

THE NEXT BIG THING

The Loop at Forest Dunes Golf Club, the first open-to-the-public reversible golf course in America, opens in Michigan.

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

ROSCOMMON, NORTHERN MICHIGAN: The doctor's eyes told the story. "Lew, you need to change your lifestyle. You had a major heart attack. Continuing to be a workaholic will kill you."

Lew Thompson, founder of Lew Thompson & Son Trucking Company, faced a common dilemma of entrepreneurs. The greater your success and growth, the harder you work. Delegation typically isn't in the lexicon.

"I knew I had to slow down," said Lew. "I was fortunate. I had my son Josh to lean on and take over reigns of the company."

"As I expanded our family-run business, I was invited to play in countless vendor golf tournaments—an opportunity I never took advantage of. My parents weren't golfers, I had never played, and I certainly didn't know proper etiquette. I heard golf could be a strong networking tool, so I decided to take up the sport in my 40s with the hope of accomplishing three objectives: to lower my stress level, strengthen my business contacts, and get a little exercise."



PHOTOS BY BRIAN WALTERS PHOTOGRAPHY

Lew Thompson

A JOB LITERALLY PUTTING FOOD ON THE TABLE

Lew Thompson and his wife Jackie live in Huntsville, Arkansas, a small dot on the map with a population of 1,200. "Huntsville is the poster child of a company town," explained Lew. "Butterball employs 1,000 people. Thus, the opportunity to start a small business faces hurdles."

Undeterred, the couple built a laundromat and opened a tire store. "We wanted to control our destiny and not report to others," said Lew.

In 1987, they turned their attention to trucking. "Hewlett Packard was started in a garage. Our trucking operation was run out of a laundromat," smiled Lew. "Butterball was growing and I sensed an opportunity. We started with one 18-wheeler and as Butterball expanded, so did our company."

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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

ADVERTISING OFFICES

Mark E. Pazdur
ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

2171 Campus Drive, Suite 330
Irvine, California 92612
PH: (949) 752-6474 FAX: (949) 752-0398

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June Graham
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The Publisher's Page

THE PROPERTY WAS ONCE OWNED BY WILLIAM DURANT, founder of General Motors. Durant sold the parcel in the 1930s to The Detroit Partnership, a well-known consortium of organized crime families. It became a recreational haven for Detroit mafia with a private runway, an Olympic-size pool, indoor riding arena, interlinking tunnels to hidden rooms, and was searched by the Feds upon the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa.



The Forest Dunes clubhouse exhibits Northern Michigan's rustic elegance.

It wasn't until Lew added his fourteenth truck that he established a formal workplace. "As you can imagine, having a client visit me in my glass enclosed office at a laundromat didn't provide a sense of confidence and there wasn't a Starbucks to meet over a cup of coffee. Margins were thin and I am conservative. If we had a good year, I plowed the capital back into buying another truck, not leasing space."

Today, Lew Thompson & Son Trucking Company owns 125 trucks, 225 trailers, has 350 employees, and hauls an incredible 26 million turkeys for Butterball annually.

EASY TO SAY, HARD TO DO

Lew's strong work ethic was put to the test to improve his handicap. "At first, I was embarrassed. I caught the 'golf bug,' and couldn't stand my poor skills. I did it right, bought the best clubs, and took a series of lessons from a PGA professional to slowly help whittle my handicap to a respectable 16. Taking up golf in the middle of life isn't the easiest of tasks. I had many a night going to bed with a sore back after practicing on the range." ▶



The Weiskopf Course is plush and rugged.

Seven years ago, Lew's investment in golf deepened beyond improving his game by purchasing The Bridges Golf Club in Montrose, Colorado. "The club was struggling and it was an eye-opener to see how the golf industry works," reported Lew. "We started with 22 members and now have 220. This year will be the first in the community's history to be cash flow positive and we have sold more real estate in the past 12 months than the previous six years combined. The experience made me realize I really enjoy the business."

Lew's attention turned to Upper Michigan when a friend recommended he take a look at Forest Dunes in Roscommon, about an hour south of Treetops Resort.

"I had never heard of the club, and for that matter, I hadn't set foot in the state!" said Lew.

Undeterred, he flew up north to investigate.

"It was love at first sight. Within 24 hours of negotiating with the bank, I bought the property. The setting is magnificent and the Tom Weiskopf course is extraordinary. I felt with the right investments I could create the equivalent of an Augusta National experience for the public to enjoy," explained Lew.

"STUBBORN BUT FAIR, combining high risk with rare reward, Forest Dunes joins Bethpage Black in New York, Pasatiempo in California, Pine Needles in North Carolina, and Pacific Dunes in Oregon among my top five public courses in the country."

— MATT GINELLA, SENIOR TRAVEL EDITOR, GOLF DIGEST

TRANSFORMING INTO A GOLF DESTINATION

It may come as a surprise, but there are more golf courses in Michigan than California. "Competition is fierce for your golfing dollar," said Lew. "We have 30 courses, including Treetops Resort, within a 30-mile radius."

"My goal was to create a golf destination that would warrant a couple night's stay, not an afternoon round as you pass through town. To accomplish the task, I knew I needed to build a lodge and ultimately a second course. When I opened the lodge in 2013, I quickly learned of my first mistake. With only 14 rooms, I underestimated demand. I didn't want to take on debt, so I built what I could afford. This season, after a flurry of villa construction, we have tripled our inventory of overnight accommodation."

STORY OF TWO TOMS

Forest Dunes had already established itself on the golf scene. Its existing Tom Weiskopf design, set within the Huron National Forest, is ranked No. 23 in *Golf Digest's* 100 Greatest Public Golf Courses. "My course at Forest Dunes replicates classic style and emulates a risk/reward involvement on most every hole," said Weiskopf. "I consid-

"FOREST DUNES has always been Northern Michigan's enigma. No other course in the state has been more lauded by critics creating those coveted 'best of' lists." — GOLF CHANNEL



The Doak Course is firm and fast.

er it to be in the top three of courses in the United States that I have been involved in."

With little new golf course construction in America, Lew had his choice of the best architects for a second golf course. "Tom Doak was my pick from day one," recalled Lew. "The bigger question was could I afford him? I had a dual mandate to create something that was really good, yet not stupidly expensive."

After a superb introductory meeting, Lew offered Doak a \$15,000 stipend to survey the land. Three months later, the phone rings, "Lew, let's get together," said Doak.

The two sat down to review plans and the initial analysis *wasn't* positive. "Tom, I don't want to hurt your feelings but I'm not impressed," sheepishly said Lew. "What you have given me is just another course. We aren't next to an ocean nor on a mountain. I need something so compelling that golfers from around the country—no, for that matter around the world—would want to travel here."

"I thought you would say that," replied Doak as he rolled up his blueprint and presented his big idea. "This is a concept I have thought about for 30 years," said Doak as he laid down a new sketch. "I think you have the right site and are the right client to understand the appeal of a reversible course, allowing golfers to play it both ways. You are getting two courses in one."

Lew was stunned and hesitant. Thoughts raced through his mind. Yes, this is different and intriguing, but would

core golfers find it to be a gimmick?

Doak pressed his case. "The idea of a reversible course is not as revolutionary as it sounds," explained Doak. "Many Scottish links, including The Old Course at St. Andrews, were played in reverse in winter to spread out the wear and tear of divots. Architects, including Tom Simpson and Alister MacKenzie, designed private estate courses with a handful of reversible holes. But, as far as I know, there is no 18-hole course in the world today that is played in reverse on a regular basis."

"Tom, can you assure me this will work?" asked Lew.

"No," responded Doak. "It is a little bit of a roll of the dice. We don't know how good until it's done. Any architect telling you otherwise isn't being truthful."

Lew green lighted the concept and construction commenced two years ago on The Loop at Forest Dunes.

The Loop, now open for play, features two distinct layouts using the same 18 greens but playing clockwise one day (black routing) and counterclockwise the next (red routing).

"If you know Tom, he is a man of few words," concluded Lew. "I asked, 'ok, the course is complete and the grass is grown in. Tom, what have we got here?'"

"It's good. It's really, really good," complimented Doak.

"His praise validated my belief we have created a golf destination worthy of a trip," concluded Lew. ■

For information, please visit ForestDunesGolf.com.