

Once More, With Feeling

Tiger Woods' 80th career PGA TOUR victory came in front of an enthusiastic gallery at East Lake Golf Club.

As Tiger Woods won for the first time since 2013, he was buoyed by the fans' enthusiastic support

By Stan Awtrey

There wasn't a nylon rope in Atlanta capable of holding back the overflow gallery on East Lake Golf Club's 18th hole as Tiger Woods walked toward the final green at the TOUR Championship in September.

Security teams threw up their hands in surrender as grown men and women, many holding the hands of their young sons and daughters, closed in to get an up-close glimpse at history.

Woods, wearing his traditional Sunday red shirt, finally emerged from the throng, following the lead blocking of the security team. He completed the emotional stroll, his lip quivering at times, and saved par from the bunker to nail down the win.

That set off an amazing roar from the crowd and gave Woods the opportunity to raise his putter aloft in victory for the first time in five long years. The only thing missing was one of those famous Tiger uppercuts.

"I could hear [the roars]. I just didn't see much," Woods said. "I was kind of looking forward and I figured that security would hold them back. When I got down to the golf ball, looked back and I think the left half of the fairway was covered."

It was a momentous triumph for Woods, who shot a 1-over 71 to finish at 11-under 269 and post a two-stroke win. It was No. 80 of his career—two shy of matching Sam Snead's PGA TOUR record—and the third time he has won the TOUR Championship.

"It was pretty emotional when Rory [McIlroy, his fellow competitor] was tapping out," Woods said. "I looked around and the tournament was over because I'd already put the bunker shot on the green and I'd won 80. Eighty is a big number. I've been sitting on 79 for about five years now, and to get 80 is a pretty good feeling."

Woods said the win did not reach the emotional level of his 2006 Open Championship victory at Hoylake, his first

major title after the death of his father, Earl. However, the circumstances that led to No. 80 made the win quite special.

"I've explained throughout the year that I just didn't know whether—when—this would ever happen again," Woods said. "If I could somehow piece together a golf swing this year, I felt like I could do it. Somehow I've been able to do that and here we are."

Woods had come close to winning several times in his comeback from spinal fusion. He held the lead on the back nine at The Open. He finished second at the PGA Championship, closing with a 64. But the man who used to make winning seem routine couldn't get over the hump. Until he got to East Lake.

Early in the week Woods told the media, "I'm close to winning golf tournaments again." He set the wheels in

motion with a 65 to take the first-round lead. That got the attention of the galleries, who had purchased tickets in record number when Woods qualified for the tournament. Over the next three days the roars grew louder and louder.

"You could really hear them," Australian Marc Leishman said. "There was [a roar] on the first seven or eight holes he played."

Rose heard them, too. "Obviously I was aware of it. The crowds were electric because of it. He was running the tables there. He was hitting good shots and making the conversion putts."

It culminated with outpouring of emotion on the 72nd hole, a meaningful display that the typically stoic Woods said he won't forget.

"It means a lot more to me now in the sense because I didn't know if I'd ever be out here again playing, doing this again," Woods said. "So yeah, I appreciate it a little bit more than I did because I don't take it for granted that I'm going to have another decade, two decades in my future of playing golf at this level."

On a stirring day at East Lake, the magic was in how the present resembled the past. ■



PGA TOUR Commissioner Jay Monahan congratulated Tiger Woods after his first triumph since 2013.