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Woods captures NEC again

AKRON, Ohio (AP) — In an epic battle that featured heroic shots and great escapes, Tiger Woods ended his winless summer with a birdie Sunday on the seventh playoff hole to defeat Jim Furyk in the NEC Invitational.

After they exchanged pars for six holes, hardly any of them conventional, Woods hit wedge into 2 feet on No. 18 to finally end the longest playoff on the PGA Tour in 10 years.

"It was a war today," said Woods, who started the final round two strokes behind. "Neither one of us gave an inch. It was fun to be a part of it."

Furyk holed a bunker shot to save par on the first extra hole to extend the playoff. Woods escaped from the trees with a fortuitous ruling and a brilliantly played bump-and-run from about 50 yards.

Furyk had three chances to win with birdie putts from about 12 feet.

With one last shot, a wedge that landed just past the cup and spun back to 2 feet away, Woods won for the first time since the Memorial in early June and ended talk about what's wrong with his game.

Woods won the NEC Invitational for the third straight year, making him the first player to take three straight tournaments at fabled Firestone Country Club, a course on which Nicklaus used to dominate.

Furyk played with courage, keeping the pressure on Woods until the end. His tee shot on the final hole wound up in the trees, and the best he could make was a bogey.

"I don't feel like I let anyone down today," said Furyk, who closed with a 71. "The only person I let down was myself. I can live with that. I've done it before, and I'll do it again."

It was a repeat finish for Woods, at least in terms of late theatrics.

A year ago, he hit a wedge about the same distance in the dark to win the NEC Invitational by 11 strokes. This was far more thrilling, neither player willing to budge during a playoff that lasted two hours.

"It was a war today. Neither one of us gave an inch. It was fun to be a part of it."

— Tiger Woods

chipped 15 feet past the hole. Furyk had 12 feet for his par putt, but it was true. Woods' par putt was true. Furyk's putt for the hole caught the right lip.

The 18th provided an unlikely par when Woods hooked his tee shot into the trees. He had little chance to get it back in the fairway, claimed relief because the scoreboard was between the ball and the flag. Then he played a beautiful bump-and-run to 4 feet and made par. Furyk missed another 12-foot birdie putt.

After Furyk chipped over the ridge to 6 feet on No. 13, he holed an 18-foot birdie putt pumped his fist, the first time he had shown all day. He took the lead with a two-swing when Furyk's putt sailed on the right.

Furyk refused to budge and two holes later he retreated to the favor.

Woods left his 50-foot birdie putt from the hole about 6 feet short, and he made his 12-footer — clipping his fist, pausing to ensure it was going in. Woods pulled his par putt, and he had the lead again.

Both laid up on the 62nd hole. Woods, hitting first, hit the ball back to 8 feet. The gallery roared with anticipation. The cheers were even louder. Furyk, perceived as the underdog throughout the day, when the wedge stopped 2 inches from Woods.

But Furyk's birdie putt sailed on the right, Woods' was right on the heart and the stage was set for a thrilling conclusion.

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