

Some way, somehow, The Club at Lac La Belle finds a way to make old things new again. Only six years ago, this turn-of-the 20th century club in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, was reimagined to become one of the Midwest's premier public golf courses. This May, that legacy will be expanded when a terrific par-3 short course named Uncle Henry's Backyard is unveiled to the public. Sure, it's a made-from-scratch brand-spankin' new nine-hole layout. But designer Craig Haltom spent over two years building a course that pays homage to both its classic big brother course, but also to the time-honored courses of Golden Age designers, including Donald Ross and Alister MacKenzie. Indeed, the new course's name recognizes the property's roots as "Uncle Henry" references one of

## Uncle Henry's Backyard Adds More Luster to The Club at Lac La Belle by Neal Kotlarek

the club's original founding members, Henry Shufeldt. More on his background later in the story.

Given a relatively flat piece of property adjacent to the championship course, Haltom (who designed and built the championship course) worked with the club's superintendent, Jimmy Cavezza, to construct a course with sloping, elevated greens, grassy mounds, and a few swirling bunkers. Another facet of Uncle Henry's Backyard is that there are no tee markers, to thus allow holes to play as short as 35 yards and as long as 200 yards. This open tee concept not only ensures a challenge for low handicappers, it also welcomes junior golfers, group outings, leagues, and family foursomes to play the nine holes at lengths that fit their skill sets.

"Junior golfers are an important aspect of Uncle Henry's Backyard," said Owner (Family-Owned) & General Manager Tyler Morse. "While we expect many of our guests to play the course before or after their rounds on our championship course, we will strongly encourage young players and members of the community to come out and experience our property. In fact, green fees for juniors are set at a heavily discounted rate to ensure affordability."

Given the challenge to build a fun, pretty and interesting nine holes featuring "wow holes," Haltom created a plan and then used a three-dimensional "computer game" generated by Cavezza to place contours across the property. While at one time the course was laid out as 12 holes, the transition to nine allowed for better tee and green placement. It took two workers and six weeks of earth-moving to set the course's template. Perfect weather throughout last summer allowed construction to move ahead quickly, with grass planted and in full growth mode throughout October. The end-result: a course that will be spectacular and remarkably mature by mid-spring.

"We are really excited to open the course up and get feedback from our members and guests," said Morse. "This addition to the Club at Lac La Belle gives the property a broader scope and will introduce our amenities to a broader audience. In this spirit of fun—and to support the 'backyard concept' of the course—we are looking to add outdoor games to play around the new clubhouse built at the top of the hill overlooking Uncle Henry's Backyard. Bocci, croquet,



maybe even a badminton court. We will figure all that out in the coming weeks and months.”

Morse said that the course’s unusual name comes from a fascinating backstory that intertwines Henry Shufeldt’s two nephews with his work to fund and build Lac La Belle Country Club in Oconomowoc on land adjacent to his property. Motivated by Henry’s vision and a makeshift course in his backyard, nephews Chandler and Walter Egan founded the nearby Oconomowoc Country Club. Only a few years later, the two became wildly successful competitive golfers. Chandler won two U.S. Amateur championships in 1904 and 1905. He also won the 1906 Oconomowoc Open. Shufeldt’s work with another successful businessman named Montgomery Ward led to the design and construction of Lac La Belle Country Club. The course was an immediate success and even drew interest from across the pond. Two of the club’s first golf professionals, Alex Smith and Willie Anderson, combined to win six U.S. Open championships in the early 1900s.

While Lac La Belle Country Club proceeded to maintain a long and storied history as a classic layout, the course was laid out over a wetlands area that inevitably became waterlogged following heavy rains. In 2018, the club was purchased by the Morse family who brought in Oliphant Golf Management to oversee a complete re-imagining and, most importantly, re-engineering of the 18 holes. Fairways were elevated two to three feet using 150,000 cubic yards of dirt and capped with 15 inches of sand. A new irrigation system was installed. Nuisance trees were removed. Finally, adjacent land was purchased so that four new holes (Nos. 1 through 4) could be routed away from areas that were chronically wet.

The end result of all that work combined with the creative genius of the aforementioned Craig Haltom and his team at Oliphant Golf Construction is a brilliant new course characterized by challenging dogleg par 4s and par 5s, scenic par 3s and magnificently rolling, multi-tiered green complexes. “The course combines the best of parkland golf with Scottish links influences,” said Owner (Family-Owned) & General Manager Tyler Morse. “This is not a vanilla course,” he continued. “We think The Club at Lac La Belle offers a unique golfing experience that includes a whole bunch of ‘wow factor’ holes.” Morse cited the 192-yard 4th hole as an example. The hole calls for a tee shot soaring over wetlands and between eight sprawling bunkers to a 50-yard-long green featuring a huge false front. Hit short of the green here and expect your shot to roll back into the fringe. When the flagstick is on the back right, a punchbowl backside of the green will literally funnel your tee shots back toward the hole. Make a hole-in-one here and be rewarded with a chance at an 1896 British one-penny.

Head PGA Professional Clint Higgins points out that the large, undulating greens are a game within a game.



“At a lot of courses, you are pretty much assured of par once you get on the putting surfaces in regulation,” he said. “This course calls for precise placement of the approach shot to give yourself a decent chance at a birdie. Land on the wrong tier or in an awkward spot away from the flagstick and you’ve got to make a bunch of mental calculations to hit your putt.”

My favorite hole on the course is the 500-yard No. 16. This tricky dogleg-left par 5 calls for a drive either over gigantic bunkers protecting the landing area or the much safer bailout zone to the right. From there, the second shot is either a straight-forward layup or a heroic 3-wood toward an airstrip landing-sized green. Reach the front side and be rewarded with a 40-foot kick forward toward the flagstick by the severely angled green.

The 9th hole, called North Pole, is a tribute to the course’s origins. The only remaining hole from the original design, this par 4 was the northerly most hole on the course. It features a green perched on a knoll with a dramatic back-to-front slope. Leave your approach too far past the hole and face a daunting putt that could very well end up off the green and perhaps back down the fairway.

No visit to Lac La Belle is complete without a visit to the clubhouse’s mini-museum honoring the club’s historic roots. Enjoy photos, artifacts, trophies and news clippings of America’s introduction to golf. As it turns out, golf professionals at the time hopped from state to state and course to course in seeking purses. Oconomowoc was a second home to Milwaukee beer barons and Chicago business magnates who were intrigued by this new game and its trappings. They hired Smith, on his way to becoming one of the finest players in America, to give them lessons in 1900. While Smith and Anderson played against one another for the national championship, the museum prominently displays a classic photo of the two taken on the Lac La Belle grounds in front of a tree that some historians conjecture still grows near the clubhouse.

To further commemorate the competition between these two legends, the clubhouse is home to the Rivalry Pub, a bar and restaurant serving up sumptuous food and cold beverages. On Fridays, the club hosts a spectacular fish fry that also features a putting competition on an amazing practice green. “Our assistant pro oversees a 15-hole putting challenge that includes prizes for the winner,” said Morse.

Located 40 miles west of Milwaukee, the Club at Lac La Belle can be played as a day trip by Chicagoans. Ample accommodations are also available nearby in the city of Oconomowoc for those looking to play the course twice. Morse said that plans are in-place to expand the offerings at the club, which include facilities to host parties, banquets, and weddings. “While the club enjoys an amazing past, we have a vision for the future that will make it even grander and more special,” added Morse.

For tee times and more information on The Club at Lac La Belle, visit [www.clubatlaabelle.com](http://www.clubatlaabelle.com).