

THE 82ND MASTERS | APRIL 5-8

TIGER BACK IN THE HUNT AT AUGUSTA

BY DOUG FERGUSON | AP GOLF WRITER

This Masters is as much about a red shirt as a green jacket.

Tiger Woods is back, and he even looks like the Tiger Woods who dominated golf for the better part of 15 years. Never mind that he is not among the top 100 players in the world ranking, that it has been 13 years since he won the Masters in that Sunday red shirt, or that it has been five years since he last won any tournament. The buzz following Woods since his return from a fourth back surgery has been bigger than when he was No. 1 in the world, racking up 14 majors and 79 victories on the PGA Tour. And as much as golf has missed the energy he creates, Woods has missed golf, especially the first full week in April.

This is the first time since 2015 he has played in the Masters, which starts April 5. He was there the last two years for the Champions Dinner, his first time ever to Augusta National without golf clubs. That hurt almost as much as the searing sensation from his ailing back. "I love playing Augusta National. I love it. And I know how to play it," Woods said, and the record bears that out. He has won four times in his 18 appearances as a pro, and 13 of those years he finished in the top 10. "There's no other golf course like it in the world, and there's no other golf tournament like it. It is literally ... it's a players' heaven."

The next step is proving he can win another green jacket, and he has shown in five PGA Tour starts since January that he is capable. Woods is as powerful as ever, with a swing speed that has reached 129 mph. He finished one shot behind at the Valspar Championship. The following week at Bay Hill, he was one shot out of the lead with three holes remaining when he hit a tee shot out-of-bounds and Rory McIlroy raced away with the victory by making five birdies over the last six holes.

There was reason for golf fans to wonder if he would ever return. The haunting image 10 months ago was his mug shot from his arrest in Florida on a DUI charge, the result of Woods taking a bad combination of prescription medicine. Just over six months ago, while recovering from fusion surgery on his lower back, Woods said he could

envision a scenario where he never competed again. And now Las Vegas has him among the co-favorites with McIlroy, Dustin Johnson and Justin Thomas.

Golf managed to move along without Woods, who had to sit out the Masters three of the last four years with his back problems. Johnson, McIlroy, Jordan Spieth and Jason Day have taken turns at No. 1 in the world, all of them major champions. Thomas and Jon Rahm are within range of getting to No. 1. All but Spieth have won this year, and Spieth showed at the British Open last summer that he can flip the switch with the stroke of his putter. And now Woods is back in the mix, along with three-time Masters champion Phil Mickelson, who won a World Golf Championship to end more than four years without a trophy.

GRAND SLAM

McIlroy is the first of three players who have a chance to complete the career Grand Slam this year, something only five others have accomplished. He lacks only the Masters to make it a clean sweep of the four majors, and this will be his fourth crack at it. McIlroy has finished six shots back the previous three times. Mickelson will get his chance at the U.S. Open at Shinnecock Hills, where he was in contention as deep as the 71st hole in 1995 and 2004. After that, Spieth will go for the slam at the PGA Championship in St. Louis.

ROARING 40s

It has been 20 years since a player in his 40s won a green jacket, when 41-year-old Mark O'Meara birdied his last two holes to win the Masters. Four players in their 40s have already won this season, and two names stand out in particular — Woods (42) and Mickelson (47). A victory by Mickelson would make him the oldest Masters champion by more than a year over Jack Nicklaus, who was 46 when he won his record sixth green jacket in 1986. "I think that 46 is not an unusual number. It was then," Nicklaus. "Anything over 40 back then was very unusual."

DEFENDING CHAMPION

Sergio Garcia won the Masters last year by overcoming a two-shot deficit with six holes to play and beating Justin Rose on the first sudden-death playoff hole. Hosting the Champions Dinner isn't enough to make his spirits soar, Garcia became a father three weeks before the Masters. He named his daughter "Azalea," and it's not hard to figure out the inspiration.

Garcia won his first major in his 70th try as a pro. Next on that list in the 86-man field at Augusta National? Paul Casey, who will be playing in his 56th major without having won one.



Sergio Garcia 2017 Masters champion



TIMELINE SINCE WOODS' LAST MASTERS APPEARANCE

- April 12, 2015:** Ties for 17th in the Masters.
- Sept. 16, 2015:** Has a second microdiscectomy surgery; hopes to return in early 2016.
- Oct. 28, 2015:** Has a follow-up procedure to relieve discomfort in his back.
- April 20, 2017:** After playing seven rounds in three tournaments, he has fusion surgery on his lower back that he hopes will alleviate his pain.
- Sept. 27, 2017:** Serves as vice captain at the Presidents Cup and says he doesn't know what his future holds.
- Oct. 7, 2017:** Posts video swinging a smooth iron.
- Oct. 15, 2017:** Posts video swinging a driver.
- Oct. 23, 2017:** Posts video hitting his trademark stinger shot.
- Oct. 30, 2017:** Announces he will return at the Hero World Challenge.
- Jan. 28, 2018:** In his first PGA Tour event in a year, shoots par or better all four rounds at Torrey Pines and ties for 23rd.
- Feb. 25, 2018:** Finishes 12th in the Honda Classic.
- March 11, 2018:** Runner-up at the Valspar Championship, one shot out of the lead.
- March 18, 2018:** One shot out of the lead until a tee shot out-of-bounds on the 16th hole at Bay Hill. He ties for 5th.

MASTERS FACTS AND FIGURES

- Site:** Augusta National Golf Club.
- Length:** 7,435 yards.
- Par:** 36-36-72.
- Purse:** To be determined (\$11 million in 2017).
- Field:** 86 players (80 professional, 6 amateurs).
- Cut:** Top 50 and ties, and anyone within 10 shots of the lead.
- Defending champion:** Sergio Garcia.
- Last year:** Sergio Garcia won his first major in his 70th attempt as a pro, rallying from a two-shot deficit with six holes to play to beat Justin Rose on the first hole of a sudden-death playoff. The turning point came at the par-5 13th when Garcia had to take a penalty drop from the bushes left of the tee. He saved par, went birdie-eagle to tie Rose and won with a 12-foot birdie putt on the 18th hole in sudden death after Rose made bogey.
- Eye on Tiger:** Tiger Woods returns after missing the Masters three of the last four years with a back injury.
- The odds:** The Westgate Las Vegas Superbook had odds at 50-1 for Woods winning the Masters before he returned to competition in the Bahamas the first week in December. Six tournaments later, he is a co-favorite.
- Grand Slam:** Rory McIlroy will try for the fourth time to win the Masters and become the sixth player to complete the Grand Slam.
- New chairman:** Fred Ridley takes over as chairman of Augusta National, succeeding the retired Billy Payne.
- Key statistic:** This is the only major where Tiger Woods has never missed the cut as a pro.
- Noteworthy:** It has been 20 years since a player in his 40s won the Masters.
- Quoteworthy:** "There's no other golf course like it in the world and there's no other golf tournament like it. It is literally a player's heaven." — Tiger Woods.
- Television:** Thursday-Friday, 3-7:30 p.m. (ESPN); Saturday, 3-7 p.m. (CBS Sports); Sunday, 2-7 p.m. (CBS Sports).
- Interactive:** www.masters.com. Live video channels from Amen Corner, the 15th hole, 16th hole and a featured group. Estimated times — Amen Corner (Nos. 11, 12 and 13) from 10:45 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday and Friday, and from 11:45 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday; Nos. 15 and 16 from 11:45 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Thursday and Friday, and from 12:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday, featured group from noon to completion of play on Thursday and Friday, and from 12:30 p.m. to completion of play on Saturday and Sunday. The Masters iPad application will display the video channels and a live digital simulcast of CBS Sports' weekend coverage.

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2018 MASTERS PLAYER CAPSULES

A capsule look at top contenders for the Masters, which starts April 5 at Augusta National Golf Club:

DUSTIN JOHNSON

Age: 33
Country: United States
World ranking: 1
Worldwide wins: 17
Majors: US Open (2016)
Masters moment: Slipping down the stairs and wrenching his back on the eve of the Masters, leading him to withdraw as the No. 1 player and heavy favorite in 2017.
Backspin: He doesn't have nearly the momentum he had last year when he was coming off three straight victories. But he hasn't been awful, either, except for his 0-3 mark at Match Play. He won Kapalua and was runner-up at Pebble Beach. He figured out how to play the course two years ago when he contended for the first time.



BUBBA WATSON

Age: 39
Country: United States
World ranking: 21
Worldwide wins: 12
Majors: Masters (2012, 2014)
Masters moment: Hooking a gap wedge out of the trees on No. 10 to set up a par in sudden-death playoff for his first Masters victory in 2012.
Backspin: Watson is healthy and happy, and the latter might be more important. He has never won twice going into the Masters, and he looked impressive in victories at Riviera and the Match Play. A good putting week is especially important for him.



RORY MCILROY

Age: 28
Country: Northern Ireland.
World ranking: 7
Worldwide wins: 22
Majors: US Open (2011), British Open (2014), PGA Championship (2012, 2014)
Masters moment: Losing a four-shot lead in the final round of 2011 and shooting 80.
Backspin: This will be his fourth crack at trying to complete the career Grand Slam. He hasn't seriously contended at the Masters since he had a 4-shot lead after 54 holes in 2011. He won the Arnold Palmer Invitational three weeks before the Masters, which has given him a shot of confidence.



TIGER WOODS

Age: 42
Country: United States
World ranking: 104
Worldwide wins: 90
Majors: Masters (1997, 2001, 2002, 2005), US Open (2000, 2002, 2008), British Open (2000, 2005, 2006), PGA Championship (1999, 2000, 2006, 2007)
Masters moment: Setting or tying 20 records in his first Masters victory by 12 shots in 1997.
Backspin: Woods has missed the Masters three of the last four years because of back surgeries. The Masters is the only major in which he has never missed the cut, which is not on anyone's mind the way he has played this spring. All it took were three finishes in the top 12 for him to become the betting favorite in Las Vegas. If he were to win, the pursuit of Jack Nicklaus is back on.



JORDAN SPIETH

Age: 24
Country: United States
World ranking: 4
Worldwide wins: 14
Majors: Masters (2015), US Open (2015), British Open (2017)
Masters moment: Becoming the only player to reach 19 under at any points in the Masters in 2015. He wound up tying the 72-hole record held by Woods.
Backspin: Spieth is going through what might be the first slump of his career, mainly with his short game. His best finish this year is ninth at Kapalua and Riviera, and he has yet to finish closer than five shots of the lead. He'll find out what kind of magic the Masters holds for him. In four previous starts, he has been runner-up twice, won in 2015 and tied for 11th last year.



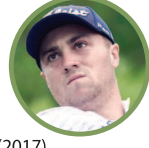
PHIL MICKELSON

Age: 47
Country: United States
World ranking: 18
Worldwide wins: 46
Majors: Masters (2004, 2006, 2010), British Open (2013), PGA Championship (2005)
Masters moment: Leaping an estimated 13 inches in the air when he made an 18-foot birdie putt on the final hole for his first major.
Backspin: Mickelson has a history of playing Augusta National well at any age, though he has lost some of his consistency. In the last five years, he was runner-up to Jordan Spieth in 2015 but finished out of the top 20 the other four times. He has not broken 70 in a major since the final round of the 2016 PGA Championship.



JUSTIN THOMAS

Age: 24
Country: United States
World ranking: 2
Worldwide wins: 8
Majors: PGA Championship (2017).
Masters moment: Earning his first crystal ball by making eagle on the par-5 13th hole in the fourth round last year.
Backspin: He is playing as well as anyone with a victory in the Honda Classic, playoff loss in Mexico and semifinal loss in the Match Play. His first two trips to the Masters have been ordinary. Thomas made the cut both times, but has yet to break 70.



MARINERS: King Felix walked five or more batters for the 15th time in his career

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San Francisco while with the Mariners since he hit an inside-the-park homer in the 2007 All-Star Game. He didn't appear in the series opener Tuesday.

"A lot of things Ichiro does is cool," Seattle manager Scott Servais said before the game. "He's an unbelievably great player. We all have different Ichiro memories. I'm looking forward to making some new ones."

Cueto pumped his fist walking off the mound after getting Suzuki to line out to left, ending the sixth with runners on second and third. The right-hander allowed eight hits and one run in six innings. He struck out one and walked two.

TOUGH TO BE KING

King Felix walked five or more batters for the 15th time in his career. He was tagged for eight runs and six hits in four-plus innings. He gave up three homers for the first

time since Aug. 15, 2015, in a 22-10 loss at Boston. Also, his eight earned runs allowed to the Giants were the right-hander's most since giving up 10 that same day versus the Red Sox.

"Zero command of my fastball," Hernandez said. "I fell behind most of the time. When you're behind and have to come down the middle, it hurts. That's what happened."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Mariners: C Mike Zunino (strained left oblique) went through a workout Tuesday and will likely have a strenuous session Thursday with the hopes he could join the team during its weekend

series at Minnesota. ... RHP Erasmo Ramirez (strained right lat muscle) pitched a simulated game for Triple-A Tacoma on Tuesday and "he continues to move in the right direction," Servais said. ... Nelson Cruz is feeling better nursing his sprained right ankle.

Giants: Pence was a late scratch after he sprained his right thumb diving for Robinson Cano's RBI double in the fifth inning Tuesday. He could be ready to start again Friday after a day off. ... RHP Jeff Samardzija, on the disabled list with a right pectoral strain, will throw another bullpen session Friday before likely beginning a rehab assignment.

AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez

Seattle Mariners starting pitcher Felix Hernandez, right, stands near the mound after giving up a three-run home run to San Francisco Giants' Pablo Sandoval, rear, during the fifth inning of a Wednesday's game in San Francisco.