

Change

In an old, often-told fable, a scorpion decides one day that he's tired of his surroundings and that he wants to move. On his journey to find new digs, he is soon stopped by a river that he cannot cross. Just when it looks like he may have to turn back, he spots a frog near the bank and asks for a lift to the other side. Unsurprisingly, the frog assesses the danger and refuses, telling the scorpion that he does not want to get stung and die. The scorpion explains that, since he cannot swim, he would never do that as it would cause his own death too. So the frog acquiesces and tells the scorpion to climb aboard. But about halfway across the river the frog feels a sharp sting in his back and looks around to see the scorpion pulling his stinger out. Then, as a paralyzing numbness sets in, the frog says, "You fool; now we both shall die. Why did you do that?" "Because I'm a scorpion," came the reply.

The story is usually told to illustrate the power of nature and a steadfast obedience to destiny at any price. Because of his inability to change his personality, the scorpion had no choice but to act harmoniously with his natural makeup. Nonsense! Someone so clever should also be smart enough to weigh the options and apply a little flexibility to the problem. What's wrong with accomplishing the intended goal, not to mention honoring his word to the trusting frog?

A lot of people laugh when they hear that story, thinking perhaps that it's a fine, albeit ridiculous, example of stubbornness and the price we might pay for it. Of course nobody would ever *really* go so far before considering change. And while it's true that very few of us would indeed kill ourselves before looking into alternative behavior, most of us are a lot more stubborn than we may think. In fact I rarely find people amenable to significant change.

Our most famous paradigm of the willingness to embrace change is Tiger Woods. Right after winning the '97 Masters by a record margin, he went to work on his swing. Commenting on that decision this past January in *Golf Digest*, he said, "People thought it was asinine of me to change my swing after winning the Masters by 12 shots... *Why would you want to change that?* Well, I thought I could become better." Over the following year, '98, he appeared anything but better as he managed to win only one tournament, quite a letdown after winning four, including the Masters, in '97, his debut season as a professional. A lot of naysayers looked at his faltering record and dismissed him as a flash in the pan who ultimately folded under the pressures of professional golf just as they predicted he would before turning pro. As for his claim that he was rebuilding his swing—a likely story.

But then in '99 the work paid off as he appeared back on track with eight 1st place finishes in 21 starts to silence the doubters from the year before. In 2000 he came back stronger, winning nine times in 20 starts including the last three major tournaments of the year. His former coach, Butch Harmon, said, "The season Tiger had in 2000 was the greatest year I've ever seen in golf. He literally had players afraid of him." With his victory at the 2002 U.S. Open, Woods ended the incredible run of winning seven of

eleven major tournaments. So, early in 2003 he proceeded to do the logical thing—well, logical for Tiger Woods. He found a new coach in Hank Haney and began to work on changing his swing. 2004 nicely mirrored his first rebuilding year of '98 with only one victory for the full season and the loss of number one status to Vijay Singh. This year the work is paying off again with a Masters victory, a British Open victory and a second place finish in the U.S. Open. Commenting on that performance in a Fox Sports story he said, “Why would I change my game? This is why. First, second and first in the last three majors, that’s why. I’m so excited to have my best ball striking rounds when I need it the most.”

It’s always fun to talk about Tiger and his unwavering commitment to excellence. But the real inspiration for this column comes from a fellow pool player in Denver named Peter Harth. A couple months ago he walked up to me in the poolroom and threw down that month’s *Billiards Digest*, opened to this page, saying, “That’s the best thing I’ve read about pool.” Now I would love to wax further on the praise since I’m always so delighted to learn that someone other than a parakeet is looking at my stuff. But to stay on the subject we must talk instead about the player. Apart from his obviously superior intelligence, Peter is a fine pool player and still a consistent 50-ball runner in straight pool at the age of 61. The remarkable fact in this story however is that he was referring to a column that covers the topic of stance and the success he enjoyed after employing a couple changes. Nothing could be more encouraging than such a positive report from someone who has been playing the game seriously for over 40 years. He explained to me very simply that learning how to place his feet precisely gave him confidence. He went on to tell me that he learns new things all the time, particularly in his field, where he is considered an expert.

Despite the success stories, it always takes great courage to change. Nobody wants to look bad and that’s almost a guarantee during the time spent learning something new. There is no guarantee however that one will emerge from the learning stage as a better competitor. According to Woods, “Achieving trust is always the final step with change.” What I find with most players and students is that, even though they may say they’re open to trying something new, the reality of performing worse than they did before the instruction causes an immediate and often subconscious reversion to their old ways. In extreme cases, some students merely seek confirmation for their current brilliance and are not at all interested in learning anything new. True champions, on the other hand, carry a deep commitment to brilliance that transcends concern for the way they may appear to others. Maybe the real greats never stop experimenting or seeking improvement. Tiger says, “You never arrive. If you do, you might as well quit.” But I prefer Peter’s somewhat more direct expression of the sentiment. “People who say, ‘if it ain’t broke don’t fix it,’ are stupid.” In either case, we should see that it is the journey, not the destination, where we find our rewards.

