

2017 Outlook

A Year of Bounty

By Tim Cronin



The beauty and ferocity of Erin Hills, site of this year's U.S. Open, is best on display late in the afternoon. This is the par-3 ninth hole. (Paul Hundley / Erin Hills)

A

U.S. Open so close to Chicago you can drive to it. A women's major you can take the train to. The cream of the college crop in the neighborhood. A trio of courses with grand openings worth a day trip. An old favorite with a new look and sheen.

That's on the tee for you in 2017. It's the most lively and progressive year on the calendar around here in years. Here's a closer look, starting with the championship chase:

The presence of the U.S. Open at Erin Hills in Erin, Wis., and thus in the Midwest, is a departure from recent years. The last one was at Olympia Fields Country Club in 2003, and it's been no closer than Pittsburgh, at fabled Oakmont in 2007 and last year, since. And after this year, Oakmont, in 2025, is the next nearby visit, as the sponsoring United States Golf Association bounces between the coasts, with the occasional diversion to Pinehurst, North Carolina.

Two visits to the Midwest in about a quarter-century is too few, so it's Erin Hills or bust if you want to see the National Open in person without driving to Pittsburgh for a weekend or taking a plane somewhere. And it should be quite a show.

Erin Hills is the realized dream of Robert Lang, whose concept of a nine-hole course for his employees turned into an 18-hole championship course that was awarded the U.S. Women's Public Links before it was finished. It then was awarded a U.S. Amateur and the U.S. Open, but Lang nearly went under trying to make changes, and finally sold to millionaire Andrew Ziegler, who is closely aligned with the USGA through having former USGA vice president Jim Reinhart on the course's board of directors.

If Lang makes an appearance at Erin Hills, it will be a surprise. It will be no surprise to see thousands of fans crowding the hills of fescue that border many of the fairways on the sprawling layout, even with ticket prices starting at \$110 for tournament rounds (and \$400 for the week). The Open is the Open, an exercise in golf masochism, where the PGA Tour's usual diet of birdies and eagles is replaced with a sterner test defined by par saves and escapes from double-bogey.

It's different, the Open, and Erin Hills is different as well. Fescue fairways are the start, and if the extra hole Lang installed to break ties has been eliminated – alas, along with the ode to the blind par 3 at Ireland's famed Lahinch – there's still plenty of quirk in the course, along with enough length that USGA guru Mike Davis can stretch or shrink holes by as much as 150 yards in many cases. Erin Hills is only 18 holes, but almost all can be set up at least four ways, which could get the heads of the players, defending champion Dustin Johnson included, spinning.

The U.S. Open starts on June 15, but the area's tournament trail commences three weeks earlier at Rich Harvest Farms, where the men's and women's NCAA Championships will take place. The women play from May 19-24, and the men follow from May 26 through 31, the first Chicago-area appearance for the college test in 20 years. Illinois' men's team, in the top five the last five years, may finally win it all.

The week before the Open, hopeful pros will populate the Ivanhoe Club in Lake County, where the Rust-Oleum Championship, a Web.com Tour stop, will stop for the second consecutive year. Max Homa isn't likely to defend his title, having qualified for the PGA Tour, which is the whole idea of the stepping-stone circuit.

The same week as the U.S. Open brings one of the biggest amateur tournaments in the country back home. The 117th Women's Western Amateur is set for River Forest Country Club in Elmhurst, the first playing in the area since 2001 for the show that often showcases future LPGA stars.

The current galaxy will take over Olympia Fields the last few days of June for the LPGA's championship, these days titled the KMPG Women's PGA Championship, to be played on Olympia's challenging North Course and concluding on July 2. Canadian teen Brooke Henderson will be defending the title she captured in a sudden-death playoff over New Zealand's Lydia Ko last year at Sahalee near Seattle.

It's the first women's major at Olympia since the 1933 Women's Western Open, which was won by Olympia member June Beebe. Golf has changed exponentially since then in many ways, not the least of which is the money involved. Beebe was an amateur, but there was no purse anyway. The ladies will be playing for \$3.5 million, and if you're looking to make a wager, Ariya Jutanugarn, who finished third last year, a stroke back, isn't a bad bet. Last year's top player won the Women's British Open later in 2016, and six years ago captured the U.S. Girls Junior on Olympia's South Course.

That's a full menu in many ways, but wait, there's more. The John Deere Classic, the state's remaining annual PGA Tour stop, returns to its mid-July dates at picturesque TPC Deere Run in Silvis. Jordan Spieth, who won his second Deere in 2015 but didn't play in 2016 because the tournament was scheduled against the Olympics, will be back, as will 2016 winner Ryan Moore, whose sterling play earned him his fifth victory on the circuit. It's as if the Deere will have two defending champions.

The Deere is supported amazingly well by the Quad Cities, from attendance – usually crowded on the weekends, but not to the point of jammed – to the enrollment in the Birdies for Charity program, which last year raised about \$10.5 million, a record for the tournament by almost \$1.8 million.

Finally, there are the WGA's two big championships, the Western Amateur, set for Skokie Country Club in Glencoe from August 1-5, where the stars of tomorrow will challenge a layout that first gained fame when Gene Sarazen won the 1922 U.S. Open on it, and the BMW Championship – the erstwhile Western Open – being played for a third time at Conway Farms Golf Club in Lake Forest.

Conway yielded a 59 by Jim Furyk in 2013, and a 72-hole tournament record-tying 262 by Jason Day in 2015. This much is sure: Conway, which has never played as long as 7,200 yards in any BMW round, will yield more low scores, and with a \$1.53 million first prize, big hitters like Day and Dustin Johnson, who won last year at Crooked Stick, are sure to be close to the top once again.

That's the best of golf watching this year. But what about playing? Now, too, there's a cornucopia of places to tee it up.

The one getting the most attention, thanks to the pedigree of the owner's previous endeavors, is Sand Valley, the latest concoction of sand-based golf envisioned by Chicagoan Mike Keiser. Located in remote central Wisconsin west of Stevens Point and south of Wisconsin



Jason Day celebrates his 2015 victory in the BMW Championship at Conway Farms. (Charles Cherney / Western Golf Association)



The fourth hole at Sand Valley both beckons and threatens. (Ryan Farrow / Sand Valley)



The new 15th green and 16th tee and fairway of Oak Meadows Golf Course in DuPage County greened up quickly after being seeded in the fall of 2016. (Oak Meadows Golf Course)

Rapids – Nekoosa is the nearby town, where the previous best attractions were a historic paper mill and the Lure Bar and Grill on the shore of Pentenwell Lake – Sand Valley is like Keiser-owned Bandon Dunes in Oregon or Cabot Links in Nova Scotia, only without the ocean.

Instead, Sand Valley will be an inland version, with a Bill Coore-Ben Crenshaw course beginning its first full year of operation, a David Kidd layout under construction, and more to come. With 1,700 acres of a former Christmas tree farm to work with, there's plenty of room for more.

The Sand Valley website says the resort "pays homage to the great heathland courses of London," including the intensely-private Swinley Forest and the better-known Sunningdale and Walton Heath. With its sandy underfooting created by the bed of an ancient glacial lake, it has a similarity to some of Chicago's better courses, including Exmoor and Beverly, along with Keiser's first project, the private nine-hole Dunes Club in Michigan, all of which were built on the edge of the old Lake Chicago.

At Sand Valley, the elevation changes created by the sudden outflow of an ancient lake that created the Wisconsin Dells to the east are even more pronounced. As a result of great land upon which to create and the imagination of the architects, and the use of fescue for firm and fast playing conditions, early indications are that both the Coore-Crenshaw course and Kidd's creation will be as favorably received as Bandon Dunes and Cabot Links.

The location is strangely serendipitous. Sand Valley isn't near any major city, but nor is it all that far from Chicago or the Twin Cities (about four hours), Milwaukee, Madison, or Des Moines. And with luxury lodging on site befitting a Keiser resort, it's a weekend waiting to happen. It is walking only unless you have a disability and – we're not kidding – a note from a doctor sent in advance, which seems overly strict for a place where you're supposed to have fun.

On the other side of Lake Michigan sit the other two notable newcomers, and one needs some explanation, for it is two courses in one. Or two atop one. Forest Dunes Golf Club owner Lew Thompson wanted a memorable course for his second layout in Roscommon, not far from Traverse City. Architect Tom Doak gave him two in the form of a reversible course, The Loop. You can play it clockwise, so to speak, one day, and go around counterclockwise the next.

Doak took the idea from St. Andrews, where the Old Course was originally played in the other direction – from the first tee to the 17th green, as it were, and so on – until the fairway was widened and the current rotation became more popular. (The other layout, now known as the reverse course, is still played a few days each year.)

Doak had the idea in his head for two decades, found Thompson amenable to it, and went to town. The result is an eminently playable walking-only layout with some brilliant holes in each version, running 6,805 yards as the counter-clockwise Red or 6,704 yards from the clockwise Black. Said Doak just before it opened for limited play last summer, "Whichever way you're playing, it never feels like you are going the wrong way."

The Loop alternates play each day, so a two-day stay yields a trip around each version. Hang around for a third,

Southern Illinois

Come Stay & Play

- 27-Hole Golf Resort
- Course-Side Lodging
- Luxury Condo Rental
- Restaurant
- Meeting Facilities
- Challenging Golf Course
- Beautiful Setting Alongside Rend Lake
- Largest Greens in the Midwest
- Family Friendly



REND LAKE
GOLF RESORT

RendLakeGolf.com
(800) 999-0977



ILLINOIS
MILE AFTER MAGNIFICENT MILE®

2017 Outlook

continued from page 23

and there's Forest Dunes' original layout, a Tom Weiskopf creation that opened in 1998. But The Loop is the showpiece.

Stoatin Brae is closer, in Augusta, just outside Kalamazoo, but similarly dramatic. In this case, Doak's design crew at Renaissance Golf (Eric Iverson, Brian Slawnik, Brian Schneider, and Don Placek) were given a parcel of land high on a bluff above the Kalamazoo River that had been cleared for a subdivision. That never happened and the Scott family, owners of the Gull Lake View group of courses, saw the opportunity for a links-style course on the cleared land.

With broad fairways and equally wide vistas from atop the bluff, the early effect is to lull a player into thinking Stoatin Brae is a pushover. A collection of challenging approach shots to greens with plenty of movement will quickly eliminate that notion.

Much of the golf is old-fashioned. There are blind tee shots here and there. The seventh hole, a par 3, is uphill and into a green hidden by a ridge that obscures all but the flagstick. But the largest hazard is the wind, thanks to the high elevation and the open vistas.

Twelve holes opened last year, and the whole course should be available in April.

All that's new, and so is Oak Meadows Golf Course, the DuPage County Forest Preserve-owned layout that architect Greg Martin is remodeling to both create additional flood-retention areas and improve the course. He's succeeded in both departments, creating a course that should take on water far less often than before, and provide a more interesting test of golf.

There are two questions yet to be answered: Precisely when it will re-open – ideally before the first day of summer, but it's too early to tell – and what it will be called. Forest preserve district officials are calling it "the former Oak Meadows" on their golf website, but a new moniker for what was originally Elmhurst Country Club has not yet been announced.

No matter the name, players should find it a pleasant upgrade from the old layout, Martin having effectively retained the original corridors while building a new course, and relocating some green complexes on the old carcass.

That's what golf promises us in 2017. Now if only the pages would fall off the calendar more quickly!

For ticket information:

Rust-Oleum
<http://rustoleumchampionship.com/purchase-tickets/>

U.S. Open
www.usga.org/tickets.html

Women's PGA
www.kpmgwomenspgachampionship.com/

John Deere Classic
www.johndeereclassic.com/sponsorship/ticket-packages/

BMW Championship
www.BMWChampionship.com

For course information:

Sand Valley
www.sandvalleygolfresort.com

Forest Dunes / The Loop
<https://www.forestdunesgolf.com/>

Stoatin Brae
www.gulllakeview.com/

Oak Meadows
www.dupagegolf.com/course/

mistwood
golf  club

WWW.MISTWOODGC.COM
1700 W. Renwick Road, Romeoville, IL 60446
815.254.3333

A multi-national award winning golf club! The best of the best!



Public Course. Private Experience.

mQ's
GOLF DOME

WWW.MCQSDOME.COM
730 N. Bolingbrook Drive (Route 53)
Bolingbrook, Illinois 60440
630.739.7600

- 60,000 sq. ft. fully-heated Indoor Dome
- 40 Hitting Stations
- 900 sq. ft. Putting Green
- Short Game Area
- Performance Center
- PGA Professional Lessons
- Custom Club Fitting
- Club Repair
- Full Menu & Bar Service Available



Chicagoland's Premier Indoor Golf Facility