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The Self-Destruction of Tiger Woods

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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A new book offers some insight into the inner life of the world-famous golfer—but not enough.



After more than a decade as the greatest golfer in history and the most famous athlete on the planet, Tiger Woods crashed on Thanksgiving weekend 2009, ramming his SUV into a fire hydrant and then having his myriad infidelities, along with humiliating text messages, exposed in the tabloids.

Since then, he has been treated for sex addiction, been divorced, changed coaches, and lost not only his way but his golf game. He has been trying, with only minor success, to climb out of the circle of personal and golfing hell into which he flung himself. Yet he still commands extensive media coverage, and TV golf ratings are robust when he plays at all well. The world still watches—and waits. Act II?

Now comes his golf coach from 2004 to 2010, Hank Haney, to offer a firsthand, first-person, inner-circle account of a Tiger who from the very beginning of his professional career has tried to hide behind a high wall of privacy. The title of Haney's book, [*The Big Miss*](#), refers to the dreaded terrible shot at a key moment in a tournament, and, of course, to Tiger's huge wrong turn off the road of sports genius into the abyss. It has risen as high as number two on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

There are three dimensions of the book—about Haney himself (poor), about Tiger's greatness as an athlete (fair), and about Tiger's character (intriguing but, necessarily, incomplete).

Haney writes about his own personal history, his lack of friendship with Tiger, the golf swing (hard to follow even for the most crazed golfers), and why he was a better coach than he has been given credit for (insecure and self-serving). Plus: Many players and coaches feel, rightly in my view, that he violated an unspoken promise of confidentiality in discussing details about Tiger's life off the course and away from the practice range. While unflattering, these aren't all that revealing—a few fairly anodyne scenes of Tiger with his ex-wife, comments on his cheapness, stuff about video games he likes. Haney won't be having lunch in golf-town any time soon.



On Tiger the fierce competitor, he deepens a story we already know. Tiger was intent on being a great physical athlete and revolutionized fitness training for golfers. He was a fiery player intent on winning, yet had an uncanny ability to stay calm and focused at the excruciating moments of highest pressure when he knew how to step on his pursuers' throats. He could be friends with lesser golfers, but played mind games with those who had the greatest talent. When he was at his best, he excelled at every shot in the game.

He was, in the end, convinced of his own greatness—and, in Haney's terms, a "stone-cold killer." His record is amazing, not just the 14 major championships, the 72 PGA tournament wins, more than 20 other wins worldwide, the 48 out of 52 times he has won when he holding or sharing the lead going into the last round, but an astounding percentage of tournaments won from 1997 to 2011—26 percent as compared with Jack Nicklaus' 12 percent (although over a longer period). Although Haney complains that Tiger didn't always listen to him and wasn't always devoted to Haney's practice schemes, he clearly believes in Tiger's golfing genius.

It is Haney's sketch of Tiger's character that is new. In essence, he says that Tiger was not happy with his success, that he felt he could never live up to expectations, that he was driven to be not the best golfer (which he was) but to realize his own potential (a place he could never reach). His extraordinary winning record meant that the mountain he had to climb was even higher. He wouldn't let people get close to him—was generally cold and aloof, and couldn't even celebrate his victories.

At one point he said to Haney, "With me, nothing is ever good enough." When he had won, he would lose the joy of playing. Just after the humiliation of the sex scandal and after he had made a canned apology, he said to Haney that now perhaps, he could rid himself of the burden of others' expectations: "When I play golf again, I'm going to play for myself. I'm not going to play for my dad, or my mom, or Mark Steinberg [his agent] or Steve Williams, or Nike, or my foundation, or you, or the fans. Only for myself." Haney concludes:

I....knew his life wasn't easy. I sensed that despite the assumption that he'd followed his dream, he hadn't chosen his life as much as it had chosen him. Giving himself over to golf instead of a more normal life had many advantages, but being a well-adjusted, fulfilled person wasn't one of them. I admired tremendously the way he held up his end of the bargain to produce excellence. But I'd seen close up the cost of so much single-mindedness, and I wondered, As much as Tiger has gained in wealth and glory, is it possible he feels used.

Haney's portrait is necessarily incomplete. He barely discusses the most important influences on his life, the father and mother who enabled a prodigy to find greatness. He admits that Tiger was usually laconic and not very revealing, and they weren't that close. He doesn't quote Tiger's personal friends or golfing colleagues much if at all.

Yet, there is a sad if unexpected ring of truth to his perspective, however limited. When Eliot Spitzer, another high achiever with a demanding father, went up in flames in a scandal involving prostitutes, the question was whether the cause had been his arrogance and hubris or rather some hard-to-explain, self-destructive impulse. That question remains to this day.

If Haney is to be believed, it appears that Tiger's paradise lost was due to his unhappiness with his own life, with some impulse that made him do something so colossally stupid as to have serial affairs and make himself vulnerable through text messages to women he couldn't trust and who had every reason to take advantage of his celebrity. I am not trying to absolve Tiger of direct personal responsibility for his acts, which were clearly self-destructive in effect, whatever the motive.

But genius is a gift. If his own self-destructive demons have taken it away, then the question which still fascinates the sports world—will there be Act II for Tiger?—is very much in doubt.

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