

# Stoatin Brae Serves Up Heavenly View



While 2017 might not have been a great year for Bears fans or White House press secretaries, traveling golfers across the Midwest should all agree that it was a truly remarkable season for new courses to challenge. Indeed, not since the golf boom era of the late 1990s have we seen more new courses pop up across Wisconsin, Northern Michigan and Chicagoland. Not only were these new additions to the golfing landscape of the region, all three were spectacular properties built by the likes of Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore (Sand Valley in Nekoosa, Wis.), Tom Doak (The Loop in Roscommon, Mich.) and Greg Martin (The Preserve at Oak Meadows in Addison).

Somewhat overlooked in all of this design excitement was the stunning unveiling of Stoatin Brae at Gull Lake View Golf & Resort, east-northeast of Kalamazoo, Mich. A little over two years ago, Bill Johnson and Jon Scott peeked over an old wire fence that lined the tee of the resort's Stonehedge South Golf Course and arrived at a mutual conclusion: There, beneath the wild grasses and weeds and wildflowers, rested a parcel of spectacular, flowing and verdant land that was destined to become a golf course.

The two men knew a thing or two about golf architecture. Johnson had been head professional at the complex since 1988. Scott had been president of the resort since 1993 and was a member of the family that has owned and operated the complex, centered on Augusta, roughly between Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, since 1965. Despite the fact that few new golf courses anywhere in the country have been built over the past decade, Johnson and Scott had very few apprehensions about tackling the project or taking on the time and financial investment the project demanded.

"We'd been talking for a while about adding a sixth course at the resort," Scott explained. "So when we took a closer look at the property and recognized how its location next to our other courses worked in our favor, the only question left in our minds was how quickly we could buy the land and locate the right architects to build the course."

While Scott had the background and necessary skills to perform the design work himself, the natural flow of the land seemed like a natural philosophical fit for Traverse City's Renaissance Design. The firm, founded by lead designer Doak, had developed an outstanding reputation over the years with acclaimed projects at Bandon Dunes in Oregon, Cape Kidnappers in New Zealand and Dismal River Club in Nebraska. Doak had previously committed himself to building the aforementioned The Loop golf course at Forest Dunes, but was intrigued.

"I saw that Jon was thoughtful and committed to doing something good," Doak said. "The project was in-state and we are always interested in stuff close to home. So I was already thinking about having [principal company designers Eric Iverson, Brian Schneider, Don Placek and Brian Slawnik] do the job on their own."

Scott quickly embraced the vision presented him by the team.

"We all agreed that the land would stay pretty much exactly the way nature shaped it," Scott said. The mission presented to the Renaissance team was simple: Build an

18-hole course that moved as little land as possible while ensuring that maintenance costs would allow for a finished course affordable to the thousands of golfers who've been the bread-and-butter of the resort for over half a century.

Opened for its first full season last April, Stoatin Brae – Gaelic for "grand hill" – is a wonder to behold. Holes weave atop and below a long ridge that provides remarkable views of the Kalamazoo River Valley. Complementing the topography are thoughtful design elements across the course including unimpeded landing areas in front and around greens on long par 4s and greens on short par 3s that are fiercely protected by sprawling bunkers.

"I believe that we've built something very different ... and different than anything we've done before," Slawnik said of the design team. "We were entrusted with a very good piece of land and really tried to leave it alone as much as possible. Putting a golf course on that site will draw golfers to a really cool part of Southwest Michigan."

The property's treeless landscape and high elevation ensure the course plays

differently each day dependent on wind direction. Offsetting at least some of the difficulty are a wide variety of tee lengths ranging from 6,742 yards from the gold tees to 6,261 yards from the blacks and 4,943 yards from blues.

The Stoatin Brae journey begins from high atop the ridge, meant to energize players with a fast and unabated start. The 355-yard No. 1 serves up a wide-open fairway directed toward a huge, wide-open green. While intimidating in length, the 218-yard No. 2 is nowhere near as difficult as it sounds, as no bunkers rest in waiting to snatch errant tee shots.

Even the 435-yard third hole seems to apologize for its length by offering a tee shot landing area shared with the landing area of the 16th hole. So don't be afraid to wail away toward the right with your driver to set up a delicate approach shot to a small green protected on both sides by sand.

Following a long par 5 that places golfers smack dab in the middle of the course, make sure to visit the halfway house

*continued on page 39*



# Pros Beyond Golf

We are all familiar with the stereotype of a golf professional: bronzed skin, snazzy clothes, confidence of a fighter pilot and owner of a golf swing the rest of us mere mortals would kill for.

While the stereotype might fit on many levels, anyone who's spent even a few hours hanging around a clubhouse or at a practice range knows that a club pro's job can be shockingly complex. Many pros, for instance, have little time to hit balls or play on a regular basis due to the responsibilities of the job. Even as some pros play to scratch handicaps, others

focus their attention on running the pro shop, scheduling club events, meeting with vendors and managing their staffs.

If there is a single thread that unites virtually every golf professional in greater Chicago, it is a shared commitment to promote and grow the game both internally at the clubs they represent and externally through a wide variety of programs and events organized at golf courses, practice facilities and school gymnasiums across the metropolitan area.

One of the most remarkable youth programs anywhere in the country takes

place in the near northwest suburbs in Des Plaines. Originated in 1994, the Maryville Golf Academy has partnered with the section to introduce the game to children and adolescents from troubled families who grow up as far from golf, or any leisure-time activity, as can be.

"The entire concept of the program is to teach skills to kids so they can be productive members of society," said PGA professional Juan Espejo, director of the program.

Working from a cozy corner of the complex's gymnasium, Espejo has built a sophisticated practice facility complete with a Trackman swing monitor, practice green (made with state-of-the-art turf) and chipping area.

"We teach golf here," Espejo said, "but the message we convey while we're teaching golf is about values, life choices and respect for others. Isn't it amazing how closely the game of golf mirrors the game of life? There are rules that must be followed. And the job of enforcing the rules of conduct fall on the individual's conscience."

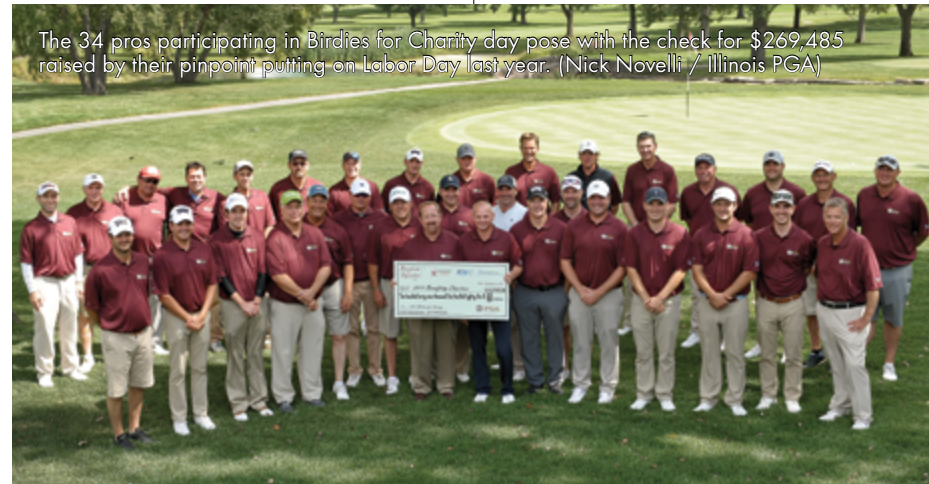
The Maryville Golf Academy program extends beyond just learning how to hit a golf ball. Espejo also teaches interested students how to caddy. Once trained, the caddies find work at a number of area country clubs. According to Greg Kunkel, caddiemaster at Sunset Ridge Country Club in Northfield, a number of Maryville caddies who spend summers working at the club will be under consideration for Evans scholarships in coming years.

"The caddies from Juan's program come to the club ready to work and many of them have top grades in school," Kunkel said.

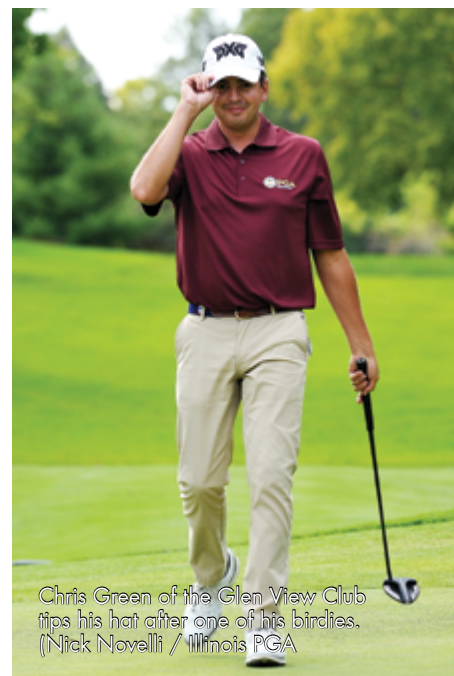
Across the city in the western suburb of Wheaton, a number of PGA professionals donate their time teaching golf as therapy to adults and juniors with disabilities. Patients from Marianjoy Hospital who suffer from strokes, spinal cord, brain injuries and neuromuscular disorders visit Cantigny Golf to assist in their recovery.

"Golf adds to the quality of life of disabled people," said Ed Stephenson, executive director of the DuPage County

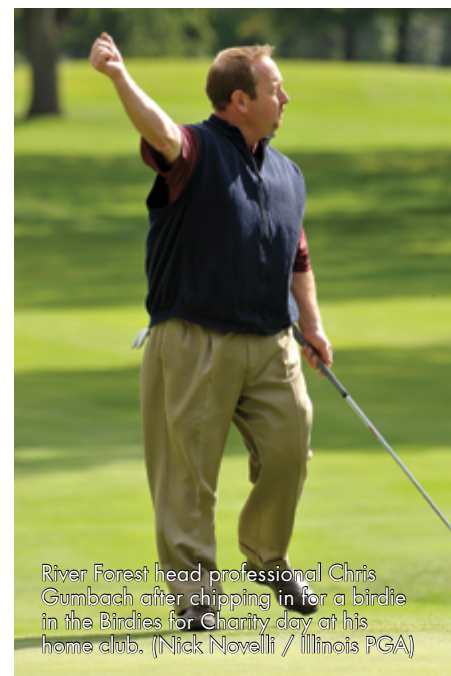
continued on page 40



The 34 pros participating in Birdies for Charity day pose with the check for \$269,485 raised by their pinpoint putting on Labor Day last year. (Nick Novelli / Illinois PGA)



Chris Green of the Glen View Club tips his hat after one of his birdies. (Nick Novelli / Illinois PGA)



River Forest head professional Chris Gumbach after chipping in for a birdie in the Birdies for Charity day at his home club. (Nick Novelli / Illinois PGA)

## Destinations

continued from page 31

prior to teeing off on No. 10 if for no other reason than to appreciate its architecture. Don't be embarrassed if you have trouble locating the small building as it is literally located within a berm. "We didn't think it was right to spoil the natural views across the entire property with a building," Scott said. "So we decided to make the snack shop as unobtrusive as possible."

The first three holes following the break serve up birdie possibilities. The 333-yard No. 10 offers an open tee shot landing area to a green protected on the right side by two bunkers. The 157-yard 11th hole is one of three short par 3s on the back nine. While three bunkers rest between the tee and green, the right side of the putting surface is wide open to provide a bail-out area. The 379-yard No. 12 is made significantly shorter by the open nature of the green which has no bunkers or water hazards to swallow up approach shots.

The 547-yard finishing hole is as challenging as it is scenic. While relatively flat, the hole is protected along the right side of the fairway by a sea of wildflowers planted by the previous owner of the apple orchard. Fairway bunkers and a massive bunker in front of the green place a premium on accuracy throughout the par 5.

Continue to enjoy the terrific views of the Kalamazoo River Valley following your round by grabbing a cold beverage and a sandwich at the Stoatin Brae's Blue Stem restaurant. Note that some of the items on the menu include traditional Scottish ingredients including leeks, cabbage and caraway seeds to incorporate the British Isle feel of the entire property.

"The best views of the valley can be enjoyed on the 19th hole," Johnson said. "We wanted our guests to enjoy the special Stoatin Brae experience from the moment they tee off until the moment they depart."

"We think," he added, "that while they're enjoying a craft beer or last bite of a sandwich, they'll be planning their next visit back to Stoatin Brae and Gull Lake View Golf Club & Resort."

### IF YOU GO

Stoatin Brae, 15579 E. Augusta Dr., Augusta, Mich., is a 2 hour 37 minute drive from downtown Chicago. There are numerous hotels in the area, including the associated Gull Lake View Resort. For information: www.gulllakeview.com, (269) 220-3976.

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