**ON TIGER'S TRAIL**

**PLENTY OF FANS FOLLOW WOODS ON 1ST DAY BACK AT OFFICE**

*[METRO Edition]*

Orlando Sentinel - Orlando, Fla.

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**Document Text**

See related stories on pages B1, B6 and B7.

Tiger Woods, get back to work!

After skipping the past two events on the PGA Tour, the world's top-ranked player returned to action Thursday at the Bay Hill Invitational.

The time off paid dividends as Woods positioned himself near the top of the leaderboard with a first-round, 3-under-par 69.

"I did all right today," said Woods, who last played at the Andersen Consulting Match Play Championship on Feb. 27. "It was nice to actually hit some solid shots again. I drove it very well."

Woods will have extra motivation to win this week.

Odd as it may seem, he never has won on the Florida swing, and his best finish at Bay Hill is a tie for ninth in 1997. Last year he placed 56th.

That run of bad luck could be changing.

Battling gusty conditions on the par-72, 7,208-yard course, Woods started by blistering the back nine with long, straight drives and accurate approaches. Minus a three-putt for bogey on the par-3 14th, Woods' short game was superb, rolling in midrange birdie putts on holes 15, 16 and 17 to go 3 under.

After a bogey on 18, Woods played the front nine to 1under, sandwiching his third and final bogey between birdies on holes 3 and 5. Woods stayed out of trouble, birdied each par-5 and even used his patented 3-wood chip shot to save par on the ninth.

Woods and six others trail leaders Vijay Singh and Duffy Waldorf by one stroke.

"Anything under par is pretty good," Woods said. "When we started off the day over on 10, I told [caddie] Stevie [Williams] that if we could shoot something in the 60s, it was going to be a good, solid round.

"Today the conditions are so hard out there. The greens are so firm that some of the balls are just bouncing, shooting over the greens."

Woods' length off the tee allowed him to reach three of the four par-5s in two strokes. Nearly every other player was forced to lay up because of the wind.

"If you're hitting the ball well, you want it to be windy," Woods said. "Right now I'm hitting it pretty solid."

As always, Woods attracted the day's largest following. When he teed off on the 10th with Olin Browne and Billy Andrade at 8:12 a.m., the gallery numbered around 200.

When Woods walked down the ninth fairway four hours later, the crowd had swelled to several thousand. Catching a glimpse of the star was difficult for everyone, including girlfriend Joanna Jagoda.

People came from all over to peer at the world's most popular player.

"I've seen Tiger Woods before, and he's certainly got charisma," said John Howarth, from Cambridge, England. "He's got such a following, especially with the younger crowd."

The young crowd also turned out to support 1991 Dr. Phillips graduate Robert Damron, who has a history of strong play at Bay Hill, his home course. Damron was among the early leaders at 3 under through six holes until he bogeyed the par-5 16th and doubled the par- 4 18th.

"It played hard," said Damron, who put his approach in the water on 18 and finished at 3-over 75. "It wasn't my day, but you know, there's three more rounds."

Woods' Isleworth neighbor, Mark O'Meara, birdied two of his final five holes to finish tied for 10th at 2-under 70.

"The key was my short game was good," O'Meara said. "The birdie on No. 5 was a nice putt, and also the birdie on No. 6. With the conditions the way they are, you have to rely a little on your short game."

**[Illustration]**

PHOTO: Working the crowd. Tiger Woods tees off on the 7th hole in front of a huge gallery at the Bay Hill Invitational on Thursday. Several thousand fans follow Woods from hole to hole during the 1st round, and he doesn't disappoint, shooting 3-under- par 69, good enough to put him in a tie for 3rd place. JOHN RAOUX/ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTOS PHOTO 5: On the job. Tiger Woods returns to work Thursday at the Bay Hill Invitational after skipping the PGA Tour's past 2 events -- the Doral-Ryder Open and the Honda Classic.

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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**MAGIC ARE UNDAUNTED BY UNDERDOG STATUS**

**COACH DOC RIVERS IS JUST READY FOR ORLANDO'S REGULAR SEASON TO GET UNDER WAY AND SPECULATION TO STOP TUESDAY.**

*[METRO Edition]*

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**Document Text**

Favorite and unfavorite. That is how Orlando Magic Coach Doc Rivers compares the resurgent Charlotte Hornets and his collection of scrappy overachievers.

Like many in the league, Rivers has pegged the Hornets as the preseason favorite to win the Eastern Conference. In a tongue-in- cheek assessment of the Magic, the rookie coach grins and says, "We're the unfavorite."

The Magic exceeded expectations in the preseason with a 6-2 record, but the real test comes Tuesday in their NBA season opener at Charlotte, N.C. The Hornets feature a balanced offense, led by 3- point specialist Eddie Jones and the inside presence of Anthony Mason and Derrick Coleman.

"It's just time to play," Rivers said. "Enough of the predictions and everyone saying this and that. Now it's all based on what is real, and I think that's important."

Magic players are adjusting well to the role of underdog.

"We have the upper hand because we have nothing to lose," Magic forward Chris Gatling said. "They [the Hornets) are expected to win, so more heat is on their shoulders, not ours."

Under Coach Paul Silas, the Hornets were one of the hottest teams in the Eastern Conference at the end of last season, finishing 22-13 after Silas replaced former Coach Dave Cowens following a 4-11 start.

Jones averaged a team-high 16.9 points per game in the preseason and torched the Chicago Bulls for 34 points in a 103-89 exhibition victory Friday night. Rookie Baron Davis, selected third in the draft and battling incumbent David Wesley for a starting spot at point guard, should see his share of playing time.

It's not set in stone, but look for the Magic to start Darrell Armstrong and Tariq Abdul-Wahad at guard, Bo Outlaw and Ben Wallace at forward, and Michael Doleac at center. Rivers plans to go deep into the bench to support the demands of playing an up-tempo, running game.

Regarding first-round pick Corey Maggette, Rivers is treating the rookie small forward like anybody else. Playing time will be based on merit.

"He has to earn it," Rivers said. "Just because he's a 19-year- old potential superstar, he has to earn it to be a superstar. Otherwise, he'll never be one.

"He has to have that total commitment, and he's showing it. That's one thing that's good about it. He is trying to earn it."

In his five seasons with the Magic, one player who has proved he deserves time on the court is Armstrong. And with Penny Hardaway in Phoenix, Armstrong will get plenty of it against the Hornets.

"It's another challenge," Armstrong said. "We don't have Penny, we don't have Nick [Anderson), we don't have Horace [Grant), and we don't have Ike [Austin). Now it's time to start up something new."

NOTES: Assistant coach Eric Musselman is in Portland to be with his father, Trailblazers assistant coach Bill Musselman, who collapsed with a possible stroke after Thursday night's exhibition game against the Phoenix Suns. As of Sunday evening, the elder Musselman was listed in fair condition. Rivers has set no mandatory return date for Eric Musselman and is unsure when he will rejoin the team.

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**LIGTENBERG LOOKS LIKE HIS OLD SELF AGAIN**

**AFTER SURGERY LAST YEAR, ATLANTA'S KERRY LIGTENBERG THREW WITHOUT PAIN AND RAISED HOPES HE CAN TAKE OVER AS CLOSER.**

*[METRO Edition]*

Orlando Sentinel - Orlando, Fla.

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**Document Text**

LAKE BUENA VISTA -- Bobby Bonilla had the unlucky task of facing a rejuvenated Kerry Ligtenberg in batting practice Saturday.

“Looked like he was throwing 200 mph,” said Bonilla, an off-season addition to the Braves' outfield whose assessment will be welcomed by fans and teammates alike.

Ligtenberg missed all of last season with Tommy John surgery on his pitching arm but showed no signs of pain during spring training workouts at Disney, mostly throwing fastballs while staying away from sliders. With John Rocker's future in Atlanta still uncertain, Ligtenberg, 28, is likely to become the closer, a position he held two years ago.

“I've still got a ways to go, but I feel real positive about things,” said Ligtenberg, who had 30 saves and a 2.71 ERA in 1998. “There's no pain, so all I can say is things are going well right now.

“I'm just trying to throw strikes. My biggest concern is that a lot of guys who have this surgery come back and tend to be wild for quite some time.”

Ligtenberg's ability to find the strike zone made him popular in Atlanta after hard-throwing closer Mark Wohlers was sent to the minors early in the 1998 season. When Ligtenberg underwent surgery on April 6, 1999, it opened the door for Rocker.

But Rocker is under suspension until May 1, and Manager Bobby Cox said he is not allowed to visit the Braves' spring training complex. His teammates, ready to move past the ordeal, claim Rocker has yet to hold any sort of team meeting regarding his comments.

With Rocker out, Ligtenberg, Kevin McGlinchy, Mike Remlinger and Rudy Seanez will handle most of the Braves' bullpen duties. Barring a major development in spring training, McGlinchy, Remlinger and Seanez likely will be used in middle relief like last season.

“Last year, regardless of what the inning and who was called upon, we prided ourselves in going out there and getting the job done”, Remlinger said. “You've got four guys right now, myself, Rudy Seanez, McGlinchy and Ligtenberg, who all have that same attitude. There's not an ego among us that says, `I have to be the closer,' or, `I deserve to go in.' We all feel like whoever they ask to do the job, they'll be able to do it.”

NOTES: Left-hander pitcher Paul Assenmacher, 39, is back for one more fling with the Braves. He came to camp as a non-roster invitee after signing a minor-league contract two weeks ago. “It feels good to have the opportunity to come to Atlanta and play with the organization you started with,” said Assenmacher, who had a 17-14 record from 1986-89 with the Braves. “This is a good team that has a chance to win.” Assenmacher was 2-1 last season with the Cleveland Indians, pitching 33 innings with an 8.18 ERA. If he can earn a spot on the roster, he will pitch mostly to left-handed batters. If cut, Assenmacher said he probably would retire.

**[Illustration]**

PHOTO: Well-armed. Atlanta starters Greg Maddux and John Smoltz are among players hoping Kerry Ligtenberg's performance Saturday is a sign of things to come this season. ASSOCIATED PRESS

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