

Woods continues to impress, wins Mercedes' title

■ **PGA:** Tiger Woods breaks the \$1 million career winnings mark with win

The Associated Press

CARLSBAD, Calif. — Tiger Woods nearly aced the first play-off hole in the rain-shortened Mercedes Championships to defeat Tom Lehman and win for the third time in just nine starts as a professional.

The \$216,000 first prize gave Woods \$1,006,594 in career winnings, the fastest anyone has gotten to the \$1 million mark by far. And only Gene Sarazen and Horton Smith won three events at a younger age than the 21-year-old Woods.

"It's a perfect start," Woods said about winning the first tournament of the new season.

"I go out there trying to win each and every tournament," Woods said.

And at times, it seems like he might be able to do just that. In his nine tournaments as a profession-

al, he has finished in the top-five six times.

Asked if he was surprised by winning a third time so quickly, Woods shook his head slowly and said: "No, only because it is what I set out to do — win every tournament."

The almost unbelievable success Woods has had in his brief professional debut at times seems scripted by a Hollywood filmmaker making a movie no one would believe.

He added to his legacy on Sunday when he stepped onto the seventh tee at La Costa Resort and Spa and sent a high, arching 6-iron 186 yards through the rain. The ball drew ever so slightly from right to left, plopped onto the soggy green about 2 feet behind the hole and spun back to within 8 inches from the hole.

"I lost it in the air because of the clouds and the rain," Woods said about his winning shot. "A rain drop hit me right in the eye when I looked up."

The surprisingly large gallery huddled under umbrellas in the

cold rain told Woods where the ball ended up, erupted in a huge roar, many shaking their heads as if asking, "What else can this kid do?"

The sensational shot helped ease the disappointment of the highly anticipated washed out final-round matchup between Lehman — the player of the year — and Woods — the rookie of the year.

Both had finished 54 holes at 14-under-par, five strokes ahead of Guy Boros, who received third-place money, and six better than Paul Goydos and Fred Couples.

But a persistent rain made the course unplayable, and tournament officials decided to make it a 54-hole event. Woods and Lehman played No. 7 because it was the only hole that was playable. They would have continued playing No. 7 over and over until a winner was determined.

Lehman hit first and immediately took the pressure off Woods by hitting his 6-iron into the wa-

ter. All Woods needed to do was put the ball on the green and two-putt.

He did much better than that.

"Tiger hit a great shot," Lehman said. "Of course, he had no pressure on him," he added, clearly disgusted with his own poor shot.

"I hit it a little high on the club face," he said. "The wind caught it and it went in the water."

Woods, who said he played conservatively all week because he was rusty from lack of competition, got better with each round. He opened with a 70, followed it with a 67 and then shot a 65 on Saturday when he closed with four consecutive birdies to tie Lehman and get in the playoff.

Lehman was equally brilliant, putting together rounds of 66, 67 and 69.

Both players were clearly disappointed that Sunday's anticipated showdown was washed out. Friday night, Lehman was voted player of the year by PGA

Tour members and Woods was voted rookie of the year.

"I'd rather have played," Woods said. "You don't want anything given to you. You want to earn it."

So far, Woods has earned a remarkable lot in a very short time.

DIVOTS: All but three groups made it onto the course before play was suspended. ...Woods warmed up for the playoff by hitting only his 5-iron on the practice tee. He then hit a 6-iron on the playoff hole. ...A poor weather forecast removed any chance of trying to finish the tournament on Monday. "The chances are so slim we could play 18 holes tomorrow that is didn't make sense to hold people over," PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem said. ...Ernie Els won \$1 million in his first 28 tournaments, the previous fastest to that mark. Woods did it in one-third the time. ...Finchem walked into the media room during the rain delay preceded by a PGA Tour official who whispered, "Quick, get the football off TV."

Injury gives Graf first-round win; Philippoussis drops out

■ **AUSTRALIA:** 1995 champ Andre Agassi and women's star Jana Novotna won't play in the first Grand Slam tournament of 1997

The Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Be-leaguered by injuries before it even began, the Australian Open got off to a stumbling start Monday when Steffi Graf's first-round opponent twisted her knee after 25 minutes.

Grafled 5-1 in the first set when Janette Husarova of Slovakia hurt her left knee changing direction while rushing the net. After having her knee wrapped in ice on the court, Husarova left in a wheelchair.

The top-seeded Graf, seeking her fifth Australian Open title, had such a short workout in the match that she went directly from center court to a practice court.

The year's first Grand Slam event lost its biggest name, or at least the one with the most letters

in it and the most appeal to hometown fans, when Mark Philippoussis withdrew with an arm injury on the eve of the tournament.

A year ago, Philippoussis put on a dazzling show of power tennis to knock out top-seed Pete Sampras in the third round. On Sunday, Philippoussis pulled out of what looked like the best opening-round match, a center court duel against Britain's rising star, Tim Henman, winner of the tuneup tournament in Sydney on Saturday.

The injured-and-out camp is getting pretty full: defending women's champion Monica Seles, French Open champion Yevgeny Kafelnikov, Wimbledon champion Richard Krajicek, Todd Martin, Cedric Pioline, Jason Stoltenberg. The don't-feel-like-playing camp already claimed 1995 champion Andre Agassi and Jana Novotna.

The injured-but-will-try camp includes Jim Courier, Michael Stich and Guy Forget.

The Australian still has plenty of top talent worthy of a major ti-

tle, and among those scheduled to play Monday — assuming they don't get hurt on the way to the stadium — is defending champion Boris Becker.

Sampras, the men's top seed, had the first day off.

Becker appeared to have the toughest assignment among the high ranking men, going against Carlos Moya. The Spaniard beat Becker in Paris last fall and reached the final in Sydney before losing to Henman on the same kind of hard, Rebound Ace court that is used in the Australian Open.

"He's not just your typical Spanish clay courter," Becker said. "He's able to play on a quicker surface as well, which is going to make him more dangerous on this surface. I've seen him a few times playing and he's no stranger to me."

Other featured matches on opening day include Stich against Sweden's Patrik Fredriksson; 15-year-old Anna Kournikova of Russia against No. 12 Amanda Coet-

zer; and 1995 champion Mary Pierce of France against No. 13 Elena Likhovtseva of Russia.

When Becker was healthy last year — at the start and at the end — he was one of the most dominant players on the tour, beating all the top five players. He suffered a freak accident when he injured his wrist returning a serve at Wimbledon, but came back strong to lead the tour with \$4 million in prize money — including a \$1.8 million victory in the Grand Slam Cup.

At 29, Becker knows his time as a Grand Slam tournament contender is getting shorter. He's already considering retirement in a few years and would like to notch another major or two before he goes. Though ranked only No. 6, hardly representative of his form, Becker has no plans to pursue the No. 1 spot by playing week after week.

"I was always the one from all the top players who played the least," he said. "I was never playing more than 15-16 tournaments. I have my periods through the year

where I have to take a break. Otherwise you're going to ruin your body and your mind if you're playing nonstop every week."

Becker gears up for the majors and certain other big tournaments, and sits out smaller ones. It's an approach he believes has enabled him to stay near the top and keep improving over the past few years.

"I think that's one of my secrets; why I am coming here for 13 years, because I always paced myself. I was never trying to burn myself out early in the year. I am taking my breaks when I feel like I need to."

Becker's son, Noah, turns 3 next Saturday, and that event will be another hint to Becker that retirement is not too far away.

"When he goes to school, when he has to be in one permanent place, then I will retire," Becker said. "But the injury which I had last summer showed me that it can be over any day. I'm turning 30 this year, so I don't have the freshest pair of legs and body. But I'm still able to produce good tennis when I'm healthy."

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