

Mcllroy exactly what golf needs

Written by Brian Milne, founder of the BallHyped Sports News Service
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Can Rory Mcllroy fill Tiger Woods' shoes? He did at the U.S. Open.

Golf needed a Rory Mcllroy.

It needed a feel good moment. A comeback story. Someone to root for. Someone young and refreshing, who could breathe new life into a sport that had gone stale since its last young superstar melted down off the course.

Fortunately for Mcllroy, and his sport, his epic meltdown came on the course just a couple months earlier, and that Augusta-sized collapse was the inspiration for Sunday's runaway U.S. Open championship.

And it was fitting that Mcllroy's wire-to-wire finish was the first at the U.S. Open since Tiger Woods did so in 2002. He also became the youngest winner of a major since, you guessed it, Woods.

"He's the best player I've ever seen," defending champion Graeme McDowell said of Mcllroy. "... He's great for golf. He's a breath of fresh air for the game, and perhaps we're ready for golf's next superstar."

For many young golf fans, Mcllroy has made Tiger-less golf watchable again for the first time since Woods' off-the-course affairs became public in November 2009. The scandal, combined with injuries, has kept Woods in the tabloids but has also kept him off the course. Woods missed the U.S. Open because of lingering injuries to his left leg.

Woods has since lost his No. 1 ranking and has gone 22 tournaments without a win. His sport has also struggled during that stretch, with TV ratings and fan interest plummeting without Woods in contention (there have now been 12 straight majors without Tiger atop the leaderboard).

Not that you would have known it by the reception Mcllroy received at the Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Maryland. It was a Tiger-like atmosphere for Mcllroy all weekend, with the gallery chanting his name and hordes of fans, media and photographers chasing the 22-year-old from Northern Ireland around like a pack of star-struck teenagers.

"What happened at Augusta was a great thing for me in terms of support," Mcllroy said. "It's just been incredible the way people have supported me and cheered for me the whole week."

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“It feels like a home match. To be able to have that when you come over here and feel like you’re one of their own is probably going to be pretty important in the next few years.”

Important to American TV ratings as well.

While Sunday’s ratings were modest – Mcllroy’s runaway did take most of the drama out of the final round – but the numbers were better than expected for a Tiger-less event held during non-peak hours on Father’s Day. And even as an Irishman, Mcllroy has the skill and the personality to boost U.S. golf ratings moving forward, according to Rick Gentile, a former executive producer for CBS Sports.

“He’s such an incredibly likable kid that I do think the American audience will react to him,” Gentile told Bloomberg.com. “The idea of Tiger and Mcllroy head to head I’m sure has networks salivating.”

It has the fans, bloggers and media who follow the sport salivating too.

Because golf is such an individual sport, the PGA Tour’s success is tied to the success of its superstars, more so than any of the major sports leagues.

Baseball doesn’t need Derek Jeter to succeed. The NBA doesn’t need Kobe Bryant to succeed.

Heck, on the same day Mcllroy ran away with the U.S. Open, former NFL running back Tiki Barber acknowledged just that in an HBO report talking about his desire to return to pro football: “The game never needs you because there’s always someone else to come and take your place. But right now, I need the game.”

Right now, professional golf needs someone to replace its biggest, fallen star ... and it appears it may have found him in Rory Mcllroy.