

All pro athletes are winners. They are better at what they do best than 99% of people are at doing anything and they've been winning games or matches for most of their lives. Only a select few athletes are champions, though. They are the ones who make you watch, who are compelling figures to even casual fans--guys like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods.



I'm not a "golf guy." I can't tell you which club a guy just used or which one he should have used instead but I understand the difference between winners and champions. Or, to put it a different way, the difference between Tiger Woods and Sergio Garcia, who just bungled away a chance to win the British Open.

Like I said, I am not going to tell you the technical details of why Garcia didn't win. I am going to go deeper and broader than that, because I know Tiger Woods. Not personally; in fact, I've never met him. But I know him. To be specific, I know his kind and I don't mean that in the way that certain people might have said those words when Woods first showed up in his lily-white (and I don't mean the golf balls) sport. Woods used to have a commercial in which various people said, "I am Tiger Woods." He could have had a commercial in which he said, "I am Michael Jordan." Or, "I am Gary Kasparov." Or, "I am Roger Federer." Those guys are all the same person, on the inside.

Yeah, I put a chess player in the mix, a guy who held the world champion title for two decades. Laugh if you must, but all of those champions have the same thing on the inside. It is a powerful mixture of intense concentration and focus on the task at hand, a fierce--and to the average person unnatural and almost incomprehensible--will to win and an equally fierce--and perhaps even more incomprehensible to the average person--hatred of losing. John McEnroe [alluded to this](#) after this year's Wimbledon tournament when he spoke to Jimmy Roberts about his famous 1980 finals match with Bjorn Borg. When McEnroe won the classic fourth set tiebreaker he thought that he had broken Borg's spirit. Young McEnroe, not yet a champion, figured that Borg had already won four Wimbledon titles, so after losing such a disheartening tiebreaker Borg might figure that it's just not his year. Instead, Borg dug deep within and played an almost flawless fifth set to win his record fifth straight Wimbledon crown. Even more than great champions love winning they hate losing, so they fight and scrap and claw. As Walter Payton put it, "Never die easy." There is a great line in a Prince song and--knowing Prince--he's probably referring to something else but it can be applied in this context: "I'll die but I won't go away." The great athlete knows that he is not immortal; he can be wounded, he can bleed, he is vulnerable but he won't go away, his spirit will not be bowed: if you want to beat him, you basically have to kill him (in a competitive sense).

Champions project a message to their opponents that induces fear and resignation. Opponents of former world chess champion Bobby Fischer used to call it "Fischer Fear." They used to say that they could feel his manic energy, his fierce will to win, across the chessboard. Michael Jordan's opponents used to feel a similar thing, as did Kasparov's and as do Woods' and Federer's. I believe that it was once said of Jack Nicklaus, another champion, "He knows that he's better than you, you know that he's better than you and he knows that you know that he's better than you." That is as good a way as any to sum it up. I've seen world class chess players in action and even played against a few and in the course of covering the NBA I've had an up close view of some of the greatest players of all-time and spoken to more than a few of them. They all have an edge, a presence, that distinguishes them even from the other great players, guys who are also marvelously gifted.

Let's get back to Garcia and Woods. Woods struggled with his game and was not a factor in this year's British Open. The funny thing is that even in a bad tournament he still tied for 12th. He had won the previous two British Opens and had tied for second in his last two major championships after winning the two major championships prior to that. Basically, Woods is almost always in contention in major championships and if his game is anywhere close to being right he has a great chance to win. I hear golf analysts make much of the fact that on the one hand Woods rarely gives up a lead on Sunday but on the other hand he has never come from behind on Sunday to win a major. I think that the former is much more significant than the latter. When Woods has his "A" game, as he would put it, he wins, point blank--he gets a lead, he keeps it and they put his name on the trophy. When he has his "B" or "C" game, he still may be in contention just because he is so good but someone else who is having the tournament of his life may end up winning.

Garcia had a three stroke lead coming into Sunday and a six stroke lead over Pdraig Harrington, who eventually defeated Garcia in a playoff. Garcia had his "A" game for much of the tournament but he did not win. That never happens to Woods. If Woods is playing his "A" game then, like Nicklaus, he knows that he is better than everyone else, everyone else knows it and he knows that everyone else knows it. When Jordan's Chicago Bulls reached the point that they were the NBA's best

team, they always won the title. Since Federer hit his stride a few years ago he has put together an amazing run of Grand Slam wins. Fischer once won 20 straight games against world class grandmasters without conceding a draw. I'm not sure how to translate that into terms that a conventional sports fan might understand but it would be something like the Miami Dolphins' 17-0 season--if the Dolphins had played a schedule stocked only with the Steelers, Raiders, Cowboys and other elite teams of the era.

It's not for me to say whether or not Garcia "choked" but it is obvious that the difference between he and Woods consists of more than just their ability levels. Champions dominate, champions break their opponents' wills and champions almost always find a way to win on the occasions when they have their "A" game. They are human beings, so they cannot have their "A" game every single time out, particularly in a game like golf--but they have their "A" game often and they win when they do. Champions may die but they won't go away. Garcia went away on Sunday and that is what makes him different from Tiger Woods.

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