



Threetops Hole No. 7

# The Gaylord Golf Mecca Struts Its Stuff

by Sam Fullerton

**B**lessed with four days of terrific late-summer weather, the Gaylord Golf Mecca put its best face forward for a recent gathering of the members of the golf media. Writers and videographers from several states were treated to the trials and tribulations that challenging golf courses can provide.

The Gaylord area has adopted a collaborative marketing effort rather than a having the array of courses engage in an expensive battle for market share. As a result, the Golf Mecca has witnessed a sustained growth in the number of rounds played. This growth has been achieved while the industry is flat at best and characterized by a number

of golf courses being closed or converted into residential complexes. The area surrounding Gaylord is home to some 21 courses, many of which were designed by top architects such as Smith, Jones, Fazio, Matthews, Robbins, and Koch. The media representatives witnessed first hand six of these courses, playing 90 holes of golf over the four day peri-

od. The courses were Threetops, Treetops Signature, Otsego's Tribute, Marsh Ridge, Black Bear, and Michaywé Pines.

## Threetops

Recognized as the top par-three course in America by *GolfWeek Magazine*, players are likely to be overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the course. Dramatic elevation changes add to both the visual perspective and the uncertainty as to which club to hit. With drops of up to 170 feet, players would be wise to carefully consider club selection. To illustrate this phenomenon, consider the names given to just four of the nine holes: "Devil's Drop," "Deception," "Valley Low," and "Hang Time". Most golfers will find this challenge adds to the enjoyment of playing this course. To ease the potential frustration that accompanies every round of golf ever played, the course is made more playable by the presence of four sets of tees. From the back tees, yardages range from 135 to 219 yards; from the front tees, these numbers drop to a range of 82 to 137 yards.

Many fans of the PGA will recognize the course as the home of the ING Par 3 Shootout that has been broadcast on ESPN for the past few years. It is where Lee Trevino made his famous million dollar hole-in-one and promptly donated half of the money to St. Jude's Children's Hospital. Threetops is playable by golfers of all levels of skill, and it represents the perfect place to begin a golf vacation at the Gaylord Golf Mecca.

## Treetops Signature

The September issue of *Travel + Leisure Golf Magazine* recently anointed Treetops as the second best golf resort as well as the second best resort for a "buddy trip" in the Midwest. The resort provides a perfect get-away with large rooms featuring numerous amenities such as a whirlpool tub in your room and a full-service spa for those who wish to be truly pampered. Despite these accommodations, it would be hard to forget that the primary allure of Treetops is golf.

Rick Smith's Signature course is part of the Treetops North complex that includes a triumvirate of championship courses in addition to the popular Threetops course. Each course is highly rated by *Golf Magazine* with the Signature course receiving 4.5 stars. The topography means that the courses have a number of similarities, but the designs of the three architects (Robert Trent Jones, Sr., Tom Fazio, and Rick Smith) provide ample diversity such that each offers a unique golfing experience.

From the back tees, Signature's 6,653 yards play to a mere par 70. But these numbers belie the USGA rating of 72.8 and the slope rating of 140. These numbers should tell you that the Signature course is anything but a simple resort course designed to facilitate a speedy round of golf. At the same time, the five sets of tees allow the player to match the challenge of the course with his or her own level of skill. The scenery is absolutely breathtaking with many elevated tees providing vistas for admiring

the surroundings that feature hardwood trees, evergreens, and an abundance of native vegetation. Add the vast bunkering system that encompasses 136 sand bunkers to the equation; then you can understand why many players heave a sigh of relief upon reaching the green. But the golfer's work is not finished because the greens can be very challenging. Approach shots may even need to be aimed somewhere other than at the pin in order to allow the slope to funnel the ball toward the hole. One piece of advice given to our party prior to teeing off was to keep the ball below the hole; putting downhill can turn any green into a challenge to avoid the dreaded three-putt. In fact, one review of the course offers an assessment that the Signature course "tests your putting skills perhaps more than any other element of your game." With the depth of several greens exceeding 120 feet, it is evident that many golfers will agree with that assessment.

The course is difficult, but beautiful. As each of our groups came off the eighteenth green, the comments were universally positive. Even though each golfer reportedly left a ball or two behind, it was apparent that everyone enjoyed the challenge and the aesthetic qualities of the Signature course. Be certain to add it to your list of courses to play.

## Tribute at Otsego Club

The Otsego Club provides an array of lodging alternatives to meet the needs of virtually any group. Beyond lodging, there is an intimate bar area and an excellent



### Marsh Ridge

restaurant. Still, it is the visual character of the golf course that gets your attention.

The Tribute incorporates some 1,100 acres of the Sturgeon River Valley. As you drive your cart from the clubhouse to the first tee, you continue to pass ski lifts and you begin to wonder where the first tee has been hidden. Finally, you arrive at the first tee. At first blush, you get the impression that the course is wide open. That impression will quickly change as you reach the third tee. The tree-line fairways are generally wide enough to be somewhat forgiving of a pushed or pulled shot, but the

strategic placement of bunkers will put a premium on accurate shot-making. The large, often undulating, greens provide ample targets for approach shots, but they also mean that your putting acumen is likely to be challenged – significantly challenged. The USGA rating of 74.1 with a slope rating of 134 for the championship tees should convince most players to swallow their ego and play the course from one of the three shorter sets of tees.

With its location on the high bluffs, the course offers many panoramic views of the area. What you seldom see is another hole or a

golfer from another hole searching for a lost ball. The vastness of the landscape from which the course was carved provided that degree of isolation. It is you against the course and your playing companions. The diversity of the course is perhaps best illustrated by number 16. The relatively short par 5 is flanked by trees on the left as the player hits from an elevated tee that requires the carrying of a large ravine in order to reach an ample landing area. As you consider your second shot, you are faced with a narrow landing area and a second ball-swallowing ravine. Your third shot to the green means that you have successfully navigat-

ed the course's number two handicap hole. You may also be fortunate enough to see some of the area's wildlife. On our closing holes, we were treated to a view of a doe and rare triplet fawns.

The bottom line for the Tribute is that it provides a beautiful venue that can be played by golfers of different abilities. It is diverse and features an ample array of hazards that need to be avoided. It is a good test of golf that is worthy of inclusion on your itinerary of courses in Northern Michigan.

## Marsh Ridge

Of all the courses discussed in this article, Marsh Ridge was perhaps the most intimidating. The fairways are sufficiently lined with trees so as to make the golfer consider the consequences of a wayward shot. Even though the course is not particularly long – playing only 6,231 yards from the back tees – it is punctuated with water and marsh lands that must be avoided. You will suffer the consequences of a poor shot. The par 71 layout is made more playable with the presence of five relatively short par-3 holes.

To help with your shot-making, the course offers GPS in the carts. The system can answer your questions about how far you need to hit the ball to avoid the various hazards.

As with many courses that comprise the Gaylord Golf Mecca, Marsh Ridge is replete with holes that feature elevated tees that afford the golfer with breathtaking views of the course and the unspoiled environment within

which it is incorporated. But don't get lost in the view; selection of the right club is more difficult and more important. In some cases, the player simply cannot afford to underclub. A number of holes, including some of the par 3s, require the player to carry the tee shot over a significant distance in order to reach a safe landing area. The 169-yard eighth hole is all carry as is the 168-yard thirteenth hole. The back nine begins with the course's signature hole, a 172-yard, par 3 that requires a tee shot from one of the five tiers of the tee area over marshland to an elevated green. Safely reaching many of the holes simply initiates a new set of problems. Some of the greens are steeply sloped as well as multi-tiered. For instance, the narrow green on number 14 has three distinct tiers that make two putts a difficult objective, especially when the approach shot has come to rest above the hole.

Marsh Ridge presents a challenge for any golfer, but its physical characteristics will provide a pleasurable experience. Of note is the fact that *Golf Digest* gave the course a four-star rating.

## Black Bear

Black Bear bills itself as the only 19-hole golf course in the state of Michigan. While golfers have come to expect a practice range and a putting green at every resort course of any note, players at Black Bear have the luxury of playing a practice hole prior to heading for the first tee. The moderate length par-three hole will help get the golfer into the proper frame of mind.

The course is fairly short measuring only 6,504 yards from the back tees and 4,404 yards from the most forward set. It is also very open, so golfers can survive their stray shots. Having led you to think the course is easy, it is time to point out that it has large, undulating greens with rolling fairways, elevation changes and roughs that often incorporate the heather that you would associate with the traditional links course. It is located in the Vanderbilt area where players may see elk, deer, or perhaps even the course's namesake, a black bear. Greens can be fairly difficult with tiering and slopes that dictate the need to hit the correct approach shot. The terrain is varied; it features considerable sand and a modest amount of water. But unlike many courses in northern Michigan, golfers do not need to stuff their bags with extra balls to replace those that they lose.

Black Bear has not escaped the eye of the media. It has been named a "People's Choice" winner, and it has been designated as a 4-Star course by *Golf Digest*. Its modest greens fees make it a great value, one well worth visiting on any golf vacation.

## Michaywé Pines

The Michaywé Pines Course is one of the original tracks that comprise the Gaylord Golf Mecca. A substantial renovation has addressed improvements in the bunkers, the establishment of four tee areas for each hole, an enhanced irrigation system, and enlargement of the pond on the 9th hole. The tee options provide alternatives ranging from 5,259 to 7,034 yards. As the name implies,



### Michaywé Pines

the course is carved out of a stand of tall evergreen trees, but the front 9 is characterized by the deciduous trees that line the fairways. Despite this reality, the course is comparative open and features flat, wide landing areas. Greenside bunkers tend to be just that – beside the greens. This has opened up the approach areas leading to the greens. And despite the aforementioned enlargement of the pond on number 9, the course is relatively devoid of water. Playability is also enhanced by the relatively flat greens. Michaywé is a residential community, so houses are also part of the landscape faced by the golfer.

Course operators take pride in

touting the course as “female-friendly.” The reality is that the course is playable by golfers of all levels of ability regardless of gender or age. It was a great way for us to end four days of golf.

### Overview

The Gaylord Golf Mecca has done a great job of marketing the area. But good marketing cannot overcome a poor product. The area’s success has been achieved because it offers an outstanding product. There are courses and lodging options to fit differing budgets and playing ability. What the courses

have in common is a desire to satisfy their customers. The ability to do so has helped the area sustain its growth in an industry that has struggled from overbuilding combined with the economic downturn in Michigan. Whether you want flat or rolling courses, wooded or open courses, long or short courses, the Gaylord Golf Mecca has what you are looking for. And they have it at prices that will not make you break out in a cold sweat. That response is most likely due to the adrenaline rush you experience as you tee it up on the first tee of any of the terrific courses that comprise the Gaylord Golf Mecca. **MG**