

By Paul Newberry
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AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP)—There were so many ways this most thrilling of Masters could have ended.

What if Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson had carried their duel into a playoff? Now that would have turned Augusta National upside down.

Or how about Kenny Perry, the ultimate grinder, winning his first major at an age when most players are prepping for the senior tour? Boy, that would have been something.

Instead, it was a burly man from Argentina who crafted an ending no one could have envisioned. Down at the 10th green, long after Woods and Mickelson had headed for exits and dragged many of the patrons with them, Angel Cabrera barely beat the setting sun with a gimme of a putt as Perry looked on helplessly.

OK, it wasn't Hollywood.

But Cabrera sure earned it.

When his swing got loose and produced two straight bogeys on the front side, he hung in there. When he faced a two-stroke deficit with two holes to play, he didn't give up. And, most impressively, when his first tee shot of the sudden-death playoff rolled to a stop behind a big tree on the first playoff hole, he never lost hope.

"I only had a spot like this big"—meaning tiny—"and only trees, so I've got to put it through there, that's it," Cabrera said, a translator relaying his words. "Easy as that."

Cabrera hooked his ball around one tree but struck another, and was fortunate to see it carom to the left and out into the fairway, a sand wedge away from the green. He knocked it up to 8 feet behind the hole, and made the putt to save a remarkable par. Perry messed up his approach and had to settle for par, too. The third member of the playoff, Chad Campbell, missed his 6-footer and the race was down to two.

Only one more hole was needed. Perry found mud on his ball in the middle of the 10th fairway, and his shot veered left of the green. Cabrera knocked his below the hole and—for perhaps the first time all day—he was finally the one in command. Perry's chip raced past the flag, and he missed the putt coming back.

Perry didn't even get a chance to finish. Cabrera's putt stopped next to the hole. He marked it, took a quick look to make sure there was nothing on it, and calmly delivered the winning stroke on his second career major.

At Oakmont two years ago, Cabrera stared down Woods and Jim Furyk to win the U.S. Open. Now he has joined the green jacket club and wiped out any perception that his first major title was a fluke.

"I was happy with my game and I had confidence," Cabrera said after a closing 71 left him at 12-under 276. "I was just trying to enjoy the moment."

He wasn't the only one. From the time Woods and Mickelson stepped to the tee, sharing a firm handshake and icy stare, there was a sense this would finally be the day the Masters delivered an Augusta-like finish. Another day broke warm and sunny. The flags drooped limply atop the scoreboard. The greens were still soft and inviting after a fierce storm a couple of nights earlier.

This was finally a Sunday for some fireworks, and they were soon going off all over the course.

The main event was Woods vs. Mickelson, or so it seemed most of the day. Mickelson scored the early blows, delivering six birdies before the turn for a record-tying 30. Woods

bounced off the ropes with a 30-footer for eagle at No. 8. They both had a shot as they headed to Amen Corner, trailed by a gallery that grew to 10-deep in spots.

"It was fun," Mickelson said. "We've had some good matches in the past. I'm usually on the wrong end of it, but it was fun playing with him."

The script began to unravel at No. 12, the devilish little hole known as "Golden Bell." Mickelson pulled out a 9-iron and took a tentative swing. The ball checked up short of the flag, spun backward and didn't stop rolling until it splashed in Rae's Creek. Mickelson wound up with a double bogey, which seemed to suck all hope out of his game.

"The ball went in the water," Lefty said, "and I stopped making putts."

A 4-footer for eagle at No. 13 missed the cup by a good inch or two—basically an airball for someone of his caliber. His last opportunity faded away when a 5-foot birdie try slid by the cup at 17. A bogey at the final hole left him with a 5-under 67, three shots shy of the first three-man playoff since 1987.

Woods was one stroke out of the lead after he planted his tee shot next to the flag at No. 16, producing his third birdie in four holes. But golf's greatest closer couldn't finish the comeback. His last two tee shots were both wide and outside. He slammed another shot off a tree. A bogey-bogey finish left him one stroke behind Mickelson and tied for sixth, his worst finish at Augusta since 2004.

He's now gone four years without a green jacket, the longest drought of his Masters career.

"I was right there," Woods said. "I hit a good tee shot down 17, the wind just held it just enough, wouldn't let it cut back, and I was dead from there."

At least he has a Masters title—four of them.

Perry headed to the penultimate hole with a two-stroke lead and seemed the most unlikely guy on the course to let it slip away. He had gone 22 holes since his last bogey, and merely needed a nice, safe finish to add some green to his wardrobe.

Then, he seemed to realize just what was happening. His hands got a little sweaty, his arms a little shaky. He was caught up in the moment, and it got to him.

"I can't stop my right hand when I get a little nervous," Perry conceded. "It wants to shoot a little bit and I can't calm it down."

He knocked his second shot at 17 over the green and took bogey. He tried to calm down, kept telling himself he still had a one-stroke lead. He just had to get through one more hole to become the oldest player to capture a major, some four months older than Julius Boros when he won the 1968 PGA Championship.

But Perry put his tee shot into a bunker. He scattered the gallery on the left with his second shot. A delicate chip left him with a 15-foot putt for the win. But it crept up short of the hole—the tentative stroke of an average golfer who choked, Perry's own brutal assessment of the miss.

"I had that putt everybody makes," he said. "Mark O'Meara has made it. Tiger made it. I knew exactly what it did, and I hit it easy. I mean, I just hit it bad."

This was Perry's second heartbreak in a major. In 1996, he squandered another lead on the 72nd hole at the PGA Championship, then lost in a playoff to Mark Brooks.

Perry knows this might be his final chance.

"It just seems like when I get down to those deals, I can't seem to execute," he moaned in his Kentucky drawl. "Great players make it happen, and your average players don't. That's the way it is."