



A Tiger in the coliseum at Kingston Heath.

# Are pro golfers the modern gladiators?

The Australian Masters was a reminder that today's pro golfers resemble Roman gladiators.

A few years ago I visited the Museum of Natural History in New York to see a display about Roman gladiators. I've always been intrigued by physical endeavour, so it was a fascinating insight, which underscored the mental strength required by gladiators to complement their physical prowess.

Just a few months ago I attended 'A Day in Pompeii' in the Melbourne Museum where it occurred to me that professional golfers have a great deal in common with gladiators from the Roman era. I was further convinced after witnessing Tiger Woods compete at the JBWere Australian Masters at Kingston Heath.

I think there's a strong relationship between golfers and gladiators. The obvious comparison is the skill and combative environment of both sports. The modern-day golfer is required to perform under pressure during competition, especially over the final nine holes when shot execution is crucial. Of course, there is a similarity with the way a sword moves compared to how a golf club is swung.

I've learned a bit about Roman history from David Potter, a classics professor based at the University of Michigan. Did

you know that almost 20,000 people would fill the coliseums in Pompeii to watch a gladiatorial event? It's comparable to the number of people that attended the Masters each day to watch Tiger. The coliseums were purpose-built, enabling the Romans to get as close as possible to the action.

These gladiatorial spectacles were very popular in Roman times, spanning 400 years. The government would sponsor an event in association with the editor (a promoter or the ancient equivalent of an IMG). It recognised the political gain of hosting a big sporting event (much like the Victorian Government, which tipped in half of Woods' \$US3 million appearance fee). There was also a lot of media hype, via graffiti and public notices, filling the role of newspapers, radio and TV.

The actual gladiatorial contests were quite structured, which I would liken to how a golf tournament pans out over the week. But the difference was the bloodthirsty nature of Ancient Rome. It was quite barbaric and people were fascinated by death. Hence, the image of 'throwing Christians to the lions'. Tigers and other exotic animals like elephants and rhinoceroses were a source of amusement for

the Romans. The first course usually involved criminals and prisoners being used as fodder. The second stanza would feature gladiators taking on these exotic animals within the arena. And the main course would be the gladiators fighting one another.

By looking at mosaics and drawings, it's possible to appreciate the muscle definition of the gladiators, which allowed them to perform different skills. The body type isn't that of a bodybuilder like Arnold Schwarzenegger, who bulked up from pumping peripheral muscles in isolation. Gladiators tended to have more in common with the physique of Tiger Woods. They had definition across the back, shoulder blades and triceps, while the gluts were really strong. It's these 'primal' muscles that were used for control and rotation.

I could imagine them having a lot of rotational force through the body. Sword fighting is a three-dimensional movement and so is throwing a spear or engaging at close quarters with shorter knives. With the weaponry they were using, it was essential to have a lot of skill to be able to move those implements by force, yet also accuracy towards targets. Plus, they needed dexterity to change direction when required.

Some gladiators preferred short swords, while others used long spears and nets. So the gladiators would pick weapons, perhaps not dissimilar to the way golfers choose equipment from Callaway, Ping, Titleist or others. They would have armour and headgear to acknowledge certain parts of history, such as Roman conquests.

## Preparing for battle

Roman gladiators trained together, lived together and travelled together as teams. They would live in 'familia' (troupes) and train in 'ludi' (gladiator schools) where they could simulate the type of battles that would take place in coliseums. It's easy to make a connection with how today's golfers attend academies to hone their skills as well as pro golfers on tour, travelling to tournaments and practising with one another.

The gladiators used to do a lot of rehearsing to make sure their patterns were correct under pressure. It's interesting to note that Tiger, after a poor third round on the Saturday at Kingston Heath, said he went back to his hotel room and did "rehearsals". There would have been an emphasis on simulation so as to make sure they weren't injured. The 'lanista' (manager of gladiators) was very conscious of his assets.

To my knowledge, only 10 per cent of gladiators actually died from combat. It's a bit of a myth that gladiators were killed. More often than not they were 'spared' from death because it took such a long time for them to be trained. Many gladiators came from poor backgrounds and in particular, slaves and prisoners of war were a source of considerable talent.

Gladiators would spend more time training than actually playing. They might only fight 10-15 times a year. Watching the Russell Crowe film, "Gladiator", you might assume they were fighting the very next day after a battle. But that wouldn't have been the case, as they would need time to recover. Similarly, top professional golfers might play 20-25 tournaments a year, while the rest of their time is spent training and re-charging their energy levels.

Gladiators were obsessed with their records and statistics. They would keep a scoresheet of how many times they had won as well as how many times they had been defeated. As you may be aware, the emperor and the crowd had a direct influence upon whether a combatant was 'spared' after losing a battle.

Of course, the more that a gladiator won, the greater the likelihood he could win his freedom. Upon being granted freedom by the emperor, a gladiator would be presented with a wooden sword in front of the public at these amphitheatres. It was sort of like the acknowledgement of a gladiator becoming a legend.

Top gladiators were regarded as superstars like we embrace Michael Jordan and David Beckham. They were highly regarded as sex objects by women, despite suffering severe injuries in battle. Many had the equivalent of fan clubs and even in Roman times there was merchandising, such as caricatures, model statues and dolls.

Skill and talent was rewarded commensurably. For just one performance, the most talented gladiators could earn 10 times more than a soldier in the Roman army. And whereas soldiers could be conscripted for, say, 25 years, a gladiator could earn the equivalent of a lifetime's wage in just five years – if they lasted that long. With different payment scales, it's comparable with golfers on the US PGA Tour, the Nationwide Tour or the pro-am circuit.

From my perspective, the atmosphere at Kingston Heath had a similarity to the gladiatorial spectacles. There was an air of excitement and wonderment about Tiger Woods. It was quite a feverish environment on the Sunday. We admire physical prowess and grace under pressure. We respect top sportsmen, who have that innate ability to perform and get the job done.

Gladiators, too, possessed enormous mental strength, knowing they could be killed every time they entered the arena. It was a life and death scenario. And to an extent, it's the same with golf. If you're not prepared to play when you set foot on the US PGA Tour, then you're going to get 'killed' in the metaphorical sense. And, like gladiators, the opportunity is there for somebody to become a top golfer if they're prepared to make the sacrifices.

Contact Ramsay McMaster on 0407 432 282 for advice about golf-specific training, or call the Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic on (03) 9569 9448 to purchase a golf-specific 'Fitness Survival Kit'.