

The Streak ends: Woods falters at Buick

■ Tiger made a comeback on the back nine, but a three-putt bogey finished off the victory string.

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Streak ended in style.

Tiger Woods defied the odds once again by erasing a seven-stroke lead in just seven holes. Just as quickly, he fell victim to his own mistakes and a sudden revival by Phil Mickelson.

The longest PGA Tour winning streak in 52 years stopped Sunday in the Buick Invitational, where Mickelson won for the first time in 18 months and left Byron Nelson's record run of 11 straight victories as the standard.

"At least I made it interesting for Phil," Woods said.

In a final round packed with as much drama as a major championship, Mickelson recovered from two double bogeys with back-to-back birdies that finally gave him a lead too large even for Woods to overcome.

Mickelson closed with a 2-under 70 for a four-stroke victory over Woods and Shigeki Maruyama, the 14th of his career. He finished at 18-under 270 and earned a career-high \$540,000.

"I have a lot of confidence after this week," Mickelson said. "I tackled the best in the world, and I won."

And so, the guy who started The Streak finally ended it six months later.

Mickelson was the first victim in a streak that began with Woods' one-stroke victory in the NEC Invitational in August.

This time, Woods was seven strokes down with 12 holes to play. Six holes later, Woods pointed at the cup as his ball fell to the bottom for a 5-foot birdie on the 13th hole that gave him a share of the lead at 15-under.

Shocked at his sudden collapse on a course where he grew up, Mickelson finally answered. After pushing his tee shot under a eucalyptus tree and having to lay up, he hit a 116-yard wedge to 2 feet for birdie to regain the lead.

And then Woods finally blinked. With only a 9-iron in his hand, he was 25 feet right of his target, above the hole on No. 14, blew his putt 6 feet by and missed it coming back — a three-putt bogey, after taking only 15 putts on his first 13 holes.

Mickelson, watching from the fairway as Woods made his first bogey in 44 holes, dropped a wedge into 6 feet for birdie and a three-stroke lead.

Woods bogeyed the next hole from the bunker, and a smile crept over his face.

"It means I came in second," Woods said, who joins Ben Hogan in 1948 with six-tournament winning streaks.

And it means Nelson, who set his remarkable record in 1945, can rest easy — for now.

It was a heart-pumping end to a streak that captured the imagination of the entire tour. And it did nothing to diminish the fact that Woods' dominance of his generation may be greater than any other player's in golf history.

"It's disappointing I didn't win," Woods said. "I just wasn't hitting it

good enough to give myself a viable chance down the stretch, and it finally caught up with me. To even be under par ... was kind of a miracle.

"Even though I put myself in a good spot, I wasn't really playing well enough to win. To even be under par ... was kind of a miracle."

Woods hit only 10 greens in regulation and missed eight fairways, but he still scraped together a 68, and he still gave Mickelson a major scare.

Maruyama had a 72 in his quest to become the first Japanese player since Isao Aoki in 1983 to win on the PGA Tour.

Mickelson, who was tied for 134th in final-round scoring last year and only two weeks ago blew a final-round lead in Phoenix with a 40, showed the kind of courage that may help him win his first major championship down the road.

Don't be surprised if Woods is there waiting for him. While the streak is over, Woods still has not finished worse than seventh in a stroke-play tournament since April.

Woods has developed such a commanding presence on tour that he was asked on the eve of the final round which players might make a run at him — even though he was six shots out of the lead.

And while Mickelson had control on a course he calls home, there was enough tension in the cool, damp air to make the final round of the Buick Invitational feel like a green jacket would be slipped over the champion's shoulders at the end of the day.

A gallery that swelled to 35,000 — unheard of for this tournament — desperately wanted to be witness to another Woods comeback.

"I just wasn't hitting it good enough to give myself a viable chance down the stretch, and it finally caught up with me."

Tiger Woods
golfer

It looked early as though luck would be on Woods' side when his drive headed left for the gallery, struck the leg of an aluminum beach chair and kicked out in the fairway. From there, Woods laced an approach that landed 7 feet left of the hole.

He made the putt and pumped his fist pretty hard for such a short putt, especially one so early in the round. It was a clear sign that while Woods had not been wrapped up in The Streak — he had a high school pal on his bag this week — the fire to win burns every week.

Mickelson had plenty of fire, too, and played like someone trying to protect his home turf. He used to play the front nine of Torrey Pines South three times a week when he was in high school, and he made it look easy.

After struggling to make three pars, Mickelson smoked his driver 318 yards down the fourth fairway. A 10-foot birdie followed on the next hole, and his 40-foot eagle putt on No. 6 just dropped below the hole for a tap-in birdie.

That put him at 19-under, still seven strokes clear of Woods and four ahead of a fading Maruyama.

No problem, right? Mickelson was a 13-time winner on the PGA Tour, not a 28-year-old

rookie like Matt Gogel, who ballooned to a 40 on the back nine at Pebble last week that gave Woods the help he needed to win his sixth in a row.

Just like that, however, the comfortable margin turned into a throat-gripping finish.

From the seventh fairway, Mickelson hit a wild approach that landed just in front of a tree and restricted his swing. Double bogey.

On the par-3 11th, he missed the green and chucked his first chip so badly it stayed in the rough. Double bogey.

After two par saves, Woods hit his approach into No. 12 to 3 feet for birdie, then tied Mickelson for the lead with another birdie on No. 13. He wasn't spectacular, but his presence alone was a factor.

As Davis Love III said earlier in the week, "Jack Nicklaus won a lot of golf tournaments by having his name up there, not by how he played coming down the stretch. Guys believe sometimes more in other people's game than their own."

Mickelson had every reason to believe in Woods. But the guy who has had problems closing out tournaments finally believed more in himself.

Shaq, Duncan double as MVPs in all-star contest

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Shaq showed his power and glimpses of finesse, too. And Tim Duncan was his usual long-armed presence in the middle with great touch, reaching above the pack for inside baskets and stuffs.

Who was more important for the West in its 137-126 All-Star victory over the East on Sunday? It was a tossup, so much so that Shaquille O'Neal and Duncan shared the MVP award in the 49th game.

"Shaq's a force to deal with night in and night out," Duncan said of his co-winner.

"You don't see many MVP guys who can go inside and outside," O'Neal said, returning the praise.

It marked just the third time in All-Star history there had been a co-MVP and first since 1993 when Utah teammates Karl Malone and John Stockton shared the award following the game at Salt Lake City.

In 1959, Elgin Baylor of Minneapolis and Bob Pettit of St. Louis were co-winners.

O'Neal didn't even play the fourth quarter because he had a sore shoulder. Before he left, he showed the versatility and the brute strength that on many nights makes him unstoppable.

He dribbled coast-to-coast for a finger roll layin in the first half, he banked in short jumpers and he drove down numerous dunks — one after he got alone for a 360-degree spin-and-stuff that the public address announcer summed up as "Shaq slam."

"I told Kobe (Bryant) if I got a break, I'd do something nasty. I was going to windmill but my shoulder gave out, so I just did a little 360," O'Neal said.

And on his ball-handling exhibition from one end to the other?

"I saw an opening. I just took a couple of dribbles with long strides and laid it up," said the 7-foot-1, 315-pound O'Neal.

"It was our size against their quickness. On this day size won."

Tim Duncan
All-Star game co-MVP

Duncan's steady play that led the Spurs to their first title last year was evident all day as he hit 12-of-14 shots.

His most pronounced dunk came in the final minutes after the West had pulled away when he took a nifty blind pass from Kevin Garnett and drove the ball down with his left hand, punctuating the victory.

"Kevin just made a great pass to me. I went up and Zo (Alonzo Mourning) was there and the ball just went down for me," Duncan said.

"This is the kind of game where you have to get out and run and know the ball is coming. You have to keep your hands up."

O'Neal, finished with 22 points and nine rebounds. Duncan had 24 points and grabbed 14 rebounds, seven on the offensive end.


"It was our size against their quickness," Duncan said. "On this day size won."

O'Neal said he enjoyed his seventh NBA All-Star game and not just because he shared an MVP award.


"Watching Vince Carter win the slam dunk contest. I've never seen anybody do stuff like that," O'Neal said.

"Now that I've become a veteran, I rested a little more and I took in some of the festivities. When I was younger, all I did was party, party."

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