

# What's DRIVING

IT WAS 1999 AND ANOTHER YEAR WALKING THE FAIRWAYS OF THE WORLD WAS ONE OF THE LAST THINGS ON STEVE WILLIAMS' MIND WHEN THE PHONE CALL CAME.

IT WAS TIGER. HE HAD A QUESTION AND IT NEEDED AN IMMEDIATE "YOU BET".

THIS MONTH, WILLIAMS CELEBRATES 10 YEARS CARRYING THE MOST FAMOUS BAG IN GOLF; AN UNPRECEDENTED DECADE OF SUCCESS.

WE KNOW WHAT DRIVES TIGER, BUT WHAT DRIVES STEVE WILLIAMS?

AND WHY DOES HE HATE PHIL MICKELSON SO MUCH?

BY ROBERT TIGHE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISTAIR GUTHRIE





**STEVE WILLIAMS IS PACING ACROSS THE PIT AREA AT WAIKARAKA SPEEDWAY DEEP IN CONVERSATION WITH FELLOW DRIVER ROY WALKER. WILLIAMS' METHODICAL, MEASURED STRIDE — ONE METRE EXACTLY — IS INSTANTLY RECOGNISABLE. IT IS THE SAME DETERMINED STRIDE THAT HAS POUNDED THE FAIRWAYS OF THE WORLD FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS. THE ONLY THING MISSING IS THE GOLF BAG. AND TIGER WOODS OF COURSE.**



IT IS A FEW MINUTES AFTER THE SECOND of three races in the Auckland Saloon Car Championships and Williams and Walker have just come from a meeting with the race referee. Williams made contact with Walker's car on his way to winning the race, but after talking to both drivers the referee rules the collision was accidental and Williams is confirmed as the winner.

You would expect him to be relieved but Williams is fired up. He is annoyed that his driving has been called into question and Walker seems to be bearing the brunt of his frustration.

A couple of days later, sitting on the deck of his Kumeu home in the early morning sunshine, Williams hasn't changed his mind about Saturday night's incident. He still feels he did nothing to warrant a stewards inquiry.

"That is the one disappointing thing about the sport. You can't race without the officials but a lot of them have never driven a race car," explains Williams.

"You are looking at it from behind the wheel and they are looking at it from another angle. It is two different views and how they see it is very different to how you see it."

That Williams is still bothered about what happened at Waikaraka on Saturday night when one of the biggest sporting dramas of 2008 exploded the very next day over comments he made about Phil Mickelson, tells you how passionate he is about his racing.

That he is prepared to sit down and talk to a journalist just two days after hacks from every corner of the globe were calling for his head after a few comments he made at a charity dinner in Taranaki tells you a little bit more about the man.

Just in case you missed it, Williams landed himself in a whole heap of trouble when he called Phil Mickelson a "prick" at a charity dinner in early December.

It was the launch of a junior golf tournament supported by the Steve Williams Foundation, the same foundation through which Williams donated \$1 million to Auckland's Starship Children's Hospital last year. Williams thought he was among friends. He assumed his comments were off the record and he was mortified to find himself at the centre of a worldwide media witch-hunt.

"That story was very embarrassing," he admits. "Tiger was spewing. I know that

you can't say things like that. But it was a small golf club and it was a lighthearted affair. I was just having some fun."

Trouble was, nobody else got the joke. Williams' website was inundated with hate mail while some suggested his job with Woods was in jeopardy. In hindsight it seems like a gross over-reaction. Let's not be prudish. Most of us work with people we don't like and most of us have probably used worse words to describe them.

We complain when sportspeople speak in nothing but clichés and we complain when they speak their mind. Is it any wonder Williams is happiest when he is away from the spotlight and behind the wheel of a racing car?

"I love racing. I love the people involved in the sport. I am 45-years-old and I am addicted to racing," says Williams. "It is where I feel my best."

**THE PIT AREA AT WAIKARAKA ON THIS Saturday night in early December is chock-full of saloon cars, mini stocks, modifieds, sidecars and an eye-catching array of young, attractive girls in bikinis. The glamour girls are here to shoot a reality TV show for Prime called Girl Racers.**

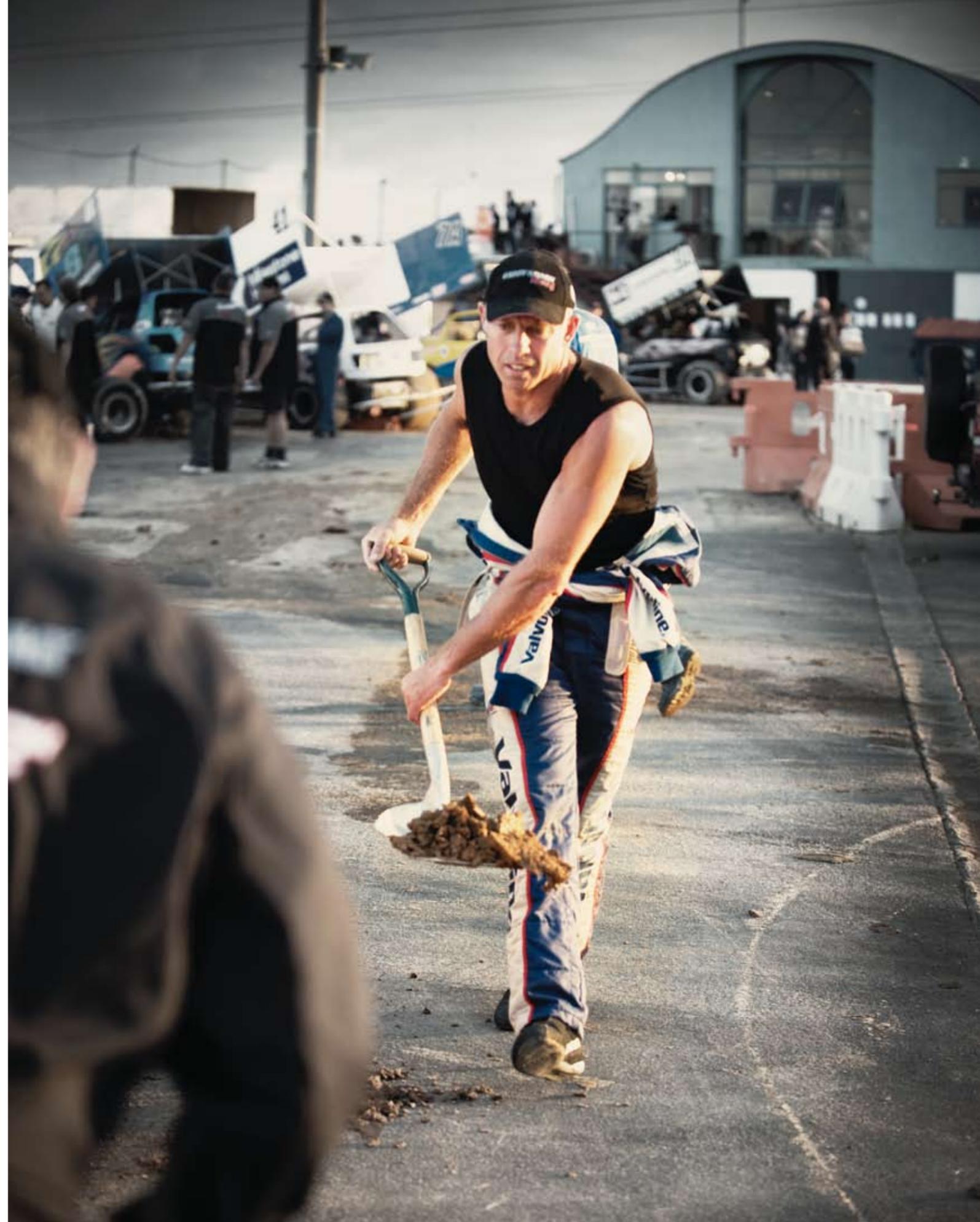
Glamour is not something normally associated with Waikaraka Speedway. A dirt track in the industrial heartland of Onehunga in Auckland, the stands are old and draughty, the chips are hot and greasy and the track is wet and muddy. Stand too close to the track during a race and you will get mud in your eye and dirt caked all over your clothes.

It really is hard to imagine anything more at odds with the pristine, pampered world of professional golf. And where professional golfers generally tend to come from middle-class backgrounds, speedway is the sport of the working man.

Phil Towgood is one of Williams' fiercest rivals on the track and runs his own earthworks business in the Far North. I ask him what kind of people are involved in the sport.

"That guy there is a truckie and the guy in the car next to him, he owns a garage. I think that guy is a painter."

And in the white Ford Mustang with the Caddyshack Racing logo and the number 21H on the side is Steve Williams, professional golf caddie. The H stands for Huntly, while 21 is Williams' lucky number. I ask Towgood how a





professional golf caddy fits in with the blue-collar boys.

"He is pretty well respected around the tracks. There is a bit of the tall poppy syndrome. Some other drivers think, 'well he has got the money, he should be doing well'. But it is not about the money. You have to have the car set up properly and you have to be able to drive the bloody thing."

And Williams can drive. He won the New Zealand Super Saloon title in 2006 but he is desperate to win another major.

"I want to win the Saloon title as well to say I've won both classes I drive in," says Williams. "It's like golf. A lot of people win one major but not many go on to win more than one. I'd like to win another one to show it wasn't a fluke."

Williams wins one of the three races tonight and finishes second behind Towgood in the overall standings. From the time he arrives at the speedway soon after 4.30pm to the time he packs up the truck and trailer a little after midnight, Williams is engrossed in his work. The man who cleans Tiger's clubs looks as happy as a pig in poo as he scrapes the dirt off the sides and the underside of his car between races.

"You get stuck in and you help out," he says. "It takes your mind off things and I can't sit still. I have to be doing something. Before the race starts I've got to start thinking about it a little bit. I've got to think about the grid draw and start making a plan. I've got to get into racing mode."

Are there any similarities to the way you prepare for a race and the way you prepare for a round of golf?

"It's the same thing. There are so many things to think about on the golf course. You've got to know where the wind is, how the course is playing, how fast the greens are, how Tiger is feeling - all of those things. I've got to figure out what the track is going to do, what kind of gears we are going to run, what kind of shocks we are going to use - there is a lot to think about here as well."

But one of the things that appeals to Williams about speedway is that when he is behind the wheel his mind stops racing. He stops thinking.

"On the golf course you have a lot of time to think about other things. When you get inside that race car your head is free of any other thoughts."

So a little bit like switching off the conscious mind and engaging the subconscious when you are hitting a golf shot?

"It is but when you are racing you experience that for the whole night. When

"They are hard cars to drive but if you are good enough to drive them there is another level. You need the brain to drive them well and Steve has that."

As well as brains I'm told you need a bit of mongrel to be a top driver. And you



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you play golf you are switching in and out of that state. At the race track you think of nothing else but racing."

Williams' obsession with speedway is well known around the pits. There are stories of him hopping on a plane straight after a golf tournament in the US, flying home to New Zealand and getting a lift to the race track just to drive in a race that night.

He even managed to convince Woods to race in Huntly a couple of years ago. Williams gives a lot back to the sport in terms of sponsorship and exposure but he is in it to win it.

"He does what it takes to win," agrees Ian Abrahams, the promoter at Waikaraka. "He crashes cars and he pushes the rules to the very limit but that is how you become a good racer. And he is very, very good.

need balls. Williams' worst crash was at Bay Park in Mt Maunganui in 2005. He needed 55 stitches to his left hand and had his pinky finger sewn back on after his car crashed into the safety net.

"It is called degloving," explains Williams. "The car flipped two or three times end over end. I braced myself with my hand on the roll cage, unaware that the roof had already come off the car. When the car went into the net the safety wire snapped and it took my finger off and peeled the skin of my hand right back to the bone."

A few weeks later Williams was back caddying for Woods at the Riviera course in Southern California.

"The weather is always good at Riviera in February so I thought I'd get away with



one hand because I wouldn't have to hold an umbrella. But of course it rained all week," laughs Williams. "It was the worst possible scenario. But I take pride in my work and I wasn't going to miss a week."

Williams takes pride in his work but that doesn't mean he always enjoys his job. Many people may think he has the best job in the world but there are times Williams feels like dropping Tiger's bag and doing a runner; times when it all becomes too much. He never feels that way in his race car.

"A race track is where I feel most comfortable. I do feel comfortable on tour but everyone is watching you. When you are racing people are looking at you as well but it is different.

"There are all these other cars and all this other action and they are not just

## "TIGER IS A NORMAL GUY" IS A MORE SHOCKING REVELATION THAN "PHIL MICKELSON IS A PRICK."



looking at you. I feel very claustrophobic on a golf course a lot of the time and it is a scary feeling. You feel like you can't spit, you can't tie your shoe lace."

"Me and Tiger talk about it a lot. He'll turn to me and say, 'Steve, are you feeling what I'm feeling?' On some of the tees the people are so close. On the green, when you are reading a putt, everyone can hear what you are saying. It is creepy.

"I joke with Tiger that before I finish with him I am going to caddie with my crash helmet on just so I can't hear anything."

Williams isn't willing to share some of the worst comments he has heard from the galleries but he is still shocked by the abuse his boss is subjected to.

"To this day it amazes me that in the Southern states of America there are some people who find it difficult to deal with the fact that a black guy is the best player in the world. People say some horrible things."

Tiger has learned to live with it, says Williams. And laugh about it. Away from the spotlight he is known for having a wicked sense of humour. The story goes that David Feherty, an ex-professional from Northern Ireland and now one of the most popular golf commentators in the US, was

playing a practice round with Woods who asked him:

"What do you call a black man flying a plane?"

"I don't know," replied Feherty.

"A pilot, you f\*\*\*\*\* racist," said Tiger with a huge grin on his face.

Williams laughs when I tell him the story and he says it sounds like a joke Tiger would tell. Williams should know.

They spend more time together than most married couples. Woods was best man at Williams' wedding and the pair are best buddies. So what's he like Steve?

"The biggest misconception people would have of a guy like Tiger is just how ordinary he is. He is really down to earth. Away from the golf course he is just a normal guy."

"Tiger is a normal guy" is a more shocking revelation than "Phil Mickelson is a prick." Of course Tiger is anything but normal. He has changed the game of golf and he changed Steve Williams' life.

Before he got the opportunity to caddie for Tiger, Williams was set to retire at the end of 2000. The plan was to come home to New Zealand and race cars.

Williams was tired of the nomadic lifestyle. Then he got a phone call from Tiger in early 1999. He was 35-years-old. He had been a professional caddie more or less from the first time he carried the clubs for the five-time British Open champion, Australia's Peter Thomson, at the age of just 13.

He had caddied for Sir Bob Charles, Greg Norman, Bernhard Langer and many other greats of the game. Before he started caddying for Woods he had won more than 60 tournaments around the world but nothing could have prepared him for the past 10 years.

"There is no way you could have scripted what Tiger has done. Before I got the call from Tiger he had already made an impact on the tour but he wasn't at his best or anywhere near his best."

The stats make a heck of a case for the influence Williams has had on Woods' career. Before Williams started working with Woods, Tiger had won just one major, the 1997 Masters at the age of 21. With Williams on his bag Woods has won 13 more majors and is now just four away from equalling Jack Nicklaus' record of 18.

You can argue Woods was still only 23 when he hired Williams and he would have dominated the game for the past decade with or without the Kiwi caddie.

You can argue about just how much or how little influence a caddie has on a golfer's game. But you can't argue with the fact that Williams' career with Woods and before that with Raymond Floyd and Greg Norman makes him the most successful caddie the game has known.



Williams' apprenticeship began at the 1976 New Zealand Open. His father, John, had been a leading amateur golfer and he set up the plum summer job with Thomson.

Little did the father know that after one tournament his son would be instantly hooked by a life on the bag. It seems strange, considering the 13-year-old Williams was already playing golf off a two handicap and on the rugby field he had captained the New Zealand U15 schoolboys side against Australia as a 1.82m front row forward.

"To this day I don't know why caddying is so fascinating to me but it is," says Williams. "I love to caddie and it doesn't matter who it is for. It is the thrill of trying to help the player you are caddying for get the best score they can."

Williams sees his role as much more than just pacing out the yardages or

holding the flag. Thomson taught Williams about the role the caddy could play in the player's mental approach.

He encouraged him to soak up as much knowledge and information as he could from watching other players and Williams was a keen student.

"I've taken notes and watched how the great players perform. What are their habits? What do they do under pressure? I was very fortunate to have a good bond with Jack Nicklaus.

"Raymond Floyd played quite often with Jack so I got to ask him a lot of questions over the years. Jack was one player I observed more than any other."

What Williams has learned over the years is how to help the player he is caddying for get into that magical, mystical place that golfers call the zone.

And, more importantly, how to keep him there.

"Quite often during a round I'll tell Tiger to take a couple of deep breaths. A player sometimes doesn't notice that he is starting to walk quick and breathe quick.

"You try to take his mind off things at certain times during the round. It is all about the little things. I'm Tiger's friend, companion, shoulder to cry on, psychologist, strategist, mathematician, weatherman, security guard and enforcer."

Williams' enthusiasm for his enforcer role has seen him called a bully and worse. He isn't bothered by any of the bad press.

"Anybody who calls me a bully or a thug, come and spend a whole week of a tournament, side by side with me and see what it is like caddying for Tiger. I just try to give Tiger an equal playing field to the other guys."

Before calling Mickelson a prick, Williams was probably best known for throwing a photographer's camera in the





**“I’M HOOKED ON RACING. AGE IS NOT ON MY SIDE BUT THERE ARE QUITE A FEW OLDER GUYS IN PROFESSIONAL RACING SO IT IS NOT LIKE I CAN’T DO IT. I GUESS IT JUST DEPENDS ON HOW LONG THE CADDYING JOB LASTS.”**

water. It wasn’t the first and it might not be the last camera he tosses, but Williams says the almost hysterical galleries Woods attracted during the height of his powers in 2000-2001, when he became the first player to hold all four Major titles at the same time, are thankfully a thing of the past.

“People almost expect him to do amazing things now so the hype is not what it was. It has definitely mellowed since then.”

Of the major titles Williams has won with Woods, the two that stand out are the first they won together, the 1999 PGA, and the 2000 British Open at the home of golf, St Andrews in Scotland.

Williams’ trophy room in his home in Kumeu is lined with flags from tournaments Tiger has won, along with signed photos, golf bags and other keepsakes. As well as a trophy room full of memories, Williams also has a bank account full of cash.

Given that Tiger has earned a staggering \$US82 million (\$NZ160m) in prize money in his career and an average caddie’s cut is 10

per cent, Williams is one of this country’s highest paid sportspeople. Or is he? I am curious to know does he consider himself a sportsperson?

“That question comes up a little bit. A coach is considered a sportsperson and a caddie is no different to a coach. One thing I can say is I put in as much effort as any other sportsperson. There isn’t any player on tour who works as hard as me. I never ever get tired on a golf course. I am as fit as can be.”

Williams may be fighting fit but the world is waiting to see how fit Woods is after his break from the game. Woods won last year’s US Open on one leg and two days after his win he announced that he needed reconstructive surgery on his left knee.

He had been playing for at least 10 months with a torn ligament in his knee and played the US Open with a double stress fracture in his left tibia. Will he be the same player he was when he comes back? Will his leg stand up to the enormous pressure he puts on it or will he have to change his swing?

Regardless of what happens this year, Williams says he and Woods both welcomed the break.

“I’ve caddied for 30 years without a break so I’ve thoroughly enjoyed the time off and I know he has as well. You could say Tiger is in the middle of his career right now so to have a break like this could be really beneficial for the longevity of his career.”

When he returns, Woods will more focused than ever on beating Nicklaus’ record of 18 majors and Williams hopes he is a part of it.

“The fun and the thrill of trying to get to 19 is too exciting to even think about retiring. But nothing is a given. I joke with Tiger that I’m out of here when he gets to 19 but he says I should stick around until 21 because I live and die by that number.

“When I get somewhere new I run 21 minutes out and however long it takes me to get back. I do a lot of swimming and I do 21 lengths in the pool.”

The obvious question is why 21?

“When I was a kid growing up there was a race car driver who I used to watch every Saturday night and his number was 21. So I live and die by 21.”

And so it comes back to racing. I ask Williams if he was forced to pick one of his passions, which would he choose. Car racing or caddying?

“I’ve been involved in golf and racing most of my life and if you had asked me that before I took the position with Tiger I would have said racing. But having the chance to caddie for arguably the greatest player to ever play the game, a person of incredible ability and someone who has taught me a lot about life in general; that has been an amazing opportunity.”

As for life after Tiger, Williams will have more time to spend with his wife Kirsty and his three-year-old son Jett, more time to devote to the Steve Williams Foundation and more time for racing. Williams hasn’t given up his dream of being a full-time professional race car driver some day.

“I’m hooked on racing. Age is not on my side but there are quite a few older guys in professional racing so it is not like I can’t do it. I guess it just depends on how long the caddying job lasts.”

And how long Williams can keep striding along, side by side with the greatest golfer and one of the greatest sportsmen the world has seen.

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