

Prologue

A very small boy, only two, marched onto the set of *The Mike Douglas Show* back in 1978. He wore short pants and was adorably cute with bright brown eyes and a little golf bag over his shoulder with three clubs in it. The boy's father accompanied him. This tall, good-looking black man sported a red turtle-neck, gold chain, and an Afro in the Mod Squad style of the 1970s.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Earl and Tiger Woods!," announced Mike Douglas, the host of what was then America's most popular daytime talk show. His eclectic roster of A-list celebrities included the likes of John Lennon, John Wayne, Malcolm X, Frank Sinatra, and the yippie anarchist Jerry Rubin. The likable Douglas had his own fans. "The only white man who ever made me moist," according to Eddie Murphy's randy three-hundred-pound grandma character in *The Nutty Professor*.

Two Hollywood legends, Jimmy Stewart and Bob Hope, co-hosted the day the toddler Tiger appeared. It made for a funky crazy quilt of Americana: the two aging white movie stars looking a bit awkward in their sidekick roles, the tiny Southern California golf



prodigy with his black father and Thai mother. The studio audience laughed and applauded when the small boy gripped a club and smacked the ball straight into an indoor net. That Tiger was a little brown kid in what most Americans still thought of as a lily-white sport only added to the novelty.



Tiger Woods, at the age of two, on *The Mike Douglas Show* with (from left) Mike Douglas, Earl Woods, Bob Hope, and Jimmy Stewart, 1978.

Surely few viewers realized that they were witnessing a handover of the celebrity superstar baton. This toddler was not to be one of those child prodigies who flames out under unbearable expectations. Tiger would become perhaps the greatest golfer ever, and among the world's most famous faces. By his early thirties, he was a one-man multinational company, with enormous tournament winnings, corporate endorsements galore, the Tiger Woods EA Sports videogame franchise, and numerous other ventures. *Forbes* magazine heralded Woods as the first athlete to earn \$1 billion. He and his blond-haired, blue-eyed wife, Elin Nordegren, seemed the poster couple for a shiny new postracial America with their two young children, two dogs, and the fabulous riches of Tiger's golfing empire.

All that changed in 2009. On the day after Thanksgiving, the news broke that Tiger had been in a car accident the night before. He'd crashed his black Cadillac Escalade into a fire hydrant just beyond the driveway of his and Elin's luxury home in a Florida gated community. Only few days before, a story in the *National Enquirer* had linked Tiger to a New York nightclub hostess. Now speculation began that Tiger and Elin had fought on Thanksgiving night, this somehow leading to his crash. In the following weeks, in fact, more than a dozen

women came forward with tales of trysting with Tiger, among them a former reality-show contestant, a waitress, and a lingerie model. The scandal became headline news in *People*, *US*, and *Inside Edition*, as well as in supposedly more high-brow publications like the *New York Times*, not to mention fodder for countless jokes, blog posts, chat-room debates, and family conversations over holiday dinner. A Google search for “Tiger Woods scandal” quickly generated over one million hits.

That a famous golfer’s sex life should have garnered more coverage than, say, the latest about global warming or the war in Afghanistan was a peculiar and perhaps disturbing sign of the times. Millions followed Tigergate’s latest twists, but, just as many more were disgusted that it received so much attention and attempted to ignore the whole affair. As an anthropologist, however, I had a special interest in Tiger’s troubles. I teach a class about the anthropology of sports and, coincidentally, had been doing research about golf’s strange, sometimes surprising role in modern American society. I’d long been fascinated by Tiger, owning the dubious distinction of having organized the first and only academic conference about the great golfer’s role as a cultural icon and global brand. (Woods, perhaps justifiably enough, later snorted at a press conference about college professors not having anything “better to do” than sit around talking about him.) Although the ridicule may have been cosmic payback for his caddish behavior, I felt a bit sorry for Tiger, who had now become America’s favorite target for opprobrious commentary and late-night talk-show jokes, and much more so for Elin and their children. But Tigergate also offered a whole new view of Tiger and the mythology that had surrounded him, and, more important, of the nature of sports, scandal, and racial and sexual politics in the country at large. It was a research mother lode for anyone interested in the bizarre funhouse and horror show of twenty-first-century American life.

This book is an anatomy of Tigergate. A star golfer’s tabloid woes

might seem an odd, if not frivolous, topic for an anthropologist. Anthropology, derived from the Greek words *anthropos* and *logos*, means simply the study of the human life, and in particular the vast diversity of cultures, traditions, and beliefs around the world. But in the era of disciplinary legends like Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski, anthropologists really only studied so-called primitive peoples in the jungles, deserts, and islands of South Pacific, Africa, South America, and the planet's other far reaches. Those early researchers returned to write tomes with weighty titles like *The Mind of Primitive Man*, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, and *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*. They left the study of modern industrial society to sociology under the curious early-twentieth-century academic division of labor. Even today, the stereotype of the anthropologist remains a pith-helmeted, Banana Republic-garbed recorder of exotic native customs in some distant Third World locale.

It's no longer accurate. Although we have new bugaboos, like a fondness for pretentious jargon, anthropologists today have expanded their range to study anybody, just about anywhere. You'll still find us with notebooks in hand in African villages and the misty Andean countryside (where I did research for many years earlier in my career), but also now in French biotech labs, San Francisco's S&M clubs, and the boardrooms of Japanese toy companies. Thus far, few of us have trained what the author and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston once called "the spyglass of anthropology" on sports, and yet more seem likely to do so as the discipline continues to broaden its scope. After all, whether it be the pregame singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at an American baseball game or the bacchanalian Brazilian celebration of a winning World Cup goal, sports abound in myth, ritual, and symbolism, those traditional topics of anthropological investigation. Now, too, we live in the era of what writer Kevin Quirk calls "SportsGlutUSA." Continuous media coverage pipes the latest scores, signings, predictions, postmortems, and

scandals into living rooms, bars, gyms, and airport waiting lounges nationwide, and increasingly around the world (and you could follow Tigergate on *Al-Jazeera*, on the Paraguayan nightly news, and, of course, in the British tabloids). Sports have become too gigantic a part of global life for anyone to ignore, especially those of us who are supposed to be deciphering the workings of culture and society for a living.

As it happens, too, sports tell us more about ourselves and the world than one might expect. “Tell me what you play,” as the French sociologist Roger Caillois once explained, “and I’ll tell you who you are.” Whether yoga, yachting, squash, boxing, or basketball, every sport draws most heavily from certain demographics, each with a sociology of its own. You don’t find, for example, many impoverished teenage African American or Latino polo players (or, for that matter, white boxers from moneyed families). The larger tastes and temperament of a society may also sometimes be revealed in its games of choice. For example, Clifford Geertz, a well-known anthropologist, penned a classic essay that showed how a passion for cock-fighting—and especially the intricate wagering around a match—mirrored the preoccupations with status, hierarchy, and bluffing and illusion in traditional Balinese culture. The modern American love affair with the NFL points to our own national obsessions with, well, gaudy spectacles, male bonding, brutal violence, and cheerleaders in skimpy outfits. Sports hold a mirror to society, no matter whether we like what we see there or not.

As much as it may also be yesterday’s stale tabloid sleaze, the Tiger Woods scandal encapsulates a great deal about modern American realities. Most immediately, Tiger’s tale takes us into the world of golf and the game’s surprising place in our society. Golf has enough bizarre tribal customs to have delighted any old-time anthropologist, including those notorious plaid pants and an argot like “gimme,” “flier,” “scull,” “fuab,” “dogleg,” “double break,” and “chunk,” which only another fairway initiate will understand. But it

also occupies a much bigger part in American life than commonly assumed. Try taking the airplane test on your next flight: look out the window, and you'll notice courses everywhere down below. This nation has more than 17,000 golf courses, covering an area the size of Rhode Island and Delaware combined. They're as much a part of our strange modern ecology as the highway, the shopping mall, the reservoir, the strip mine, the missile silo, and the farm fields. More than twenty million Americans play golf; the golf industry employs another 400,000 between maintenance men, teaching professionals, driving-range operators, club industry executives, trade-magazine reporters, and many more. The first golf construction boom, just before the Great Depression, led the visiting Duke of Windsor to declare that America was "one vast golf course." It can seem truer than ever today.

I promise not to bore you with too much about golf in the following pages (and we'll soon get to the steamier topics of betrayal, raunchy sex, and race conflict). However, Tiger's case does afford an occasion for trying to figure out just why so many Americans play a game that many of their fellow citizens view as deadly dull or worse. That appeal has to do with the game itself and the special, sometimes addictive attraction it can exercise over those who take it up. (I must confess to being a golfer myself, though playing less often now after a string of back surgeries.) Golf has also long been the pastime of American business tycoons and politicians, all the way from Andrew Carnegie and William Howard Taft to Bill Gates, George W. Bush, and, yes, Barack Obama. A happy retirement to that gated Sunbelt golf community is the golden endpoint in a certain version of the American dream itself. At the same time, golf has always traced the fault lines of conflict, hierarchy, and tension in America, among them the archetypal divides of race and class. The fight to desegregate public golf courses and then professional golf, for example, is a fascinating, if little-known chapter in the Civil Rights movement. Nowadays, whether in Las Vegas or South Caro-

lina's lowlands, you'll find five-star trophy courses for vacationing corporate moguls only a few miles from the run-down trailer parks where the Latino workers who do the course upkeep live. The game maps the geography of an America where the gap between the haves and have-nots has never been greater. There are low-cost, more plebeian traditions of golf in America, and yet this will never be the sport of revolutionaries. Golf suits a Center-Right country where it's political suicide to talk too much about poverty, injustice, or taking away anyone's gas guzzlers or assault rifles.

The case of Tigergate also takes us beyond the manicured fairways into the world of sex and scandal. In its simplest form, this was a dismally prosaic domestic drama of marital infidelity, hardly a rarity in an America where more than half the marriages will end in divorce. But ours is a starstruck culture. We swoon over our sports, music, and movie celebrities, and yet also love to see them squirm, suffer, and feel our righteous rage when they misbehave. There was plenty of embarrassing, titillating, sometimes X-rated material for the gossip blogs and tabloids to report, between the likes of Tiger's raunchy "sexts" to a porn starlet and a panicky voicemail pleading for another lover to turn off her cell phone I.D. so Elin wouldn't get wind of their affair. And, of course, the mathematics of celebrity scandal means that the bigger the star, the bigger the scandal; Tiger was blessed and cursed to be among the biggest stars of all. That Woods had seemed such a straight arrow until that Thanksgiving night lent an extra element of drama and surprise to the plot line. It was no surprise that Tiger's troubles beat out such other momentous developments as Jessica Simpson's weight gain and a pair of reality-show hopefuls crashing a White House dinner to top About.com's list of the "ten hottest scandals" in 2010.

All this makes Tigergate good ground for plumbing the place of celebrity scandal in contemporary American culture. As much as we might prefer to ignore them, these tawdry dramas have become a multibillion-dollar business for a sector of the media, and

their protocol is now every bit as ritualized as any village initiation ceremony. There's the breathless reporting of transgression; the blogosphere and tabloids digging for more evidence; the celebrity's attempt to evade, stonewall, or make excuses; and, of course, the solemn, sometimes teary public apology with an eye toward rehabilitation. We've seen it countless times, among politicians (Bill Clinton, Mark Sanford, Anthony Weiner), famous athletes (Michael Vick, Marion Jones), and, though we give them more license for misbehavior, movie stars and others entertainers (Mel Gibson, David Letterman). Tiger, a man who named his yacht *Privacy*, had always tightly controlled access to his private and family life. But even the proud, guarded Woods found himself swept along by the demands of scandal's cultural script, including at last the requisite apology before the cameras. His case very much followed the expected conventions of celebrity scandal, with its media frenzy, social psychology of public stoning, and the opportunity for the repentant sinning star later to be forgiven and reinstalled in the pantheon of the admired.

Most scandals may follow a similar script, yet each has its own special twists and turns (and they wouldn't be entertaining otherwise). One turn that Tigergate took was into the archetypal American trouble spot of race and race politics. Tiger's mixed heritage had made him a flashpoint for controversy early in his career, but the color of his skin seemed to matter less and less as he ascended the Olympus of golf legend and American glory. The revelations about Tiger's serial infidelity—and details like his seeming interest only in white women—reopened the matter of his racial identity in sometimes very ugly ways. Suddenly, for example, Tiger's penis size became the object of much interest and speculation in the tradition of white fear, anxiety, and voyeurism surrounding the supposedly greater bedroom prowess of black men. This and much else about Tigergate showed an America angry, afraid, transfixed, curious, and resentful about racial politics in both old and new ways.

None of these troubles had been in the Woods master plan. It was the quest for golfing excellence that had dominated Tiger's life almost from the cradle. His father, Earl, set up a highchair so his baby son could watch him hit golf balls into a practice net in the garage of their suburban Southern California home. When the tiny Tiger showed aptitude for the game, Earl, a former army colonel and Green Beret, dedicated himself to training the boy, intending to transform him into the world's best golfer in the tradition of the stage parent.¹ Tiger, who called Earl both his best coach and best friend, made his father's dream his own. He recorded a score of 48 for nine holes at the age of three, an incredible golfing feat for a toddler (and, in fact, Tiger appeared on the hit television show *That's Incredible!* not long after his Mike Douglas cameo). You can't understand much about Tiger and his story without knowing something about the game that was the foundation of his fame and identity.

And so let me begin with a bit more about golf and its peculiar place in our society.