

The Greatness Gap

There is excellence, and there is greatness—cosmic, transcendent, Einsteinian. We know it when we see it, we think. But how to measure it? Among Tiger Woods' varied contributions to contemporary American life is that he shows us how.

As just demonstrated yet again at the US Open, Woods is the greatest golfer who ever lived. How do we know? You could try Method 1: Compare him directly with the former greatest golfer, Jack Nicklaus. For example, take their total scores in their first 22 major championships (of which Nicklaus won seven, Woods eight). Nicklaus was 40 strokes over par; Tiger was 81 under—an astonishing 121 strokes better. But that is not the right way to compare. You cannot compare greatness directly across the ages. There are so many intervening variables: changes in technology, training, terrain, equipment and often rules and customs.

How then do we determine who is greatest? Method 2: the Gap. Situate each among his contemporaries. Who towers? Who is, like the US today, a hyper power with no second in sight?

The mark of true transcendence is running along. Nicklaus was great, but he ran with peers: Palmer, Player, and Watson. Tiger has none. Of the past 11 majors, Woods has won seven. That means whenever and wherever the greatest players in the world gather, Woods wins twice and third trophy is distributed among the next, oh, 150.

In 2000-01, Woods won four majors in a row. The *Washington Post's* Thomas Boswell found that if you take these four and add the 2001 Players Championship (considered the next most important tournament), Tiger shot a cumulative 1,357 strokes—55 strokes better than the next guy.

To find true greatness, you must apply the “next guy” test. Then the clouds part and the deities appear. In 1921 Babe Ruth hit 59 home runs. The next four hit 24, 24, 23 and 23. Ruth alone hit more home runs than half the teams in the major leagues.

In the 1981-82 season, Wayne Gretzky scored 212 points. The next two guys scored 147 and 139. Not for nothing had he been known as the Great One—since age nine.

Gaps like these are as rare as the gods that produce them. By 1968, no one had ever long-jumped more than 27 ft. 4-3/4 in. In the Mexico City Olympics that year, Bob Beamon jumped 29 ft. 2-1/2 in.—this in a sport in which records are broken by increments of a few inches, sometimes fractions. (Yes, the air is thin in Mexico City, but it was a legal jump and the record stood for an astonishing 23 years.)

In physics, a quantum leap means jumping to a higher level without ever stopping—indeed, without even traveling through—anywhere in between. In our ordinary understanding of things, that is impossible. In sports, it defines greatness.

Not only did Michael Jordan play a game of basketball so beautiful that it defied physics, but he racked up numbers that put him in a league of his own. Jordan has averaged 31 points a game, a huge gap over the (future) Hall of Famers he played against (e.g., Karl Malone, 25.7; Charles Barkley, 22.1).

The most striking visual representation of the Gap is the photograph of Secretariat crossing the finish line at the Belmont Stakes, 31(!) lengths ahead of the next horse. You can barely see the others—the fastest horses in the world, mind you—in the distance.

In 1971, Bobby Fischer played World Championship elimination rounds against the best players on the planet. These were open-ended matches that finished only when one player had won six games. Such matches could take months, because great chess masters are so evenly matched that 80% of tournament games end in draws. Victories come at rare intervals; six wins can take forever. Not this time. Fischer conducted a campaign unrivaled since Scipio Africanus leveled Carthage. He beat two challengers six games in a row, which combined with wins before and after, produced a streak of 20 straight victories against the very best—something never seen before and likely never to be seen again.

That's a Gap. to enter the pantheon—any pantheon—you've got to be so far above and beyond your contemporaries that is said of you, as Jack Nicklaus once said of Tiger Woods, "He's playing a game I'm not familiar with."

The biologist and philosopher Lewis Thomas was asked what record of human achievements he would launch into space to be discovered one day by some transgalactic civilization. A continual broadcast of Bach would do, Thomas suggested, through "that would be boasting."

Why not make a music video? A Bach fugue over Tiger hitting those miraculous irons from the deep rough onto the greens at Bethpage Black. Nah. The aliens will think we did it all with computer graphics.

- Charles Krauthammer
The Point of It All
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