Our exclusive survey of amateur play at Torrey Pines reveals this: The gap between you and the pros is even bigger than you think.

The real difference between you & Tiger

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WHERE IS THE GAP WIDEST BETWEEN PROS AND AVERAGE GOLFERS?

Where do we amateurs fall short when stacked up against the best the game has to offer? Driving distance? Greens in regulation? Putting? The answer, according to an exclusive Golf Digest study of 90 average golfers playing a PGA Tour course, is all of the above—and then some. As that noted golf pundit Mark Twain put it, in another context, the difference between pros and amateurs is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug. Just for starters, when compared with PGA Tour players, even better-than-average amateurs give up more than 70 yards off the tee. On the greens, tour pros are likely to hole it from a distance three times as far away. And when it comes to hitting greens in regulation or scrambling to get up and down once we do miss the putting surface, hackers are even more hopeless.

This and other revealing data was uncovered during a research project conducted at a celebrated and difficult public venue, the South Course at Torrey Pines in La Jolla, Calif. The course is the
Amateurs vs. Pros

The average score for the entire test group was 96—24 over par—six shots worse than their reported averages. When broken down into higher handicap (over 10) and lower handicap (10 and under) players, even more major differences reveal themselves. (See accompanying diagrams for more detailed hole-by-hole analysis.)

Distance and accuracy off the tee

The golfers in our test averaged 212 yards per drive on the measured holes (Nos. 4 and 9). The tour average during the Buick event was 285 yards; Woods averaged 298. So Tiger has an 86-yard head start on our players. Our 10-and-under handicap players bridge this gap by nearly a quarter, to 232 yards, trailing Tiger by 66 yards.

Woods' driving accuracy at Torrey Pines in '03 was subpar (48.2 percent; the tour average was 66.2 percent). Tiger made up for it with his approaches, hitting 73.6 percent of greens in regulation, against the field's 64 percent. On the year, Woods hit 62.7 percent of fairways (ranking 142nd in driving accuracy) and reached 68.6 percent of greens in regulation (26th).

The difference in driving accuracy between our higher- and lower-handicap players was fairly small, 44 versus 40 percent, on the two longest measured holes.

Amateurs vs. Pros

4th

PAR 4

Pro tee: 471 yards
Amateur tee: 460 yards

DRIVING DISTANCE was the differential on this tough par 4, which was the 17th hardest hole on the PGA Tour in 2003. Amateurs playing from the white
One of the most telling numbers was how dramatically the amateur players inflated their driving distances. The lower handicappers claimed their average drives went 247 yards, while driving-distance stats taken on two holes documented an average of 232—a 15-yard exaggeration. Poorer players claimed a driving average of 227 yards and, in actuality, hit it 198 yards—a 29-yard lie of the mind.

Many conclusions can be drawn from this data, but the hard lesson on this aspect: The worse the players, the more they kid themselves about how good (and long) they are. Nobody, it seems, wants to admit he drives the ball less than 200 yards. Succumbing to self-delusion, it seems most amateurs tend to equate their best drive with their average drive.

From the fairway (or thereabouts)

While our amateurs largely held their own in finding the fairways, their performance typically went downhill from there. For example, although 27 of 87 golfers hit the fairway on the 432-yard par-4 first hole, only seven of the 27 also hit the green in regulation.

On the shorter (347-yard) par-4 second, GIR percentage for those who hit the fairway improves to 66 percent. Among those who missed the fairway, however, only 7 percent found the green. In short, if you miss one shot, the chances greatly increase that you will also miss the next one.

Our 10-and-under handicappers hit 30 percent of greens in regulation. When they missed, they got up and down 44 percent of the time. On tour, the average up-and-down rate is 58.3 percent; Tiger in ’03 was at 60.2 percent.

In looking at the self-assessed strengths and weaknesses from the amateurs who hit a fairway and then missed a green, “driving” was named a strength as often as it was a weakness. No other weakness was cited as much, with responses scattered among “short game,” “putting,” etc. The amateurs’ emphasis on the long game was clearly underscored regardless of their performance in our statistical sampling.

On the greens

Tiger’s putting at the 2003 Buick was outstanding—even for him. He averaged 1.9 putts per hole. The pros’ precision was clear from the inset below showing tee-shot dispersion from the third round, even though the front bunker did plenty of business, too. Of the 11 tour players who found that front bunker over the weekend, six got up and down for par; 15 of 24 got up and down from around the green. From the amateur group, of the 48 who missed the green, only nine got up and down. Of the nine amateurs who hit into a bunker, two made sand saves. Three times as many over-10 handicaps missed the green as the 10-and-unders.
Pine's amateur average per hole was 2.10 putts, 0.59 worse than Tiger, 0.32 worse than the tour. Over the course of 18 holes, this adds up to 10.6 strokes separating Tiger from the rest of us on the greens alone (and multiplied over a four-round tournament, a whopping 42.5 strokes).

On average in '03, the pros left their approach putt (the distance to the hole after the first putt where the green was hit in regulation) 30 inches from the hole. Scrutinizing the length of putts holed by amateurs that day, surprisingly few were made from more than 10 feet—just 15 to be exact, over 435 holes on which data was gathered. The longest? A 54-footer on the eighth hole. Compare this 15-of-435 performance with that of the tour pros at No. 8 on Sunday, when they went four for 15 on 10- to 20-footers, two for 16 from 20 to 30 feet, and made two of 32 putts longer than 30 feet.

For the average tour pro, on a relatively flat green, the breaking point, or "metric," from which they will make half of their attempted putts is nine feet. For the amateur golfer, the make-or-break point for hoiling putts is one-third of that: three feet.

What lessons are we to take from all this number-crunching? For sure, Torrey Pines is one tough muny track, even for the pros. And after you get the playing field as level as possible by comparing tour players and average golfers on the same course, the conclusion is, as advertised: The PGA Tour players are good, and Woods, when on, is a statistical step above all of them.

And for the rest of us? Put it this way: We've got a lot of ground to make up.

Eager to test your own game against Torrey Pines South? You can call the golf shop at 800-985-4603 to book a tee time up to eight weeks in advance. Golf fees are $185 on weekdays and $205 on weekends (includes cart, $10 gift voucher, three holes with the pro). An alternative is to stay at The Lodge at Torrey Pines or the Torrey Pines Hilton. Each has access to five tee times a day. Or call the course's automated reservation system at 619-570-1234. Tee times become available at 7 p.m. PST a week in advance and sell for $105 on weekdays and $125 weekends, without cart (locals get a price break).