

THERE'S NO TWO WAYS ABOUT IT

Forest Dunes features the only reversible course in the world with 18 different greens and fairways.

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

ROSCOMMON, NORTHERN MICHIGAN: It comes as no surprise that Florida and California are the two largest golf markets in America. What may be a revelation is Michigan rounds out the "Top-5" as a prime golf destination.

"Michigan hasn't been immune from changing consumer trends," reported Don Helinski, director of operations at Forest Dunes. "Almost 200 courses in our state have shuttered in the past decade. That's not to say if you deliver you won't succeed."



The Weiskopf Course

EVERYONE LOVES A GOOD STORY

Forest Dunes, a three-hour drive north of Detroit, quickly established itself on the golf scene in 2003 when its Weiskopf Course, set within the Huron National Forest, was named "Best New Upscale Golf Course in America" by *Golf Digest*. To this day, the course remains on its 100 Greatest Public Golf Courses list. "My course replicates a classic style and emulates a risk/reward involvement on most every hole," detailed Tom Weiskopf. "I consider it to be in the top three of courses in the United States that I have been involved in."

"The property was once owned by William Durant, founder of General Motors," revealed Helinski. "Durant sold the parcel in the 1930s to The Detroit Partnership, a well-known consortium of organized crime families who in turn established The South Branch Ranch [with an Olympic-size pool, indoor riding arena, and interlinking tunnels to hidden rooms]. Canada is only a couple of hours to our east and north. Legend has it the

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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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PAZDUR PUBLISHING

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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ranch stored all the hooch imported from Canada during Prohibition and the property was searched by the Feds upon the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa."

A CHALLENGE AND A SOLUTION

Located off the beaten path, Forest Dunes faced a challenge. "Many of our guests stopped for a day to play our Weiskopf Course and then moved on," winced Helinski. "Our busiest days were Mondays and Thursdays as folks visited us on the head



The Loop at Forest Dunes, designed by Tom Doak, was named "Best New Public Course in America" by *Golf Digest* in 2016. For information, visit ForestDunesGolf.com.

tail of their trip. It was a dynamic that we wanted to change."

A decision was made to build a second golf course to create a *golf destination*. "It was the proverbial equation of 1+1=3. Our hope was having two courses would change travel plans, making us a stopover for a multi-day visit," said Helinski.

The investment wasn't without risk. "I must admit, I had a pit in my stomach," recalled Helinski. "There was no guarantee that 'if we build it, they will come.' Our photography in our marketing material is the best in the business, but you need to be here in person to grasp the total immersive experience."

Tom Doak was selected to design the second course. During a planning meeting, Doak surprised Lew Thompson, owner of Forest Dunes. "He broached the idea of a reversible design," said Thompson. "The course would offer two distinct layouts using the same 18 greens but playing clockwise one day [black

"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



routing] and counterclockwise the next [red routing]."

Intrigued, Thompson cautiously approved the concept.

"I've had the blueprints for a reversible design in my head for 30 years," said Tom Doak. "Forest Dunes had the right site and Mr. Thompson was 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.

"The idea of a reversible course is not as revolutionary as it sounds," continued 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, Forest Dunes is the only course in the world today that is played in reverse on a regular basis with 18 distinct greens and fairways."

INSTANT CREDIBILITY

"It was love at first sight touring Forest Dunes," reminisced Lew Thompson. "I bought Forest Dunes [which, at the time, only had the outstanding Weiskopf Course] within 24 hours of setting on property. The backdrop is magnificent and the Weiskopf course is extraordinary.

"With the right investments, I felt I could create the equivalent of an Augusta National experience for the public to enjoy. Having Weiskopf and now Doak designs provides instant credibility to Forest Dunes."

GREAT CONTRAST

Unlike other golf resorts with hundreds of rooms and multiple conference facilities, Forest Dunes provides intimate lodging options and chose to stake its reputation on golf.

"We don't have a pool with cabanas or a luxury spa," explained Helinski. "An outsized percentage of our revenue comes from golf and our commitment to provide the best is reflected in our conditioning. It's not uncommon to see the maintenance crew on their knees trimming edges 'just so right.'

"Similar to how playing tennis on a *clay* or *grass* court makes for a different game and strategy," continued Helinski, "playing our Weiskopf and Doak golf courses provide contrasts."

The Weiskopf Course benefits from a landscape sculpted from ancient glaciers. "The course is a story of two tales," said Helinski. "The front nine is typical Northern Michigan with tree-lined fairways. When you make the turn, the back opens into a wasteland, dunes setting.

"The Doak Course is a different experience. It's walking only and plays firm and fast. Your best strategy from 35 yards out to the pin might be to putt the ball," advised Helinski.

As summer nears, hours of daylight expand. "Sunset occurs late in our neck of the woods," said Helinski. "It's not uncommon for a foursome to roll in for dinner when most are settled in bed to watch the 10 P.M. news." ■