The Shifting Winds of El Niño and the Greatest Game on Earth

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I went to the Masters this year. Second time. I got a little misty when I walked through the gate, just as I did the first. That's the way it is at Augusta, if you love golf.

I love golf.

I love the majesty of it all. The rolling hills. The verdant stretch of manicured fairway. The curve of blooming hedges in their spring finery. I love the egg salad sandwiches in little green baggies they sell for $1.50. And the pimiento cheese. I love the way the golfers tip their caps when you applaud their touch around the greens. And the rising, genteel simmer of the crowd. I even love the long queue at the Amen Corner bleachers. And the sour perfume of kitty litter Augusta National uses on its grassy pedestrian carpet to soak up the April rains.

This year's Masters was a memorable one, and not just for the sandwiches. The first event since the death of Arnold Palmer, it started with gale force winds and ended in victory for a player many golf aficionados have regarded as pretty full of bluster himself.

Sergio Garcia burst onto the scene at the 1999 Masters in a Spanish duel with El Tigre—Tiger Woods—at the PGA Championship at Medinah in Illinois. Sergio was 19 then, so they called him El Niño, which means "little boy" if you failed those two years of Spanish they made you take in High School.

Fittingly, El Niño also refers to the powerful winds that develop in the Pacific in December but wreak havoc long after—throwing off cycles of warm and cold temperatures, destructive flooding, and drought.

Sergio's career had been characterized by wild swings and destructive habits, too: technical wizardry with a side of whining, sporting iron play with unsportsmanlike conduct. Along the way, we rooted for the Spanish prodigy because of how supremely talented he was, and rooted against him because he couldn't live up to it, both in the way he played and the way he sometimes behaved.

Yet we suspected, despite his verbal gaffes, he was a good person at his core. We glimpsed it in his earnest apologies when he misstepped, and witnessed in his face his own deep disappointment when he fell short. We saw how alive he came during the international Ryder Cup competitions, with his European teammates on his side and honor as the prize.

In 2012—after a long stretch of almosts, and another tough stay in Augusta—Sergio wondered aloud in the post-tournament press conference whether he was good enough to ever win a major. We did, too. Yet in that moment of vulnerability, we discovered something new about this golfer: his humanity.

Here was a guy who had sparred with Tiger. But who was real enough to express himself authentically when his more successful rival was not. Tiger's mastery on the course was

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clear. Off it, he was the great obfuscator, from his recent DUI arrest, to the handling of his infidelities, to fuzzy proclamations about his health. Among his best equivocations were those he made concerning his aborted return to the game after back surgery. "My glutes just wouldn't fire" is my personal favorite.

In contrast, the Spaniard was an open book. Sergio once said, "Everything I say I say because I feel it." This year at the Master's, we felt it too.

We might have picked Jordan Spieth—that model of a young man with the gravitas and graciousness of an elder statesmen, whose earnestness is endearing, and whose golf is captivating on nearly every level. Or Justin Rose, the Brit—past winner of the US Open—who won hearts at the Rio Olympics for the respect he gave the Games when everyone else was dropping out, and for the Gold Medal performance he delivered there. Both were worthy champions.

But deep into the final round at Augusta, the world was rooting for Sergio.

This was his 74th appearance at a major tournament, after all. He lost to Tiger in that 1999 PGA Championship, his maiden major, and placed second or third at the US Open and (British) Open Championship, his favorite, in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2014. At the 2007 Open Championship—with the trophy easily in his sights—he blew a four-shot lead, an 8-foot putt and a sudden-death playoff. At the PGA Championship that same year, he was disqualified for signing an incorrect score card after the third round. Even if you didn't like the guy, you couldn't help be gutted. Surely this was what legendary sportscaster, Jim McKay, meant when he talked about the agony of defeat.

The phrase had gripped me from an early age. I never golfed as a child. But my father played. He was nearly 70 with a bad back by the time I was old enough to learn the game. So after he hung up his spikes, we curled up on Sundays and watched golf together. I was transfixed by the theatrical prelude to every broadcast. The Wide World of Sports. The royal trumpets and portending drums, a dramatic accompaniment to McKay's storytelling. "He walks to a destiny to which there is no return. To win or lose." We'd watch together, my Dad and I, with a tin of peanuts and some orange soda. Nicklaus. Watson. Trevino. Rooting for whichever man had a chance, willing putts into the cup, and, sometimes, in my case, falling asleep on the couch to the silky lullaby of the announcers.

Of course we watched team sports, too. Football. Baseball. But golf was different. That was understood. There was no crowd noise or 7th inning stretch. No team jerseys, no tackles. Golf was singular. Pure. Alone in nature, players battled the fatal beauty of the course—the deep sand, dark water, and chewy grasses that teased and rewarded ambition, and more often than not, punished it.

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There were triumphant endings, like Tom Watson's one-shot victory over Jack Nicklaus to win the British Open, or Johnny Miller, that tall drink of water with the hair of a surfer and the hands of a surgeon, who seemed one year to win everything. There were epic melt-downs, too. Like that guy with the oversized glasses and straw hat, Tom Kite, who lost the US Open when my father was pulling for him. And all the other losers like him who were dying inside every Sunday but shook hands on the 18th green anyway, and meant it.

I lost touch with golf for a while after my dad died, but took up watching again when I dated a guy from Texas who bartended at night and teed it up during the day. And, finally, I played. We'd go out under the Triboro Bridge and hit drives at the range bordering the East River. The first time I struck a ball, it made that metallic ping, an intoxicating melody that carried the makeshift, urban fairway nearly 200 yards before it landed. After we broke up, I still watched the game every weekend. But I wouldn't chase that sound again until almost 20 years later with my husband at our Connecticut country club.

During the summer, we'd play Saturday. Sunday, he'd work in the garden, while I spent the afternoon with Jim Nance in the booth on CBS. At night, I watched the analysis of the day's drama on the Golf Channel. I picked up a lot, enough to beat most of the guys from the clubhouse in the betting pool, if not on the course.

I'm 50 now, a 36 handicap. A transplanted Yankee living in Charleston, the golfer's paradise, I love the game as much as I did when my dad introduced me to it one Sunday afternoon four decades ago. His hero and doppleganger, Palmer, once said, golf is " deceptively simple and endlessly complicated." If you saw the scorecards I take with me from the local lowcountry courses—bogey, par, birdie, quadruple bogey, double—you'd surely agree.

But more than my score, or the rush I get when I hear the lyrical thwak of a well-hit Titleist, there's something else that draws me back to golf again and again. It's there in the overwrought melodrama of Jim McKay's score, and in the lessons I take from Sergio's long-sought championship.

Golf is the sport most like life. We walk our path with some tools and talent, with a bag loaded full of doubts and bad habits, in the company of our own fear and uncertainty. Victory is elusive. Perfection, too. But as Sergio showed us, we needn't be perfect. We just need to find a single, perfect moment. On a course rimmed with flowers and battered by weather, after 74 tries, Sergio found it.

Maybe it was El Niño's time. His championship. Maybe the world willed him to grasp that trophy. Or maybe the wind was just finally blowing in his direction. Whatever it was, golf is better for it. After watching, I feel a little better, too.

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