

If Only Life Imitated Art

By **John Quinn MSc IT**, Published on December 6th, 2009

A scratch handicap is the elusive Holy Grail for the majority of the world's golfers. For Tiger Woods, the greatest golfer and highest earning sportsman in the world, the scratch or two he sustained in a recent domestic incident at his home in Florida not only tarnished his physical appearance but his obsessive desire for privacy could be fatally compromised. The symbiotic media relationship which celebrities cultivate to project a positive public image will in moments of vulnerability rebound and overwhelm even the most powerful of felines. Tiger, the most PR conscious athlete on earth has now become the victim of a media monster that he helped create but is no longer able to control. Hiding this week from a golf tournament that he himself promotes is further evidence if any were needed of this new humbling state of affairs.

Meanwhile over on Sky News, the media frenzy surrounding the incident continued with gusto. Sky stubbornly persisted with its headline story of a car crash resulting in serious injury when it was patently obvious from early on that the incident was minor in nature. Other mainstream media outlets put it more succinctly, describing it as more a case of *'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Hydrant'*. The cynic with justification would be inclined to the view that coverage of a golfing sensation lying prostrate in hospital during golf's annual quiet period would do nicely for Sky's revenue stream. His travails could be forensically deliberated upon during a protracted period of recuperation. With any luck his recovery would be timed to feature in Sky's golf coverage in the New Year which incidentally cost the broadcaster an undisclosed fee to the US PGA Tour. Alas, the Sky marketing department will now have to dig deeper or be fortunate enough to unearth another story of stature to boost advertising revenue and sell more subscriptions to offset the cost of this coverage.

The celebrity obsessed National Enquirer and other locusts from this journalistic genre have also got in on the act having managed to instantly transform Tiger Woods from a national sporting icon to an object of tabloid fascination. They exhibit no qualms about reducing his personal and professional reputation to shreds without any consideration for the consequences of their actions.

These journalists are hungry, relentless, fearless and generally merciless celebrity stalkers who will stop at nothing to bag that exclusive story or photograph. Other journalists with a genuine interest in the sport of golf would empathise with Tiger and his family's plight and simply move on to the next event. In passing though, the golfer cannot but marvel at just how good a golf swing Elin has having made such quick work of that massive 4-wheel drive Cadillac SUV; probably using a 4-Iron. If nothing else, she has struck a blow for global warming. It is often said that *'all political careers end in failure'*, perhaps what we are witnessing here is the logical outworking of a media relationship of another public figure grown stale, ultimately souring and inevitably resulting in breakdown and recrimination.

Other famous personalities and their relationship with the media come to mind. The late Princess Diana in a 1995 televised interview with the BBC reporter Martin Bashkir candidly discussed her private life. During a protracted and sympathetic discussion, Diana talked about her love affair with James Hewitt, her riding trainer, and acknowledges the pain her husband's relationship with Camilla Parker-Bowles caused her. She also opened up about her depression and bulimia as well as her children and the media. Whether or not this interview was contrived is a moot point, clearly it had the effect of media and public alike being favourably disposed to the image of a beautiful yet hapless princess trapped in a loveless marriage.

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In contrast, the paparazzi car chase which resulted in Diana's death illustrates the darker side of a media relationship in which they were more interested on the price on her head than in any genuine desire to come to the aid of a dying princess.

Tiger Woods obsessive desire for privacy is interesting and perhaps it is no coincidence that his \$20 million 155ft yacht is also called 'Privacy'. In an excerpt from a statement issued on his Web site about the domestic incident, he also refers to privacy. He continues, *'I would also ask for some understanding that my family and I deserve some privacy no matter how intrusive some people can be'*. The need for privacy is understandable but is Tiger compounding his vulnerability by unwittingly setting himself up as a high value target for ambitious journalists who consider it a rite of passage to land some blows on this coolest and cleanest of heroes? His alleged involvement with other women may be just the opening they have been yearning for. Granted these issues are not about substance but so be it as any opening will suffice because to the unscrupulous journalist, it is equivalent in scale to a hacker breaching the computer systems of the Pentagon. Now that Tiger has chosen or advised to continue on this path, it is likely that the war of attrition will continue and as a result his relationship with the media will become even more paranoid.

The more substantive issues surrounding the Tiger Woods phenomenon do not appear to be subject to the same rigorous scrutiny as that of his more innocuous private affairs. His career earnings to date represent a staggering \$92 million and with advertising and endorsements he has become the first billion dollar athlete in history. Chevron, tournament sponsors for this week's Tiger promoted golf event entered a five-year so called philanthropic relationship with the Tiger Woods foundation in 2008. This company to whom Tiger is closely linked is fighting lawsuits all over the world for dumping toxic waste in Alaska, Angola, Brazil, California and Canada.

Worse still Chevron has a partnership with Burma's reviled ruling military junta on the country's Yadana gas pipeline project. This project is worth \$5 billion since its inception in 2000. Tiger has the opportunity to continue with his newly acquired taste for open dialogue with the media. He could reply to an open letter from Ka Hsaw Wa, co-founder and executive director of EarthRights International who has brought these unseemly matters to his attention.

In its nascent stage, the celebrity media relationship is a win-win situation, the *'am I a celebrity, get me in there'* manages to mould a public image to its own design and the media is happy to oblige while its circulation figures continue to improve. Somewhere down the line the relationship grows stale, ultimately sours and the celebrity has suddenly lost control of a carefully crafted and cherished public image. In the overall scheme of things, the Tiger Woods incident lacks substance but on a personal level, he is being devastated by a media frenzy that shows no sign of abating. Unfortunately for Tiger this humbling state of affairs is a classic case of the monster turning upon and threatening to devour its once unassailable benefactor. His latest media statement attempting to clarify matters has unwittingly stoked this media frenzy. He could learn from a late fellow resident of Florida in his much more circumspect dealings with the media. Citizen Kane's utterance of the single word *'Rosebud'* in the movie of the same name managed to thwart the media for what seemed like an eternity. Tiger's media relationship would be much more manageable, if only life imitated art or is the other way around? A less PR conscious figure would gamble and double-up to utter the most celebrated of two-word expletives to the media and then just get on with life because it really is none of their business is it?