February 7, 2011

To the Judges:

In the year and a half since Jason Gay joined the Journal, he has managed to complete a process that often takes a decade: He has become one of the paper’s most-loved and most-assiduously read columnists.

In addition to his Monday column “The Couch,” a weekend sports column that first appeared in April 2009, Mr. Gay began this year writing four other columns per week about local sports for the Journal’s new Greater New York section. His output, awesome by any standard, has made him one of the paper’s most prolific writers.

Mr. Gay’s quick delivery is as legendary as his volume of output at The Journal. He actually wrote a column about LeBron James while waiting in Dubai for a connecting flight to South Africa, where he was going to cover the World Cup final. His copy nevertheless is unfailingly clear and polished—a quality that is especially valuable in sports, where deadlines constantly loom even while games are in progress.

Mr. Gay has an uncanny knack for identifying the story of the moment and crystallizing it with heavy doses of humor even before most sports fans have finished processing the day’s news. His columns have cultivated a large audience that extends beyond traditional sports fans, including many readers who don't subscribe to the Journal’s Web site. And at least half of his readers are women. Writing for 20-something men is the norm in sports journalism; reaching, as Mr. Gay does, sports fans who don't usually read sports coverage, is about as radical as it gets.

His columns, far from being simply collections of one-liners, are carefully knitted with themes and threads that carry all the way through, and humor is an integral part of the pattern.

As Roger Federer arrived in New York for the U.S. Open, Mr. Gay gave his take on the myths that have grown up around the champion.

We have this unshakable vision of him padding around in monogrammed slippers in a remote Swiss castle—it’s more of a lair, really—accessible only by horse, helicopter and very impressive yachts. He lives there in harmony with the inimitable Mirka, of course, and the delightful twins, as well as a personal chef, a butler, a stylist, a Savile Row tailor, a sommelier, a harpist, a falconer, an art restorer, an old man who can be called upon at any hour to share adventurous stories about the Amazon, and a rare albino tiger named Sampragassi.

On the continuing saga of the serial retirements of Minnesota Vikings quarterback Brett Favre, he wrote:

Some day, Earth will miss Brett Favre. The old scruff dog really was something, wasn't he? He may still be. Throughout his two-decade NFL career, Mr. Favre's been a perilous mixture, a cruise ship margarita. Just his last name is a brand, associated with fearlessness, with slinging, with teetering precariously between greatness and heartbreak.

Unfortunately, it also stands for driving America totally bonkers.

His columns are always so disarmingly framed, and so free of nastiness, that he’s uniquely able to slip in some thoughtful and meaningful points. As Tiger Woods returned to professional golf after a scandal that had enveloped him, only to struggle mightily with his game, Mr. Gay dialed down the jokes and ended his column thus:

It's tempting to draw a parallel between Mr. Woods's struggle and the economic cloud lingering over this country. For most of the previous decade, Mr. Woods surfed a similarly irrational wave of exuberance. Though golf is historically a merciless game, few thought his greatness could ever stop.

After years of prosperity, however, there's been a harsh correction, forcing reduced expectations and the pursuit of modest victories. But that's the same overreaching nonsense that prematurely elevated Mr. Woods as an infallible legend who could play by different rules.

Tiger Woods is just a professional golfer. And right now, he's not a very good one.

In sum, Mr. Gay’s versatility, and his intelligence and keyboard speed, have made him one of the Journal’s most influential voices and, I believe, the best sports columnist working in print and a worthy candidate for this award.

Sincerely,

Michael W. Miller
Senior Deputy Managing Editor
The Unsettling Sight of a Tiger Tamed

Woods’s Career—Worst Score Furthers a Kind of Harsh Correction on a Career That Had Been All Irrational Exuberance

BY JASON GAY

Remember when golf was going to save Tiger Woods? That was the dubious pop-psych theory last winter, as Mr. Woods uneasily emerged from a self-imposed shame hibernation following a conga line of messy allegations about his private life.

The Couch

Saying “sorry” wasn’t Mr. Woods’s métier. His apologies were scripted and wooden, at times strangely defiant. A blue-curtained press conference in Florida appeared transmitted from Planet Awkward. A Nike commercial featuring his late father’s disembodied voice bordered on macabre.

Just let him play golf, his defenders said. That’s when you’ll see the real Tiger. That’s when the healing and absolution will begin. An opportunistic brigade of armchair therapists were quick to prescribe 18 holes—or perhaps, a 15th major—as a remedy for acute off-the-course trouble.

It was foolish medicine, more hair of the dog for a hangover. Who knew what Tiger Woods needed? Surely Mr. Woods didn’t, not as he watched his pristine, sponsor-burnished reputation circle a very expensive drain.

We shouldn’t have masked our selfishness. Mr. Woods’s tabloid saga was tawdry and tedious; everyone longed to see him swing

Tiger Woods tips his cap to the gallery as he walks to the 18th green during Sunday’s final round of the Bridgestone Invitational, where he finished with a score of 18-over-par.
a club again. It was really fun to watch Mr. Woods play golf, and his stand-ins were likeable but unglamorous. Not even Retief Goosen wants to watch 18 holes of Retief Goosen.

But it's been four months since Mr. Woods returned to playing golf, and the sport has not been his redemption—or any fun. He has yet to win a competition since his infamous early-morning car accident, and on Sunday, he finished a tournament tied for 78th place, two errant shots from dead last.

Had it not been for a ghastly round on Sunday by his rival Phil Mickelson, Mr. Woods would have statistically relinquished his throne as the world's No. 1-ranked player.

But that's just fine print. The headline is Tiger Woods is lost. Earth's most famous golfer does not cut an especially sympathetic figure, but his descent is a sad sight. A former fist-pumping king now finds himself vacant and glum—Unhappy Gilmore.

This past weekend was brutal. On Thursday, Mr. Woods tied off in Akron, Ohio—the home of another gifted but ill-advised king—at the WGC-Bridgestone Invitational, a tournament he'd won seven times, including last year. He promptly carded a flabby 74, added a 72 on Friday and plunged from contention.

At another tournament, Mr. Woods merely would have failed to make the cut and escaped in a jet Friday afternoon. But the Bridgestone is a no-cut affair, so Mr. Woods was forced to play on through the weekend for 36 more holes of ignominy—a jilted bride, cruelly asked to smile through a reception.

On Sunday, Mr. Woods shot a 77 to close out at an 18-over-par 298—the worst score of his career. His signature red Nike jersey was a strange intruder at the breakfast hour. Mr. Woods isn't supposed to finish his Sunday work before "Meet the Press" wraps.

"Pretty grim," the CBS announcer Jim Nantz said early Sunday afternoon.

It's worthless to try and diagnose a specific golf ailment. Mr. Woods is fully scrambled. Outside of a fourth-place tie at the Masters—a finish that now looks as if it was accomplished on adrenaline and fumes of tabloid ink—he's been searching erratically for fragments of his former greatness. Emotion has crept in. The theory that Mr. Woods was a cold-blooded compartmentalizer whose game would be immune to his personal crisis? A fantasy.

"It's been a long year," a hollow-eyed Mr. Woods told reporters afterward.

An unfamiliar rattle of skepticism now follows a relentless player who couldn't ever be safely counted out. It's no longer heresy, but fashionable, to say Jack Nicklaus's record of 18 majors—once thought to be laughably in reach—looks distant.

There is a stunning but rising clatter that Mr. Woods doesn't deserve to be named to the coming U.S. Ryder Cup team. "I wouldn't help the team playing like this," Mr. Woods admitted Sunday. And Mr. Woods will be nobody's favorite when the PGA Championship begins Thursday in Kohler, Wis.

But it's silly to count him out altogether. A humanitarian might suggest that Mr. Woods shut it down and go home after the PGA, and he might. Better to break it down again and start anew, like he's done before in rebuilding his swing. But this time, his chief afflictions may not be the least bit physical.

It's tempting to draw a parallel between Mr. Woods's struggle and the economic cloud lingering over this country. For most of the previous decade, Mr. Woods surfed a similarly irrational wave of exuberance. Though golf is historically a merciless game, few thought his greatness could ever stop.

After years of prosperity, however, there's been a harsh correction, forcing reduced expectations and the pursuit of modest victories. But that's the same overarching nonsense that prematurely elevated Mr. Woods as an infallible legend who could play by different rules.

Tiger Woods is just a professional golfer. And right now, he's not a very good one.
JASON GAY

Superduperhuman Has His Doubters

We have this unshakable vision of him padding around in monogrammed slippers in a remote Swiss castle—it's more of a lair, really—accessible only by horse, helicopter and very impressive yachts. He lives there in harmony with the inimitable Mirka, of course, and the delightful twins, as well as a personal chef, a butler, a stylist, a Savile Row tailor, a sommelier, a harpist, a falconer, an art restorer, an old man who can be called upon at any hour to share adventurous stories about the Amazon, and a rare albino tiger named Sompragassi.

Life in this lair is normally idyllic. But earlier this month there was an uncomfortable rustle. Word filtered through an intermediary—it was the falconer's cousin, actually—that the cognoscenti of the United States Open had turned a tad skeptical on Roger Federer in 2010.

At the time, Mr. Federer was sitting on a rug made of mulberry silk and Bjorn Borg's hair, playing Wii2 bocce with Vladimir Putin, Valentino and Sting. (Oh you don't have the Wii2? Mr. Federer does.)

"Xerxes," Mr. Federer said (the falconer's name is Xerxes—you can't make this stuff up). "Is it true? Have they really begun to doubt me?"

It was mostly true. Mr. Federer still looms largely in tennis—you don't get 16 Grand Slam titles and get a suggestive Lindt chocolate ad just for being

Mardy Fish—but it's become oddly trendy to be a Fedoubter. Mr. Federer nearly went seven months between ATP tournament titles before stopping Mr. Fish the other weekend in Cincinnati, and, as the Journal's Carl Bialik noted the other day, he's an un-Fed-like 25-23 against the World's Top 10 since 2008. The other day we read a tennis poll in which only one expert picked Mr. Federer to win in Queens. A bunch picked Andy Murray. Even tennis analyst Lil' Wayne totally blew off Mr. Federer in his Open picks for Sports Illustrated from Rikers Island.

Amid this cloud of underestimation, Mr. Federer surfaced Monday evening in Arthur Ashe Stadium for his first rounder against Brian Dabul. He looked, as always, Fedtastic. He wore an understated navy blue Nike ensemble that contrasted elegantly against the neon army that makes the Open look like a rehab center for Happy Mondays fans.

Mr. Dabul was not a challenge. Mr. Federer prevailed 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 in less time than it takes Roger Sterling to move from drinks to lunch.

What Monday's debut match will be remembered for is The Shot—Mr. Federer's between-the-legs winner that flummoxed Mr. Dabul and electrified the stadium. It was Mr. Federer's second version of The Shot—the first one came at last year's Open, against Novak Djokovic in the semifinals.

This Shot was not That Shot. But it was a stirring reminder of the taken-for-granted greatness that still lurks within the 29-year-old Mr. Federer. After hitting it, we half expected him to light a cigarette at midcourt and coolly say, "Oh, were you expecting somebody else?"

This is the curse of the Superduperhuman—to be merely superhuman is no longer enough. Mr. Federer is the No. 2-ranked player in the world, seeded No. 2 here at the Open, easily in the conversation for the greatest of all time, and yet, there will always be fashionable nonbelievers. Mr. Dabul isn't one.
Another Summer of Eat, Pray, Favre
Season No. 20 and Comeback No. 3 for America's Favorite Scruffy, Indecisive Quarterback

BY JASON GAY

Some day, Earth will miss Brett Favre. The old scruff dog really was something, wasn't he? He may still be. Throughout his two-decade NFL career, Mr. Favre's been a perilous mixture, a cruise ship margarita. Just his last name is a brand, associated with fearlessness, with slogging, with teetering precariously between greatness and heartbeat.

Unfortunately, it also stands for driving America totally bonkers. Has there been an ath-

lete who has done more lately to unnecessarily torment the sporting public than Brett Lorenzo Favre?

Please don't say LeBron James—that was a dust-up, a trifling, a parking ticket.

Three straight years we've endured this ludicrous retirement soap. In and out Mr. Favre wanders, round and round. It's always the same script. Eat, Pray, Favre. Dejected geezer goes back home, sits in an easy chair, pronounces himself finished, says he's too banged up for one more, grows out his beard, lards on a little off-season flab, starts daydreaming about that final game, how it didn't end the exact right way and then...

No way. The wise sports fan immediately bails out. You're not going to get sucked in by Mr. Favre this time. You're done with no. 4, you'll catch him later—enough with these insufferable midlife crises. Let us know when he makes his decision.

Please.

The boycott lasts a day or two. Maybe a week at most. You move on to other, worthier football sagas—Tim Tebow in Denver, Pete Carroll in Seattle, and those mother-offending New York Jets—but then, almost unconsciously, you peek at ESPN and see those five familiar letters scrolling across the red ticker on the bottom of the screen, right after the baseball scores and the free agent gossip.

You don't have to read the tape. You know what it says. Mr. Favre may be back. But he's not totally back. It's brutally noncommittal, like a homecoming queen ignoring an invitation to the prom.

You try to summon the outrage. You chastise the Minnesota Vikings for enabling it all, for begging and sending a desperate plane carrying hirsute veterans to lure him back. One imagines a shirtless Mr. Favre lying on a daybed, eating a spit-roasted boar with his hands as linemen Jared Allen and Steve Hutchinson fan him with giant palm leaves and former Green Bay teammate Ryan Longwell outlines the Viking 401(k).

You rescind your respect, like the exasperated TV analysts Tedy Bruschi ("I've lost all respect for this team") and Rod Woodson ("I've lost respect for Brett"). You ridicule ESPN and other news outlets for their purple siren "Favre Battlestations" coverage blanketing the QB with a fervor once reserved for moon landings and state funerals. Is a helicopter shot really necessary to see Mr. Favre walk from a plane to a car to a field?

Then he's back. The news lands meekly, like a surprise party for a spouse tipped off by the strange cars in the driveway. He practices with his Vikings teammates and tells reporters he was swayed by the last-minute appeal. "Those guys are like, 'Hey, if you could do us one favor, and it's a pretty big favor.'"

Fantastic. Comeback 3.0 is a favor? For a reported $20 mil-
lion? One is reminded of Alvy Singer's line about his hapless grade school classmate in 'Annie Hall.' "Ivan Ackerman. Always the wrong answer. Always."

Still, the righteous anger toward Mr. Favre feels tonally off, misplaced. Yes, the wavering is absurd, a bit rude. Had Mr. Favre been leading actual Vikings in the ninth century, it's safe to assume they would have eaten him by now.

But no one has been hurt here. This not an arrest or a positive test. Mr. Favre's faux retirements are less an affront than a musty punch line, like Larry King's marriages or Tiger Woods's cell phone. He is the boy who cried Metamucil. Heyoooo!

This country has a high tolerance for mindless repetition. We've endured four iterations of the Fast and the Furious and twelve Friday the 13ths. CBS is remaking Hawaii Five-0.

Athletes are the worst offenders, of course. Air Jordan came back twice. Roger Clemens relaunched three times. Boxers never quit, even in the afterlife. (The MGM Grand would still book Max Schmeling.) The most recent Super Bowl halftime show was played by The Who, a band that first said farewell in 1982, when Mr. Favre was 13.

Now 40, Mr. Favre is self-aware enough to detect the snickering. He says this 20th season is his finale, but he knows nobody will take that pledge seriously, or plead for more. "This is the last year of my contract," he said the other day. "I'm sure a lot of people are like, 'Yes!'"

He's a messy paradox. He is a man who wears crumpled ball caps that look stained in tobacco juice, but he teases like a pop diva. He's an experienced pro with a chemical aversion to common sense, a daredevil who's started 309 straight games. One wonders if the same gene that tells Mr. Favre to un-retire is the one that tempts him to force a pass into triple coverage. He sees a storm and gladly flies right in.

Nobody ever loved Mr. Favre for being perfect. He's back, and despite all logic and protests, so are the rest of us.
JASON GAY

A Farewell Column
From Larry King

On Tuesday, Larry King announced that this fall he will end his 25-year run as host of CNN’s “Larry King Live.” While Mr. King is a legend of television and radio, he also wrote a popular and highly entertaining newspaper column, which ran in USA Today until 2001. Here is an unworthy homage.

Everyone asks me: Where is LeBron James going? That’s easy: he’s going to the same place as Art Linkletter, Senator Byrd, Rin Tin Tin and the rest of us. What happens between now and then is just the fine print, my friends...

...But not even Chris Bosh cares where Chris Bosh goes...We’re almost three weeks into the World Cup—how is my pal Pele doing?...Stephen Strasburg is a fine name for a once-in-a-lifetime ace, or a twice-married orthodontist...

When did they move the Seattle Supersonics?...Have a nice cold Super Bowl in New York, I’ll be asleep in a deck chair at the Miami Fontainebleau...John Wooden never would have stood in line for an iPhone...I have no interest in seeing that Airbender in 3D or 2D or 1D.

Phil Jackson could coach a team of blind armadillos to the NBA semifinals, at least... I miss the old Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds—and when Central Park was a saltwater marsh...Jonathan Papelbon always looks like he’s going to mug an old lady...Somebody please tell Leonardo DiCaprio to take off the ball cap—he’s a matinee idol, not Stan Musial...Here’s a free idea for the NHL: take it easy on the Canadian angle...To me, fantasy baseball is Mantle after Maris, not that egghad bunt with the stats and slide rulers...Never understood why Jimy Williams spells it “Jimy”...What on earth does “PTT” stand for?

Derek Jeter will run for President but not as a Democrat or a Republican...College football needs a playoff and Don Johnson needs a good script...I’m not worried about Roger Federer, Roger Goodell, or Roger Moore...My favorite Knick was Bill Bradley. But my favorite New Jersey Senator is Frank Lautenberg...The best place to watch a baseball game? Dyan Cannon’s sitting room...Can somebody introduce Mikhail Prokhorov to Jennifer Aniston? They’d be a fun couple...Eli Manning still makes me edgy...Joe Torre can be in my foxhole any time, along with James Patterson, Robert Jarvik and Vader Hevel...Is there really a soccer player named Kaka?

In another era Rex Ryan would be a silent movie star...I could listen to Michael Kay read a phone book or the menu at Shun Lee...You can never go wrong with Cracker Jacks, or a Morgan Freeman movie on a plane...The redheaded boy who wins at the Winter Olympics—what does he do when it’s hot outside? Tiger Woods needs to move in with Phil Mickelson or Dr. Phil or both...HBO really blew it when they cancelled “The Joe Buck Show”...You won’t believe me, but I still use my George Foreman grill.

I’d let Lady Gaga throw out the first pitch, then I’d send her straight to Bellevue...A theory: Brett Favre actually likes the drama...You can go your whole life without jury duty or watching an All-Star Game...Are those two young men still playing tennis at Wimbledon?...Not planning on going anywhere soon, but my first choice to do my eulogy: Vin Scully. Second choice: Hilary Duff...How do I want to go out? Content, in the arms of my beloved. Or in Jeff Van Gundy’s.
The Note the Mets Wanted to Write

On Monday, the Zombie New York Mets dismissed general manager Omar Minaya and manager Jerry Manuel, announcing the firings to fans in a hilariously boring letter clearly written by Ho-Hum, the Bland Front Office Memo-Writing Robot. Here’s the letter they really wanted to write:

Dear Mets Fans,

We know, we know. Get over yourselves, geniuses.

You think this disaster was hard to watch? Imagine paying $136 million for it. You’d never complain about those cable or private-school bills again.

Do you want to see the check we just wrote to Oliver Perez? You’d never stop crying.

Besides, it’s not as if we were the worst team in baseball. We were 79-83. That’s B-minus. Maybe C-plus. OK, C-minus.

Still, we weren’t as bad as the Pittsburgh Pirates. We weren’t as hopeless as Seattle. The Mariners lost 101 games. One hundred and one games! That’s five more games than A.J. Burnett lost in 2010.

Here are some other teams we finished with a better record than: Cleveland, Kansas City, Baltimore, Washington, Houston, the Chicago Cubs, Arizona, the French national soccer team, NBC, and Sterling Cooper Draper Prynce.

Why don’t you masterminds go scream at the Knicks? We didn’t gut our roster to seduce LeBron James, beg Mayor Bloomberg to make a pitiful television commercial, and then wind up with Amar’e Stoudemire and a wicker basket full of canned meats.

Amar’e Stoudemire, basketball savior! You’re killing us. Really.

And lay off comparisons to the Yankees. You know how hard it is to compete with those pompous blowhards? We’d love to have a payroll of $206 million, plow through it in a stupor and call ourselves brilliant. We wish we could pay someone $82 million to throw pies at faces. Call on line two for Kei Igawa! Anyone?

Go quit and be a Yankee fan. Enjoy getting blasted by Minnesota in the ALDS. Yeah, we said it. What’s it to you?

If you decide to stay with us, you have to stop moaning about our free-agent deals. You guys were the ones who whined like Veruca Salt and demanded Carlos Beltran, Francisco Rodriguez and Jason Bay. How about we bring those guys over to your house with three sleeping bags for the winter?

And quiet your yapping about ticket prices. We know how much New Yorkers pay for truffle risotto. Pricing out the “average fan”? You say “average fan” like you’re talking about a 9-year-old kid with coal dust on his cheeks and holes in his shoes, holding a baked potato to keep warm.

Give us a break. If you don’t spend your wad of cash on us, you’re totally blowing it in Anguilla or on Salvatore Ferragamo.

What’s our plan? The plan is the same as it always is: We’re going to hire Some Guy You’ve Heard Of, who will hire Another Guy You’ve Heard Of, then overpay a couple Recognizable Free Agents of Questionable Value, come up with a listless slogan—we’re thinking “October Baseball. It’s Too Cold”—and hope you stay awake until June.

Why, what do you think we’re doing, sitting around in lab coats, concocting new, post-Bill James algorithms? We can’t even get Luis Castillo to clean all the stuffed animals out of his locker.

Remain calm. Or else we’re going to close the Shake Shack behind center field, chubby pants, and then you’ll really be heartbroken.

Yours,

The Mets