

Being No. 1 a dream if you're not Tiger

By DOUG FERGUSON
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KAPALUA, Hawaii

Adam Scott was in his final year of high school in Australia when he awoke at 5 a.m. one Monday in April to watch the final round of the Masters.

COLUMN

What he saw that morning brought equal doses of awe and reality.

Scott had spent countless hours working on his game, driven by the dream of being No. 1 in the world.

On the screen that morning was 21-year-old Tiger Woods becoming the youngest Masters champion with a record score of 18-under 270 for a 12-shot victory, the largest margin in a major championship since 1862.

"I thought it was unreal," Scott said.

And it didn't take long for him to recognize that his dream might be just that.

Scott showed up at Kapalua for the start of the 2007 season with his game as good as it has ever been. He found consistency to go



AP PHOTO

Tiger Woods has been the No. 1 player in the world golf rankings for all but a few short periods of time since first rising to the top in 1997.

with that polished swing, rose to a career-high No. 4 in the world ranking and captured the Tour Championship to finish a career-best No. 3 on the PGA Tour money list.

The final few steps, though, seem like a marathon.

"All my life as a kid, I dreamt of being No. 1 in the world," Scott said "How am I going to live up that dream? I've got to

somehow figure out a way to play better than this guy over a pretty long period of time. I don't think I'm making up ground on him, but at least I'm creeping up to a level that's competitive."

Then he paused and finished the sentence with a smile.

"On a good day." "That's not giving up. That's reality."

Woods first rose to No. 1 in the summer of 1997, and only two players have taken that away from him, David Duval in 1999 and Vijay Singh in 2004.

So it can be done.

Then again, neither stayed at No. 1 for more than six months. And both times Woods lost the No. 1 ranking, he was at the tail end of overhauling his swing.

A new year brings renewed optimism, yet the one question that remains is whether any young player is capable of challenging Woods.

The list of candidates has become more refined, spearheaded by Scott, U.S. Open champion Geoff Ogilvy, Sergio Garcia, Luke Donald and Paul Casey. All of them are in their 20s.

And all of them understand what they are facing.

"It's unfortunate for us that we've probably got the best golfer of all time that we have to be better than to be No. 1 in the world," Ogilvy said. "But we're also fortunate to be playing in his generation. We're all better because of him. The tournaments are better, there's more people to play in front of."

Ogilvy broke through in a major way last year, winning the Accenture Match Play Championship and the U.S. Open. He finished fifth on the money list despite missing two months when his wife gave birth to their first child.

Long considered one of the most talented Aussies, his goal was always to be the best, figuring the No. 1 ranking would come along with that. And now?

"I still have aspirations to be No. 1," said Ogilvy, now at No. 10. "I think it's feasible."

Inspiration comes from Singh, who set a lofty goal in 2002 to take down Tiger. Remember, this was the year that Woods won the Masters and the U.S. Open at Bethpage Black, and finished second at the PGA Championship. Singh closed that year by winning the Tour Championship to move to No. 7 in the world.

But the Fijian matched Woods' five victories in '03 and then won nine times in '04 to dethrone Woods.

"If someone told you that Vijay would be No. 1 in the world after Bethpage, you would have laughed," Ogilvy said. "Well, you wouldn't have laughed because Vijay is a great player. But you would have laughed if someone said anyone would be better than Tiger. He was winning tournaments for fun back then."

"No question, it's possible. But it's going to be tough. And a lot depends on him."

Woods twice went 10 majors without winning, and he lost his No. 1 ranking both times.

But his rebound was remarkable. After the first dry spell, he won seven of the next 11 majors; after the second, he won four of the next eight.

"If Tiger plays his best golf, it's hard to beat that," Casey said. "It can be done, and I don't think Tiger would disagree. But he would find a way to work twice as hard to make sure it didn't happen. And that's the difficult part."

Doug Ferguson covers golf for The Associated Press. Send comments to dferguson@ap.org.

NHL should downsize if it wants to grow in U.S. market

By WILLIAM HOUSTON
TORONTO GLOBE AND MAIL

COLUMN

The most unexpected story of 2006 might have been the decline of the National Hockey League in the United States, despite the improvements made in the game.

Hockey has never had much appeal outside its traditional markets, but attendance problems and poor television ratings sounded alarm bells in virtually all of the league's U.S. cities.

"Hockey Night in Canada" host Ron MacLean said he believes the game is in trouble because of the officiating, that penalty-riddled games are driving fans away.

But MacLean's is a voice in the wilderness. Most see the new NHL, without hooking, holding and interference, as far superior to the scrum league of the 1990s.

The NHL's problems today started with expansion of the 1990s. The league now goes to the marketplace with 30 mediocre franchises and says: "Here we are." To which the consumer says: "You've got to be kidding." The NHL has too many teams, and there isn't enough talent to go around.

Just to ensure everlasting mediocrity, the league negotiated a collective bargaining agreement that makes it impossible for teams to keep their top players and build perennial winners.

We'll never again see the likes of the Montreal Canadiens of the 1970s, the Edmonton Oilers of the 1980s or even the Pittsburgh Penguins of the early 1990s.

And, because of the salary-cap limitations imposed by the collec-

tive bargaining agreement, trades have all but disappeared.

So, two basic elements that inspire interest and excitement in a sport, glamour teams and the potential for big trades, have been eliminated.

How do you fix the problem? You start by shrinking the league.

When a team flounders, the NHL should buy it with the goal to reducing the number of teams to 28 (four seven-team divisions) and the long-term objective of getting it down to 24 (four six-team divisions).

The league could finance its purchase of a redundant franchise by auctioning off the players to the highest bidder. Would the New York Rangers pay \$25 million for Sidney Crosby?

Making the NHL smaller would consolidate talent, upgrade the caliber of each team and improve the overall quality of the

product. The collective bargaining agreement's salary cap could be adjusted to be made more flexible, allowing a team to spend the money needed to keep its core players together. A superior product would improve everything: interest, media attention, attendance and regional television ratings.

The howls you are hearing are from the NHL's front office.

"But we need our 24 U.S. markets to grow our national TV ratings," the league will say. "We need more teams, not fewer."

Wrong. Expansion for the sake of filling a TV market or moving to a city because it happens to have an empty arena is what got the NHL into this mess. The idea of the NHL adding even more franchises, to Kansas City, Mo., Las Vegas or Oklahoma City, Okla., is a hockey fan's worst nightmare.

What's more, expansion in the United States hasn't helped national TV ratings. The numbers have dropped during the past 13 years.

So, you give up on the impossible dream of making hockey a national U.S. sport.

Why should sports fans in Albuquerque, N.M., pay any attention to a winter sport, anyway?

You retrench. You get smaller but stronger and better. You focus on improving the caliber of play and growing the popularity of the sport in each region.

If the NHL stays the course and moves toward further expansion, sooner than later its most important base, the Canadian market, will tune out.

William Houston is a columnist for the Toronto Globe & Mail. Send comments to truh@globeandmail.com.



AP PHOTO

The Maple Leafs' Ian White, back, takes down the Boston Bruins' Yan Stastny during the third period of Monday's game in Toronto.

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