



long time ago in a place not that far away, a massive glacier retreated and left behind all kinds of ridges, sand deposits, hills, lakes, glens and moraines. While the remnants of the glacier did automobile transmissions no favors, the happier effect is the amazing landscape left as a palette over which great golf architects like Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Robert Trent Jones II, Pete Dye, and William Langford could create their masterpieces. Welcome to central Wisconsin!

Next month during U.S. Open week, a whole bunch of talking heads on the Golf Channel will take turns talking about the amazing legacy of Erin Hills in the tiny community of Erin. And it is, indeed, a remarkable account of how a hotelier and former school teacher named Bob Lang had a vision of turning the hilly piece of farmland he owned into a world championship golf course. While that story took twists and turns before eventually becoming the venue for our nation's golf championship, the real tale behind the tale is how America's Dairyland somehow churned out great golf course after great golf course to become one of the epicenters of the country's golf scene.

This is not the Badger State's first major championship rodeo, of course. Just two years ago, the Pete Dye-designed Whistling Straits hosted the PGA Championship for a second time.

Blackwolf Run, located in nearby Kohler, has its own major championship legacy, as that great course hosted the U.S. Women's Open in 1998 and 2012. If tournament golf isn't enough proof of Wisconsin's claim to golf excellence, consider the grand opening of Sand Valley in Rome, 114 miles away from Kohler and Lake Michigan. Reviewed in other pages of this issue, the spectacular Sand Valley Golf Resort is owned by Chicagoan Mike Keiser and is slated to grow to two courses by 2018 and perhaps to four courses in coming years afterwards.

While it is tempting to trace the genesis of central Wisconsin's golf boom to Herb Kohler, president of Kohler Resorts which owns and operates Blackwolf Run and Whistling Straits, a more reasoned and reflective path to those successful properties goes through Green Lake and Stevens Point, respectively.

Renowned as the oldest resort town west of Niagara Falls, N.Y., Green Lake was a great fishing and hiking destination until 1887 when Chicago newspaper baron Victor Lawson, publisher of the *Chicago Daily News*, purchased 1,100 acres of scenic rolling land a short distance north of the lake. The property served as an elegant resort until 1929, four years after Lawson's death, when the property was purchased by H.O. Stone & Company. Acclaimed golf architect William Langford was hired and paid a then-extraordinary sum

THE MAGIC OF CENTRAL WISCONSIN

By Neal Kotlarek



of \$250,000 to build a world-class golf course. Today, Lawsonia Links remains one of America's top 100 classic golf courses. It was joined 60 years later by the delightful Woodlands Course to create a memorable 36-hole complex.

While the Links Course, as it is known today, has received tweaks and renovations through the years, its Scottish-links character has remained basically unchanged since its origins. Most every golfer's favorite hole on the course is No. 7, a 160-yard gem known as the "Box Car Hole" due to the train railcar upon which its green was built. Inevitably then, this putting surface is perched high above the rest of the hole to present a do-or-die tee shot. Hit your 7-iron or 6-iron high and soft and putt for birdie. Hit it slightly off target and be challenged by an imposing flop wedge shot to the flagstick. <https://lawsonia.com>

Lawsonia Links stood out as Wisconsin's top public golf course for over 50 years until Robert Trent Jones Jr. was enlisted by the president of Sentry Insurance Company in Stevens Point to create a masterpiece on 200 acres adjacent to the firm. The resulting SentryWorld golf course virtually captured America's imagination in 1982 when it opened to wide acclaim, specifically due to its stunning, oft-photographed 16th, the "flower hole." Called golf's most beautiful hole by Chicago golf writer Len Ziehm, the short par-3 features some 33,000 colorful begonias, petunias, zinnias, celosias and laurentias which basically encircle the green alongside four clover-shaped sand bunkers.

SentryWorld remained among Wisconsin's top 10 golf courses, but received a much-needed facelift by Trent Jones Jr. in 2013. The course was named America's Best New and Newly Remodeled Course the following year. Characterized by massive greens, mature trees and deviously large sand bunkers, SentryWorld is once again heralded as among the state's premier layouts. www.sentryworld.com

The combination of Lawsonia Links, SentryWorld and southern Wisconsin's Playboy Club (today known as Grand Geneva Resort & Spa) cemented the state's reputation as a great golf destination. That foundation was widely expanded with the grand opening in 1988 of the first of Kohler's four premier courses, all designed by Dye. Extensively chronicled in this magazine through the years, the two courses at Blackwolf Run – the River and the Meadow Valley – were joined years later by Whistling Straits – the Straits and the Irish Course – to create two of the finest golf complexes in the world. In 2020, the Straits Course will host golf's premier event, the Ryder Cup, as a follow-up to its successful hosting of the 2015 PGA Championship. www.americanclubresort.com

Located a short drive from Kohler in Sheboygan Falls, The Bull at Pinehurst Farms is Wisconsin's only Jack Nicklaus Signature course and was ranked among the country's top 70 public courses by Golf Digest in 2016. Built atop a 400-acre former dairy farm, the course features rolling hills, deep ravines, large ponds, impressive elevation changes, woodlands and massive sand bunkers. Congenial owner David Bachmann Jr. keeps the course in picture-postcard-perfect shape and tournament-ready. The property's Champions Restaurant & Bar features



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casual dining, and is a perfect spot to grab a cold beverage following one's round. www.golfthebull.com

The unlikely-named The Bog in Saukville was built in 1995 by Arnold Palmer, and was immediately acclaimed as one of the King's best designs. As presumed, the Cedarburg Bog plays a leading role across the property as holes flow over and around wetlands on both nines. Those challenges are complemented by 118 sand bunkers, rolling hills, and mature woods to provide a memorable round of golf. The course was purchased for \$1.99 million by the Hammes Co. in 2015, which immediately hired Northbrook's KemperSports to manage the course and develop it into a premier golf experience. www.golfthebog.com

The amazing duo of Michael Hurdzan and Dana Fry built the impeccably manicured and fun 7,414-yard Wild Rock course in Wisconsin Dells. Rated among the top five courses in the state by Gary D'Amato of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the course features boulder-strewn streams, sand, and gravel mounds along with amazing vistas. www.wildrock.com

A half-hour's drive south of the Dells in Merrimac, Devil's Head Resort & Convention Center is a four-season resort featuring two amazingly diverse championship courses. The Prairie Glen course transitions from gently rolling land to dramatic hills across a sweeping landscape. The front nine features two delightful par 3s. The 134-yard No. 3 calls for a 9-iron or 8-iron woven between trees left, right and behind a fairly large green. In stunning contrast, the 146-yard No. 7 features a 120-foot drop that reduces club selection by one or two clubs. Enjoy the view of the forest from off the tee before heading to the green. The Glacier course is far more rugged than its sister layout as holes heave up and down the expansive property. While the 165-yard No. 7 is a truly beautiful par 3, the succeeding par 5 is probably the most scenic and fun hole on the entire property. A drive hit left of center should kick further left to leave a 3-wood or 5-wood to an unprotected green. Before you get too eager to line-up your eagle putt, enjoy the vista afforded from the top of the entire resort property. www.devilsheadresort.com

Not bad for the work of one glacier.