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Tiger at the Masters: An Ultimate Test of His Toughness

By Sean Gregory

From his days as a child golf prodigy, Tiger Woods has thrived in the spotlight. But can any athlete be mentally prepared for the circus that will unfold at this year's Masters? After taking a four-month leave of absence from golf to deal with the fallout from his shocking infidelity scandal, Woods will make his highly anticipated return to the sport this week, at the Masters tournament in Augusta, Ga. On Monday he will hold his second postscandal press conference — the first in which he will actually answer questions from the assembled press — and then will tee off his opening round on Thursday. In an interview with [SL.com](#) last month, Sean McManus, president of both CBS Sports and CBS News, called Woods' return to golf "the biggest media event other than the Obama Inauguration in the past 10 or 15 years." A hyperbolic reach from the leader of the network set to broadcast the final two rounds of the Masters this weekend? Sure. Still, the cameras will be glaring, the tabloids screaming, and one of Woods' alleged mistresses has indicated she plans to dance at a strip club in nearby Atlanta. This will be a Masters unlike any other. ([See Tiger Woods in the 2010 TIME 100 poll.](#))

In the midst of such madness, what can Woods do to stay focused on his golf game? Before we give out psychological advice to the embattled golf superstar, let us be the first to admit that he probably doesn't need it. Until he proves otherwise, Woods is still the mentally toughest athlete on the planet. "He wrote the book that we're all using," says Gio Valiante, author of *Fearless Golf: Conquering the Mental Game*, who is currently acting as golf shrink for Camilo Villegas, one of the best young players on the PGA Tour. "He's got this belief system that is perfectly constructed for adversity."

Valiante has played golf with Woods on about a half-dozen occasions. "More so than any other person I've ever studied, he's the best straight learner I've ever seen," Valiante gushes. "He makes mistakes, but then you watch him go about his business and he doesn't make that mistake twice." (Of course, you could argue that the sheer number of Woods' alleged mistresses, over 15 by some counts, proves that he's quite capable of repeat offending.)

The key, says Valiante, is Woods' constant quest to be better. As TIME wrote in a 2000 cover story about Woods: "What is most remarkable about Woods is his restless drive for what the Japanese call *kaizen*, or continuous improvement. Toyota engineers will push a perfectly good assembly line until it breaks down. Then they'll find and fix the flaw and push the system again. That's *kaizen*. That's Tiger." These words were written after Woods' first reconstruction of his golf swing, a revamping he undertook after winning the 1997 Masters by a record 12 strokes. Despite his continued dominance, he has made major changes to his swing at least two more times in the past decade. "He has taken the greatest game in history, broken it and put together something better," says Valiante. ([See a brief history of the Tiger Woods scandal.](#))

Valiante believes Woods, who has undergone therapy, will reconstruct his life along similar lines. His game will surely follow suit. Valiante points to a relatively overlooked quote from Woods' March 21 interview with ESPN. "The strength that I feel now, I've never felt this type of strength," Woods told the network. To a psychologist like Valiante, those words are particularly telling. "Think about that," he says. "Woods is finding strength through redemption and humility. It's like when A-Rod admitted he used steroids. A massive burden was lifted off his shoulders, and he could go out and play."

Despite Woods' obvious resolve, a little advice from the golf shrinks couldn't hurt, especially since he's entering a pressure cooker with the potential to break even the best athletes. For example, if Woods were on his couch, Bob Rotella, a noted golf psychologist and author of *Your 15th Club: The Inner Secret to Great Golf*, would encourage the golfer to truly relish this uncomfortable comeback. "Love the challenge," Rotella says. "This is a totally different challenge than you're used to. Go out and test yourself. Go love it." Rotella also recommends that Woods pal around with his fellow players in the clubhouse. "After you've had a problem, you want to see if your buddies still like you," Rotella says.

Patrick Cohn, a sports psychologist based in Orlando, Fla., and author of *Peak Performance Golf: How Good Golfers Become Great Ones*, says that Woods can block out distractions by not trying to block out distractions. Instead of telling himself to tune out the occasional heckler, he should just visualize placing the ball in the fairway. "Once you focus on the right stuff," Cohn says, "distractions fall by the wayside." ([See the top 10 scandals of 2009.](#))

When Woods was a teenager, he worked with a hypnotist to help place his mind in the proverbial zone. And given his recent revelations that he's reconnected with Buddhism, it's fair to assume that Woods is doing a fair amount of quiet introspection. Do more of it, say the psychologists. With

practice, you can enter an altered, hypnotic state on the golf course, though not to the point where you're barking like a dog on command. "You are aware of what's going on," says Ken Grossman, a Sacramento, Calif.-based hypnotherapist who has worked with many athletes. "You're not out in left field."

For example, Jennifer Scott, a golf hypnotherapist from Phoenix, suggests staring at some object on the course — perhaps a leaf on a fairway tree — and taking a deep breath while waiting to take a shot. "Your eyes are very powerful," she says. "If you're darting your eyes back and forth, you lose focus." Summon the subconscious and give yourself a mantra. "Think peace, harmony, relax, relax," Scott says. "The golfers I teach love those words." Denise Silbert, a hypnosis expert from La Jolla, Calif., recommends selecting a physical trigger, like holding a golf ball while walking down the fairway, which will signal your brain to slow down. "As I hold the golf ball, I feel a calm energy," Silbert says. "I let go of the conscious riffraff, I'm reprogramming the unconscious mind. The verbiage in my mind is affirming: 'Fairways of power, greens of solace.'" Are you in a trance yet? For Woods, Scott suggests a less hippie-sounding mental chant, perhaps, "I'm the greatest player in the world, see each shot as it lands."

While affirming his greatness, Woods should also visualize his most triumphant moments. "I'd have him channel a mental movie," says Grossman. "While he's in that relaxed state, he should recall his 2008 U.S. Open championship win against Rocco Mediate. He would want to remind himself he won that with a broken leg, and here at the Masters, he's not even feeling any pain." ([See the top 10 awkward moments of 2009.](#))

And despite the pain he may be enduring in his personal life, the shrinks don't recommend betting against him. "His head will be in a good place on the golf course," says Rotella, the golf psychologist. "He's going to put all his energy into playing great, and that crazy mother probably will."

[See the top 10 sports moments of 2009.](#)

[See pictures of Tiger Woods' best victory moments.](#)

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