bethpage in 2002, a magical week in which Tiger conquered the diabolical Black Course and some miserable weather to win the U.S. Open on as grand a stage as possible. Yet, inexplicably, that achievement stands alone.

In eight Met Area tournament appearances as a professional, plus two more as an amateur, Woods has just that one win



Above: Tiger was on hand at the U.S. Tennis Center in Queens to watch his pal Roger Federer win the 2006 U.S. Open. During golf's U.S. Open, Tiger's yacht (below) dwarfed others in Mamaroneck Harbor.

and only one other top-10 finish (the 2005 PGA Championship). For someone who has won at a 25-percent clip so far in his career (12 of 40 majors, 55 of 216 overall with 134 top-10s) his results here are merely mortal. In addition, they include these low points:

- Playing with a heavy heart and a coat of rust two months after the death of his father, he missed a cut in a major for the first time as a professional at the 2006 U.S. Open at Winged Foot. Leaving the yacht he docked in Mamaroneck for a morning round, he found a *New York Post* photographer waiting for him. Needless to say, he didn't appreciate the invasion of Privacy, which, appropriately, is the name of the 155-foot boat. "Have a nice ****ing day," was his greeting.



- He never contended in four appearances at Westchester Country Club, whose narrow fairways and difficult greens don't suit his game. His best Buick Classic finish is a tie for 13th in 2003.
- In Woods's first-ever U.S. Open, as an amateur in 1995, he injured his wrist hacking out of the rough at Shinnecock Hills and was forced to withdraw.

What's more, New Yorkers have adopted chief rival Phil Mickelson as their favorite son. The Big Apple may be the only place in the U.S. where Tiger is second banana.

There are even questions whether Woods will play Westchester at this year's Barclays, which kicks off the new FedEx Cup playoff series in August. Woods has never been known to play a heavy schedule of tournaments after the season's final major, and the way the playoff system is structured, it would call for him to play up to four weeks in a row from late August through mid-September.

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Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that Tiger hasn't had a consistent pattern of success in our midst. Woods has never been one for crowds or hubbub, preferring the isolation of early-morning practice rounds. When he's been in New York, he's tried to stay in the shadows, or at least in Roger Federer's box at the U.S.T.A. National Tennis Center in Queens.

Maybe he learned his lesson after an interview he gave to Charlie Pierce for *GQ* shortly after the infamous Fuzzy Zoeller flap at The Masters in 1998. As he and Pierce drove around Manhattan, a few raunchy jokes Tiger thought were made off the record found their way into the piece. The media wall started going up after that incident.

Woods's first public appearance in the Met Area took place in June 1994 at St. Andrew's Golf Club in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. The occasion was a Met PGA clinic with Jim Thorpe prior to that year's Buick Classic, where Woods had been extended a sponsor's exemption. He had not yet won the first of his three U.S. Amateur titles, which would come later that summer. As a result, he was still relatively unknown to the general public.

"Jim Thorpe was actually the headliner that

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Above: Tiger contended at Baltusrol in the 2005 PGA but fell short of winning. After his father's death last year, the embrace between Tiger and Earl at the 1997 Masters (right) took on added meaning.

When Tiger's foundation put on a clinic at Randalls Island in 1997, then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani proclaimed it Tiger Woods Day.

day and Tiger was very behind the scenes," recalls Charlie Robson, the Met PGA's executive director. "It was kind of neat to see him relate because, at that point, he wasn't a whole lot older than the kids he was talking to. You could see he had a magical way but he really let Thorpe take control.

"When we saw him in '94, we didn't see him as becoming such a presence in the game. Maybe a great player, and certainly someone who could win as soon as he turned professional, but I know I didn't go to that program saying 'here's the next Messiah of golf.'"

When Woods returned three years later, that had changed. He was the reigning Masters champion, and when his foundation put on a clinic at Randalls Island in New York City, then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani proclaimed it Tiger Woods Day.

"It was the first time that I got that this guy is bigger than life," Robson said. "You could tell, too, not only was he affected by it, but the kids were too. They weren't just watching a

golfer, they were there to see a real presence." "It's been wild," Woods told kids during a question-and-answer session after starting the day with an auction at the All-Star Cafe in Midtown. "I've had a tough time with certain things, but I've come to the conclusion that's the way it is. The beauty of it is, I get to do something I love every day. Not many people in the world can say that."

Likewise, not many people can say they make an estimated \$90 million in endorsement money each year. If Woods hasn't always dominated New York's fairways, he's cleaned up on Madison Avenue and done pretty well in Central Park and on the Brooklyn Bridge, too. In a popular television ad for American Express, Tiger played golf through the concrete canyons of New York and then holed out into a coffee cup on the famous span. Meanwhile, kids everywhere take the video version of Tiger around an imaginary course set up in the park on the popular EA Sports Tiger Woods PGA Tour game.

On a recent visit to Manhattan to promote the video game in 2005, word-of-mouth spread fast after his early-morning appearance on "Fox and Friends." By the time he got to his afternoon event at the Virgin Records Megastore in Times Square, 10-person deep crowds were lining Broadway.

"I was riding in the car with Tiger to get there and there was traffic everywhere, even though we were working with the NYPD," remembers EA's Amy Bartlett. "Tiger never



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expected all that hoopla to be for him. He said, 'Amy, what is all this traffic about? What is going on here in Times Square?' And I said, 'well they're here to see you.'

"We got out of the car and it was like a rock star was arriving. Everyone was screaming. You couldn't even move on the sidewalks... there were people everywhere," Bartlett said. "It was just an amazing event for a video game launch. I know Tiger has the caché to draw

this type of crowd, but it was neat to see the average New Yorker come out just to get a glimpse of him. There isn't another athlete currently out there that can draw this kind of hysteria at a product launch without a lot of heavy promotion."

Three other moments help sum up New York's fascination with Woods. First, there were the throngs who showed up at Mamaroneck Harbor to gawk at his 6,500-square-foot yacht. One onlooker told the *Journal-News*, "everybody with a heartbeat in this area knows Tiger's boat is here. It's great to have Tiger Woods as a neighbor for a couple of days."

When he came to town in late May of last year to play a practice round at Winged Foot, he also attended a New York Yankees game as a guest of his good friend Derek Jeter. The YES Network cameras showed him seemingly every few minutes - there's Tiger chatting on his cell phone, or eating a hot dog, or signing an autograph. While showing a celebrity at a baseball game is certainly not new, this particular instance displayed new heights of obsession with even his



Tiger meets a fan at a 1994 junior clinic (far left) at St. Andrew's, and draws a considerably larger crowd at the 2006 U.S. Open.

most mundane acts. Nothing, though, compared to the most celebrated bathroom break in the history of sports when Tiger stepped into a port-a-john during his Thursday round at Bethpage in the 2002 U.S. Open. "Ti-ger, Ti-ger," the Long Island crowd started to chant in soft tones. The place erupted when their man stepped out. Said one guy in a New York accent, "Hey, Tiger, wash your hands!"



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At a video game promotion in 2005, Tiger carted his way through Times Square.

It was one of the few times during a big round that Woods ever broke his concentration. He laughed and said something as he shook his head but he couldn't be heard above the ovation. Later, he told reporters what he'd said. "Are you guys clapping because I'm potty-trained? I mean, I

made it this far. You'd think I know how to go."

In New York, New York, it lent new meaning to the well-known lyric "if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere." ■

Hank Gola covers golf for the *New York Daily News*.

The crowds at Winged Foot witnessed a rare missed cut for Tiger.



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