

Top players left awestruck by Tiger Woods' streak

by Johnny Paul
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PEBBLE BEACH, Calif. — Tom Lehman, perhaps the PGA Tour's sharpest player entering Thursday's AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am, painted a lighthearted picture of Tiger Woods' assault on history.

"Let's just say that if he gets to about eight or nine . . . he'll wear his cap backward. He'll do everything the exact same way for about the next three tournaments," Lehman said regarding Woods' streak of five consecutive PGA Tour victories.

Woods can match Ben Hogan's 1948 string of six consecutive victories — the second-longest streak in tour history — by winning this weekend, although Lehman suggested confidently that "all good things must come to an end." Who, though, in this 180-member field will challenge the planet's best player? Who will derail the Tiger Express before Woods threatens Byron Nelson's 55-year-old record of 11 consecutive victories?

"It's going to take someone to stuff it in his face a couple of times coming down the stretch to knock him off that," Davis Love III said.

Lehman, who won the Phoenix

Open on Sunday, could emerge as the one who terminates the streak, an accomplishment Woods continued to downplay yesterday.

"To be honest with you, I still don't really consider it [five] because it's over two seasons," said Woods, who won the final four PGA Tour events he entered to close 1999 and the Mercedes Championships on Jan. 9 in his only Tour appearance this season.

"People forget that I played three tournaments in between the two regular seasons. I've won two out of three. I guess that counts for something, but I don't know if it's [five] or not. I'm counting that I've won this year once and trying to win two in a row."

Mark O'Meara, a five-time winner at Pebble Beach and Woods' neighbor, suggests that maybe he should crack his friend's "ankle or something with one of my practice swings.

"I think that may be the only way you can stop Tiger Woods," O'Meara said. "I think he's going to continue on this little ride. I wouldn't be surprised come Sunday afternoon if Tiger Woods is in contention here at Pebble Beach."

But being in contention does not satisfy Woods' thirst for victory, and

second place holds no appeal for the world's No. 1-ranked player.

"I've never liked it," Woods said. "I don't understand why people are satisfied with that because that's not the ultimate goal — at least that's not mine. My ultimate goal is to win, and anything short of that I'm always going to be disappointed with because I didn't accomplish my goal." The ultimate goal, though, one that has been forced upon him by the media and by his fans, is to catch and pass Nelson.

Woods views Nelson's signature achievement as "incredible" and recognizes the legend's stellar play during "The Streak." Nelson's 68.14 scoring average for the nine medal-play events during his streak betters Woods' 68.20 average through his five consecutive victories.

"He beat some great players, but more importantly, if you look at his stroke average, he really did play well," Woods said. "It wasn't like he was just getting tournaments handed to him. He was going out there and beating players."

Woods also hasn't had any tournaments "handed" to him. He, too, has shown mettle in tough victories, including a playoff win against Ernie Els in the Mercedes Championships. The world's top players are taking

notice.

Love views Woods' recent success as the "modern-day equivalent" of Nelson's streak. "I think the competition now is just so hard," Love said. "Winning that many in a row is . . . kind of inconceivable."

Woods enters this tournament with the confidence to match the waves from Monterey Bay that crash Pebble Beach's shoreline. "It is pretty high now because I've had a lot of success lately," Woods said. "More importantly, I know how to get it around when I'm not playing that well. There were times when I didn't play that well and was able to score and get the round in under par somehow and just kind of hang in the tournament and go on to win despite not playing that well."

Woods, recall, fired a third-round 66 at the National Car Rental Golf Classic at Walt Disney World Resort despite hitting only nine greens in regulation en route to his second consecutive victory. "I've just never seen anyone with more talent that what he has," said O'Meara, who joined the PGA Tour in 1981. "Plus, he has a tremendous desire to win. He wants to win, and it's not just about the money. He just wants to win golf tournaments."

Rocker suspended until May 1

by Joseph Person
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ATLANTA — More than a month after John Rocker touched off a national firestorm with his derogatory remarks, the Braves reliever has been suspended until May 1 and fined \$20,000 by Major League Baseball.

Rocker, the 25-year-old native of Macon, will not be eligible to play until May 1 — 28 days after Atlanta opens the regular season. Rocker also is not allowed to participate in spring training or "Camp Leo," the informal, pre-camp pitching workouts that begin today under Braves pitching coach Leo Mazzone.

Additionally, Rocker has been ordered to undergo sensitivity training for an undisclosed length of time, while the money from his fine will go toward a charity related to ethnic diversity.

The month-long suspension is the longest for any offense not drug-related since Texas' Lenny Randall received 30 days in March, 1977, for punching his manager, Frank Lucchesi. Rocker released a statement through his agent, Alan Hendricks, criticizing the decision.

"I do not believe it is appropriate that I should be harshly disciplined for my misguided speech unaccompanied by any conduct on my part," he said. "I have previously apologized for my unfortunate remarks, and I stand by my apology."

Gene Orza, the No. 2 official in the players' union, said his group plans to file an appeal on Rocker's behalf. "It is literally unprecedented to impose a penalty on a player for pure speech, offensive though the speech may be," Orza said. "That, coupled with the magnitude of the penalty, just as unprecedented, makes us optimisshock. I just think that's pretty harsh." Seanez said. "At the same time, since everything is all said and done with now, he knows what's going on and when he can

come back. He should just use this time to get ready to come back and be ready to go May 1."

Rocker will be eligible to re-join the organization on April 3 — either in extended spring training in Orlando or with one of the Braves' minor-league affiliates.

The hard-throwing lefty saved 38 games last year in his first season as Atlanta's closer, a role that will initially be filled by committee. Kerry Ligtenberg, the team's '97 closer, is coming back from reconstructive elbow surgery, while Seanez had arm trouble that sidelined him for the last six months of the season. Second-year righty Kevin McGlinchy also could be a closer candidate for April.

Said Schuerholz, "We'll have someone close our games. For a month we'll be fine."

In a *Sports Illustrated* article published Dec. 23, Rocker took shots at a variety of ethnic groups, as well as homosexuals and AIDS victims. He also anonymously referred to teammate Randall Simon as a "fat monkey."

"Major League Baseball takes seriously its role as an American institution and the important social responsibility that goes with it," Selig said in a written statement. "We will not dodge our responsibility. Mr. Rocker should understand that his remarks offended practically every element of society."

The Braves potentially faced a circus atmosphere in Orlando later this month had Rocker been there for the start of spring training. Schuerholz is hopeful that the media now will focus on baseball-related matters.

"Now that John won't be in camp, it will be a very straightforward issue," said Schuerholz. "It will be a topic that won't be discussed. We can go on and do our job."

Rocker made \$217,500 last year with the Braves, but is not yet under contract for next season. Schuerholz said the Braves have offered Rocker another one-year contract, which must be signed by March.

Kurt Warner doesn't expect big payday, but wants repeat performance

by David Newton
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ATLANTA — The Kurt Warner story isn't over. Asked Monday what he could do to top his rags-to-riches season that included a regular-season MVP award, a Super Bowl MVP award and a selection to the Pro Bowl, the St. Louis Rams quarterback didn't hesitate.

"Do the same thing. Get another ring," he said less than 12 sleepless hours after a 23-16 victory over the Tennessee Titans in Super Bowl XXXIV.

"I don't know if there is any other way to do it better than we did this year than to be able to repeat next year. Repeating is not out of the question."

The Rams (16-3) have just four starters older than 30 and only four free agents, of which only cornerback Todd Lyght is a major player. They also have enough room under the salary cap to tweak whatever weak spots are on the roster.

But it's doubtful they can duplicate the human drama of the season they just completed, going from 4-12 in 1998 to 16-3 and world champions. For Warner it may be downright impossible. No longer will he be looked at as the 28-year-old who five years ago was stocking shelves at a grocery store in Iowa, who three years ago was playing for the Iowa Barnstormers of the Arena League, who five months ago was a little-known backup without an NFL start under his belt. From now on he'll be looked at as one of the top quarterbacks in the NFL, one who on Sunday blew away Joe Montana's Super Bowl record for passing yards with 414 and became only the sixth player in league history to win the Super Bowl and regular-season MVP in the same season.

He'll be looked at as the one who put up Dan Marino-type numbers, passing for 41 touchdowns during the regular season and eight more in the playoffs, including the 73-yarder to Isaac Bruce with 1:55 remaining in one of the most dramatic title games.

In case you missed it, the outcome wasn't decided until Tennessee quarterback Steve McNair, an amazing story himself, had his final completion stopped 1-yard shy

of the goal line.

But that was on Sunday. Monday was about Warner, who by the time he arrived for an early-morning press conference with bags under his eyes, his commercial for Disneyworld had been shown on the network news. He probably had dozen of other calls from companies wanting him to endorse their products and from publishers wanting to copyright his seemingly unbelievable story.

"I want to take advantage of some things where I can go out and share my story a little bit, share my faith in God with some people and get an opportunity to use the position that has come upon me," Warner said from the ballroom at the Hyatt in Atlanta. "I guess I am going to have to sit down and check things out and see what I think is best for me and my family, and things that we might not get a chance to do ever again and take advantage of those."

Warner certainly will do what he can to take care of his family. His wife was on food stamps when they first met. He was making \$5.50 an hour at a grocery store while keeping his football dream alive. His 10-year-old stepson, Zachary, is partially blind because of a near-death accident when he was an infant. But because Warner is an exclusive rights free agent who played for the league minimum (\$254,000) this season, and because the Rams gave quarterback Trent Green a large contract to be their starter a year ago, there will be a limit as to how much they can reward their living legend immediately.

Fortunately for the Rams, Warner isn't the typical pro athlete. He's more concerned with keeping together the team and starting a dynasty than he is his net worth.

"A lot of things motivate different people," Warner said. "I hope I can play a big role in that. I am a guy that isn't necessarily motivated by money. Other things are more important to me, and hopefully that can rub off with some of the other guys."

"Obviously, we all want to take care of our family. But we need to look beyond some of the things to try to keep this team together because we do have something special. With just a little work on both ends, from the Rams and



KURT WARNER'S 1999 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- led the NFL in touchdown passes
- NFL regular season MVP
- Super Bowl MVP
- set Super Bowl record for passing yards
- Super Bowl champion
- Pro Bowl selection
- led the offense that scored the most points in NFL history

from the players, that we can keep this thing together for a long time."

Rams coach Dick Vermeil hopes so, although he refused to guarantee his return next season.

"No guarantees in anything," he said. "I will say the kind of people these guys are, with the leadership of Kurt and the other leaders that we already have under contract and the good organization of the salary cap and everything as it is, I think we will be able to keep this squad together."

The Rams in many aspects resemble the 49ers' dynasty of the 1980s. They have a brilliant, young quarterback, perhaps the best group of receivers in the NFL, the league's best all-purpose running back in Marshall Faulk and a defense that is young and talented. They also face higher expectations and a schedule that will be much tougher than the one they just completed. Other teams in recent history, such as the Atlanta Falcons last season, saw a dramatic falloff the year after reaching the Super Bowl.

"We have a motto," Vermeil said. "We don't care where we play, who we play and when we play. The only thing we care about is how we play. That motto will not change."

The only change Vermeil wants to see is for the better. He said the Rams can improve in all aspects, including Warner, whose passing rating led the NFL. Vermeil said he noticed late in the season that some of Warner's fundamentals began to deteriorate.

"We are going to have to treat him just like we would an offensive lineman you have to keep working on the fundamentals the pass drops and setups and the deliveries," Vermeil said. "I could see signs of him disintegrating a little bit because you only have so many hours on the field."

But before Warner returns to the Rams' practice field he has a trip to Honolulu for the Pro Bowl. "Obviously, we have another football game to play," Warner said. "But I heard it's a little more relaxed."

Witnesses say Derrick Thomas was speeding, changing lanes

by Shawna A. Hamel
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KANSAS CITY — Witnesses said Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Derrick Thomas was speeding and changed lanes frequently before his Jan. 23 accident, according to a Missouri Highway Patrol report released Tuesday. Thomas was seriously injured and passenger Michael D. Tellis died in the single-car accident about 1:30 p.m. on Interstate 435 near Woodland Avenue in Kansas City, North.

Thomas was westbound on I-435 when he lost control of his vehicle, which skidded off the left side of the hilly, snow-covered roadway and overturned at least three times before coming to rest on its wheels, the report said.

Shawn J. Farrell of Maryville told police he was driving the speed limit of 70 mph on westbound I-435 when Thomas' Suburban passed him and started swerving out of control, went into the median, and started rolling.

Vicky Wantland of Kansas City, North, and Judy Jenkins of Warrensburg told the Highway Patrol the accident happened this way: Wantland was driving about 50 mph in the right lane approximately seven car lengths behind a tractor-trailer. Jenkins was driving in the left lane two or three car lengths behind the tractor-trailer. Thomas' Suburban came up behind the two vehicles and moved to the left lane behind Jenkins' car. The Suburban then went back to the right lane and then cut between the tractor-trailer and Jenkins' car. Thomas' Suburban then cut left, went sideways, hit the median, and rolled at least three times.

Neither Thomas nor Tellis was wearing seat belts. Both were ejected through side windows. Thomas was

found in I-435's eastbound lanes. Tellis was found in the median next to Thomas' vehicle. A third passenger, John C. Hagebusch of Raymore, was wearing a seat belt and suffered minor injuries.

The Highway Patrol concluded the accident was caused by Thomas' driving too fast for the road conditions at the time. Highway Patrol Sgt. John Hotz said authorities would send a copy of the crash report to Clay County Prosecutor Don Norris if requested.

After viewing a copy of the report released Tuesday, Norris said there was insufficient evidence for him to charge Thomas. "I view reports presented to me as to whether I should issue something more serious than the traffic summons the officer could write," Norris said. "That is something the officer has to decide, whether to issue a traffic summons."

Hotz said Tuesday that the Highway Patrol had not written any traffic tickets against Thomas. Trooper Scott Meyer recently said that the department did not expect to seek careless and imprudent driving charges against Thomas at this time. The agency has up to a year to file charges.

Tellis' family has asked that charges against Thomas not be sought. Meyer said there was no evidence of drugs or alcohol having been involved in the crash. A toxicology report was not performed on Thomas, because state police did not have reasonable suspicion to request one, even though the accident resulted in a fatality, Hotz said.

A final autopsy report for Tellis was unavailable Tuesday. Thomas Young, Jackson County medical examiner, said he was waiting on the results of Tellis' toxicology tests. Initial tests showed no signs of alcohol in Tellis' blood at the time of the accident, Young said.