Tiger and the need to complicate the world we grew up in



The year is kicking off with what's becoming a loose tradition: a documentary about a renowned '90s athlete that aims to shade in a more complete picture. This time around, it's *Tiger*, a two-part HBO Sports documentary about golf superstar Tiger Woods. Like *The Last Dance*, which chronicled Michael Jordan's final season with the Chicago Bulls while reflecting on his entire career, *Tiger* attempts to complicate the prevailing narrative of a legend defined by his meteoric rise and equally steep fall.

Even if you didn't know golf, you probably knew about Tiger Woods. If you came of age in the '90s or early aughts, it was impossible to not know about the man who brought raucous, Michael Jordan-levels of celebrity to golf – a sport so traditionally restrained that Adam Sandler was able to make a hit comedy where the only real joke was "what if a golfer got real pissed off all the time?"

Tiger Woods was a phenomenon. He had the sort of generational talent that becomes synonymous with a sport while simultaneously redefining what's possible – despite (or because of) the fact he was so different from what came before. It also might be why Tiger Woods' fame as a golfer was equally matched by his notoriety as gossip fodder, as his addictions and indiscretions piled up for a fall as ravenously chronicled as his rise.

Throughout most of its roughly three-hour runtime, *Tiger* feels like a *Behind the Music* special narrowly focused on Tiger's life: directors Matthew Heineman and Matthew Hamachek are very interested in Woods' early years as a child prodigy and the complicated relationship the golfer had with his controlling father. It's against this backdrop that *Tiger* holds the golfer's entire career and public life up for scrutiny: it portrays his unprecedented successes as owed in part to the arguably abusive upbringing his father gave him and his descent into painkiller addiction and infidelity as the response of a man who was lost after his father died.

For the most part, *Tiger* is successful at humanizing the person behind the headlines, even if it works at a remove. Woods himself mostly appears in archival footage, with the exception of a brief surprise appearance at the end of the film. His story is mostly told by the people who were around him at the heights of his renown: friends, rivals, journalists, and lovers form a motley crew of people caught up in the hurricane of his fame. It's a good exploration of the casual dehumanization that's part and parcel of modern celebrity, but at the same time, the film is so limited in scope that it can't quite escape the lurid fascination it's ostensibly critiquing. This is especially true in its second part, which veers into sensationalism by treating Woods' sex scandal – the second widest-known thing about him – as a suspense narrative.

Much like *The Last Dance*, *Tiger almost* hits the mark. But the

production is hindered by its subject's involvement. Woods didn't let anyone get too close to home, which means *Tiger* is missing the insight you can get with a strong critical lens. Both compensate for this by focusing on the phenomenon of fame over the men themselves. These are stories less about people and more about culture in a way that's wholly unique to professional sports.

Athletes make for a good measuring stick of our cultural biases because their existence tends to raise certain possibly uncomfortable questions: how much agency do we afford them? How much do we fixate on their perceived moral failings? How much pushback do we give when they don't stick to sports? Race is an inextricable part of these stories, too. Black athletes make millions for executives and entertain fans — which leads both groups to a strange feeling of ownership over them. It manifests as a benevolent frenzy when they are performing, and it can be terrifyingly hostile when they are not.

For Woods, that sense of public ownership manifested itself in the continual headlines in the early 2000s about his bad behavior. He wasn't punished by the public just because of a salacious tabloid culture; he was punished because people felt like he tarnished the lily-white image of professional golf. He stepped out of line. It's not hard to make the leap to other unfairly maligned athletes: Colin Kaepernick overstepped when he protested police brutality; Serena Williams has been raked over the coals for not being "sportsmanlike enough," which is code for, ironically, what happens when a woman behaves like one of her male colleagues. Some people who like the Lakers hate that LeBron James is vocal about current events. These biases aren't new, and they're not going anywhere. They're a part of how we tell our pop culture stories, bad-faith arguments that often dictate how these stories are framed in our memory.

Yet the first draft of a celebrity narrative is rarely an accurate one. It's a managed story, carefully orchestrated by

publicists and corporate interests. Star power means money, and money must be protected — yet celebrity also dictates that famous people appear relatable, that the wider public be privy to some aspects of their personal lives. And thus, infamy is sticky. If you're Tiger Woods, the headlines can be hard to shake.

It's also rare that pop culture affords the notorious a careful reappraisal. Lately, the stars of '90s gossip headlines are getting a better rap than most, sitting at the confluence of an industry in dire need of content and an audience voracious for new stories about the heroes they grew up with. Though it's imperfect, *Tiger* can serve as a reminder that the easy stories aren't necessarily the ones we should be telling. In truth, we *should* meet our heroes — and think about who the villains really are, too.

https://www.theverge.com/2021/1/23/22245068/tiger-woods-tiger-documentary-review-hbo-sports-comeback