

SPORTS / GOLF

Tiger Woods inspired golfers across New York area



Tiger Woods watches his tee shot on the first hole during the first round of the PNC Championship in Orlando, Fla., on Dec. 19, 2020. Credit: AP/Phelan M. Ebenhack

By Jeff Williams

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When Callen Williams was 6 years old, his father, Derri, showed him a Newsday clipping about Tiger Woods winning a major tournament. Williams, of Hempstead, already had taken to the game and had joined the golf program of the First Tee of Nassau County at Eisenhower Park.

Williams, who is Black, is now the assistant program director of that First Tee and sees Woods as the inspiration for sticking with the game.

"My dad says older kids might be teasing you about playing golf," said the 25-year-old Williams on Wednesday, the day after Woods' traumatic car crash in California. "But I want you to know there are people who look like you who are out there and play the game. I was amazed that someone who won a major event looked like me, so every time I would see him play or hear about him, it motivated me to continue to play golf."

The inspirational nature of Tiger Woods and his effect on the game of golf was a universal theme throughout the Long Island golf community during a series of interviews on Wednesday.

The First Tee's regional director for Nassau County, Justin Draycott, also attested to being motivated by Woods. Draycott, who lives in Brightwaters and attended Bay Shore High School, graduated from there in 1997, the same year Woods won his first major, the Masters.

"Tiger was a huge influence on my golf upbringing," Draycott said. "I think he was for a lot of kids in this area, it's a diverse area here in Bay Shore. You have country club kids and you have municipal course kids. Tiger appealed to both. I saw Tiger growing up my whole time that I knew golf. Always a huge influence."

Bob Posillico, head pro at Eisenhower Park, vividly remembers following around Woods at the 1996 Masters. Woods was then still an amateur.

"At the Masters we literally walked two feet away from him the entire round of golf and I came home with stories about how you can't believe how far this guy hits the ball," Posillico said. "I came home and nobody heard of the guy and I said you can't believe how good he is."

It was that year that Posillico started running the junior golf programs at Oyster Bay Golf Course. The following year Tiger won the Masters and his star power swept across the nation, bringing young people to the game.

"It was the biggest boom for junior golf that I had ever seen," Posillico said. "We just saw the influx into junior golf. For the first time it was cool to play golf for a kid. It was a cool thing. Kids were trying out for high school teams and playing golf and it was OK to do that. Before it was almost a stigmatism to play golf as a kid."

Charlie Robson is the retired executive director of the Metropolitan PGA and helped form the umbrella First Tee of Metropolitan New York, headquartered at the Mosholu Golf Course in the Bronx, in 2001.

"We made sure we had a location like Mosholu to meet the needs of communities that Tiger was bringing into the game," Robson said. "It's hard to say what direct effect he had. He elevated the brand of golf to a larger market than we had ever seen before. Was great to be part of that from the Met PGA standpoint."

"Tiger really inspired a generation of kids," said Ed Brockner, executive director of the Metropolitan First Tee. "It made golf seem more welcoming for people from all backgrounds. I don't know if there would be a First Tee if there wasn't a Tiger Woods."

When Draycott heard of Woods' accident and subsequent speculation on the future of his career, one name came to mind—Ben Hogan. Hogan was involved in a near fatal head-on collision with a bus in Texas, in February of 1949. He astoundingly came back to win 12 tournaments, including six majors.

"When I heard of Tiger getting in the accident, I immediately thought of Ben Hogan, who had a major accident," Draycott said. "I thought maybe Tiger could pull another comeback."

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