Padraig Harrington successfully defended his Open title at Royal Birkdale north of Liverpool, England, becoming the first person not named Tiger Woods to win consecutive times at the same major since Nick Faldo at the Masters in 1989 - 90. It was really a memorable weekend of golf for those of us that love the sport, as Greg Norman made a great run at winning his first tournament in ten years, and became the oldest person ever to lead a major after three days. Mitch talks about the Shark and the win for Harrington in his latest.

Padraig Harrington successfully defended his Open title at Royal Birkdale north of Liverpool, England, becoming the first person not named Tiger Woods to win consecutive times at the same major since Nick Faldo at the Masters in 1989 - 90.

Yes, it does seem important to mention the recuperating #1 player in the world, as his absence was definitely noticed, but that is not to say that Tiger would have won had he been present; after all, he couldn't beat Harrington last year at Carnoustie.

The entire tournament reminded one more of Winged Foot in the 2006 U.S. Open, where it was looking as if the winner would be the man who melted down the least. That pattern led to the unfortunate event where the leader from each day faded the next.

Robert Allenby, Scottish Open winner Graeme McDowell and Rocco Mediate all followed top Thursday rounds of 69 by shooting 73 on Friday. 36 hole leader K.J. Choi's two stroke lead vanished on the front nine on Saturday, putting him in the second to last group on Sunday, tied with Harrington, trailing Greg Norman by two.

Norman was the feel good story of the tournament, making a most improbable comeback at age 53. His attitude rejuvenated following his marriage two weeks ago to tennis legend Chris Evert, the Shark was displaying the same ball striking skills and course management abilities that had garnered him his only two titles in a Major; the 1986 and 1993 Open championships.

But the storybook ending was not to be, although it would be unfair to categorize this in the same light as Norman's historic collapse in the 1996 Masters, when he blew a six stroke lead on Sunday, losing to Faldo.

This was not a choke...it was just simply a case of the conditions and age finally catching up to Norman. There is no shame in the game that he played throughout the weekend, and much to be praised over his determination, and the class he showed from the first to the seventy-second holes.

The conditions made it nearly impossible for anyone to perform to their normal standards. Cold and wet on Thursday and Friday, especially for those that went out earliest on the first day. Phil Mickelson, the highest ranking player at the Open, couldn't handle the weather, and struggled to a round of 79, nine over par. He recovered well enough on Friday to make the cut with a 68, but his continued failure to find the fairway in the constant 35 mph winds on Saturday relegated him to also-ran status. The winds returned on Sunday as well, although the were "substantially" lower...in the 25 - 30 mph range, with gusts "only" up to 35 mph, as opposed to 45 mph gusts on Saturday.

None of the other pre-tournament favorites were able to take advantage of the

first tournament without Tiger since the 1996 PGA Championship. Sergio Garcia was never able to make a charge, and then faltered on the weekend. Young guns Justin Rose, Trevor Immelman, Geoff Ogilvy, Adam Scott, and Zach Johnson never sniffed the top of the leader board. The man anointed "the next young challenger to Tiger", Anthony Kim, had his moments, but couldn't put in the high wind, and therefore never really pushed the leaders.

Some of the old guard had their moments, like Retief Goosen and Jim Furyk, but it wasn't enough, while others like Ernie Els, Vijay Singh, Colin Montgomerie, and Stewart Cink either missed the cut, or took themselves out of contention with disastrous rounds.

Meanwhile, most of the attention received by Padraig during the week was concerning his medical condition. He had sprained his wrist, and was considered unlikely to even make a start as late as Thursday morning. But maybe the injury was what he needed for two different reasons. First was that it forced him to do things that would keep him away from the worst possible results, trying to hit out of the hay that passes as the heavy rough in England, which would have certainly aggravated his wrist. Harrington kept his driver in the bag for all but a couple of holes, often teeing off with irons, and since he didn't take big risk/big reward chances, he stayed out of the really thick stuff.

Perhaps more important was the fact that he played no practice rounds, only hitting two or three shots on Wednesday. Therefore, after 63 holes in the cold, the rain, and the high winds, when other players were reaching their physical limits, Harrington was still fresh.

The drama from this 137th Open will be Harrington's amazing back nine. Following consecutive bogeys on 7, 8, and 9 that cost him the lead, Harrington could have collapsed, but he kept playing his game, keeping the ball trajectory low in the wind, and re-establishing his rock steady putting stroke.

It looked for a moment to be Englishman Ian Poulter's tournament, as the pink clad Brit hit an amazing approach shot on 16, and then rolled in 20 foot birdie putt to get to seven over. But a three putt for par on the easiest hole on the course, the par 5 17th, and then a 15 footer on 18 to save par left Poulter in the clubhouse needing Harrington to have some bad holes.

It was not to be for Ian. Harrington was simply amazing on the back nine, saving par on the treacherous par 4 10th, birdying 13 with a long putt, and then converting a very long two putt for birdie on the difficult par 5 15th, giving him a two shot lead.

The affable Irishman then took the hopes of Poulter and mercilessly executed them with an unbelievable second shot on 17, a 5 wood that barley cleared the bunker, and rolled up the multiple levels of the green, settling three feet away from the pin. Harrington made the eagle, and with no berns waiting for him on 18 like the ones he hit into twice last year on the 72nd hole at Carnoustie, the championship was his.

So the Claret Jug stays in Dublin for another year,

undoubtedly about to be filled with Guinness. No asterisk should be attached to this win, even without Tiger, as Harrington was absolutely without peer at the end of the day.

But as heart warming as the Greg Norman story was for this week...I still would have loved to see two of the great links course game managers go head to head on the last day to see if Padraig could have held off Tiger (or vice-versa).

NOTES:

~ You could hear the grinding of teeth from the ABC booth from U.S. Ryder Cup captain Paul Azinger. Not only because he was reminded again and again of the fact that Tiger won't be available, but also due to the dominance shown by the Europeans. The top three were from Europe, along with seven of the top 15, whereas the top American was Furyk at fifth,

one of only three Yanks in the top 15.

~ For a little while David Duval stood as almost as much of a heart-warming story as Norman, as the one-time British Open champion who has since fallen into oblivion seemed to have a rebirth of his game, and was playing in the group with Harrington on Saturday, tied for fourth. Alas, the Duval of the last three years returned, and he shot an 83. But he did fight back with a 71 on Sunday to finish in a tie for 39th.

~ Someone really needs to stop John Daly, golf's equivalent of Brittney Spears. Prior to the Open, Daly turns on former swing coach Butch Harmon, blaming him for the fact that golfing's biggest train wreck can't get that many sponsors exemptions anymore. Yeah, John...it has everything to do with Butch, and nothing to do with the fact that you are a fat, drunken joke

who had to make a tricky five foot putt on Friday to avoid shooting 90.

~ At least Daly showed up, as opposed to Kenny Perry choosing to skip both the U.S. Open and the British Open, instead opting to play in Milwaukee this week. This has got to be another ulcer brewing up in Azinger's stomach...knowing the guy currently ranked #3 in Ryder Cup points is too scared to put himself in competition with the world's best golfers on the world's biggest stages.