Once upon a time, the state of Wisconsin was considered to be a great place for only three things: cheese, the Dells, and bratwurst. Today, the Badger State has evolved into the epicenter of the championship golf world as it plays host to the 2015 PGA Championship, the 2017 U.S. Open, and the 2020 Ryder Cup Matches. How the heck did this happen?

While the game has long been part of Wisconsin’s DNA with celebrated courses in Green Lake, Door County, and Lake Geneva, the state’s reputation as a golf haven didn’t really take off until June of 1982 when Sentry Insurance president John Joanis teamed up with Robert Trent Jones Jr. to open a wondrous golf course over 200 acres. The parkland-style layout was immediately celebrated across the nation for its design, its conditioning, and its iconic signature “Flower Hole” featuring some 36,000 begonias, petunias, salvias, celosias, and zinnias.

It can be persuasively argued that the investment by Joanis and the creative genius of Trent Jones Jr. spurred the development of other championship venues across Wisconsin—specifically Blackwolf Run and Whistling Straits in Kohler, and Erin Hills in Hartford. While SentryWorld has maintained its lofty status among the state’s premier courses since its grand opening, designer Jones returned in 2013 and collaborated with fellow architects Bruce Charlton and Jay Blasi to oversee a major renovation to the property with upgrades on everything from the greens, the grasses used on the course, the sand bunkers, and the irrigation system. Fairways were widened and even some of the routing was changed. The layout was also stretched from 6,900
yards to 7,237 yards to keep up with the technological changes in golf balls and equipment. Finally, two completely new holes were added to improve playability.

Early reviews of the new SentryWorld have been overwhelmingly positive. Gary D’Amato of the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel praises the finished product. “In a word? Spectacular,” he said in his October, 2014 review. Bradley Klein of Golfweek magazine calls it “more fun to play than ever.” Already the course has shot up in Golf Digest magazine’s annual rankings, from No. 10 best golf courses in Wisconsin inclusive of private clubs in 2013-14 to No. 5 on the 2015-16 list.

Lovers of the original design will immediately notice some of the adjustments made, particularly the reduction in bunkers to allow run-ups to some of the greens. But these same aficionados will take comfort in the fact the designers took special care to maintain the character of the original work. They will experience the same outstanding shot values of the original design along with its impeccable conditioning and the stone-lined lakes. All of these elements resulted in SentryWorld being named the “Best New Public Course in the Country” in 1983, according to Golf Digest magazine.

Even though the early 1980s saw lots of acclaimed golf courses opening around the country, SentryWorld caught the golf world’s eye due to its sweeping course design with holes framed by towering mature trees. From the very start, Jones called the layout “my Mona Lisa.” When he returned to make the upgrades 30 years later, his singular objective was to enhance the experience for loyal regular guests of the course while accommodating higher handicap players with various options to reach the greens.

The first new hole on the course is the 151-yard No. 3, a par 3 that starts from an elevated tee and heads downhill with the property’s major lake serving as a backdrop to the putting surface. Two large sand bunkers front the left side of the green, thus demanding that a mid-iron shot should be directed away from hazards to leave a long putt for birdie.

The 161-yard No. 12 is located on the northeast corner of the complex and plays over a slice of the property’s biggest lake. “Adding this hole allowed us to update the course for..."
At the intersection of talent and purpose lies inspiration. Alistair Mackenzie provided the talent, Bobby Jones and Clifford Roberts provided the purpose. The result was inspiration: Augusta National Golf Club and The Masters. It is hard to reconcile the phenomenon that is The Masters. Augusta National is both incredibly contrived and spectacularly genuine. For all its pomp and ceremony, it is quite unique. It is tailored, manicured, nostalgic, and fixated on order. Simultaneously, it is spectacularly beautiful, filled with graciousness and the antithesis of commercialism. Augusta National has rejected the standards of capitalism to rewrite the rules. The result was inspiration. Alistair Mackenzie provided the purpose. The result provided the talent, Bobby Jones and Clifford Roberts.

Augusta National. It remains confounding. The course is made to imagine any foursome walking off the 18th green after a round at Augusta restricts corporate visibility to one’s advantage. I am a fan and I continue to resolve my suspicious impressions of The Masters and The Masters. No visit to SentryWorld is complete without a stop at PJ’s Sports Bar, which is located inside the newly renovated clubhouse. Food options include an ingenious concoction blending our favorite beverage with our favorite snack: toasted bread with form cheese, beer cheese soup. PJ’s also offers handmade burgers and 25 tap beers including PJ’s White Ale brewed exclusively for SentryWorld customers.

Along with the outstanding golf course, SentryWorld offers group and individual lessons from PGA professional Brian Dumler and LPGA professional Katie Kreuser. While SentryWorld does not offer lodging, nearby hotels offer Play & Stay Packages including Comfort Suites, Country Inn & Suites, and the Holiday Inn. The Eagle package provides two rounds of golf at SentryWorld and one night’s accommodations at the Comfort Suites or Country Inn & Suites for $225 until May 31st, and $285 from June 1 through September 21 (note: prices are subject to change). Packages are per person and do not include tax or gratuity, and are based on single or double occupancy. The Holiday Inn offers a similar package at a slightly higher cost. For tee times and more information, visit the web at www.sentryworld.com.

Flower Power

continued from page 19

both enhanced enjoyment and challenge,” Jones said. The lake is lined by large boulders which obviously need to be avoided at all costs. The designer made a wise decision to not fiddle much with No. 16, the aforementioned par-3 "Flower Hole" that has graced the front covers of dozens of golf publications over the years. In fact, the number of flowers has actually grown to around 50,000 and provides a true feast for the eyes. While the 176-yard par 3 looks intimidating off the tee and on the scoreboard, the major obstacles to getting a par on the hole are the sand bunkers which can snatch even good tee shots if they are slightly misdirected. With the advent of cell phone cameras, it is hard to imagine any foursome walking off the course without at least one snapshot of this creative and gorgeous hole. The 18th hole is listed as the No. 1 handicap hole on the course. Don’t be lulled into over-confidence. At 446 yards from the back tees, the slight dogleg left plays even longer due to two sand bunkers that reside on the right side of the landing area and another bunker in the middle of the fairway designed to capture long tee shots. A large green is made tighter by three more mischievously placed bunkers on the left, right, and in front of the green.

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Reconciling The Masters

Greg Martin

Yes, The Masters creates inaccessible expectations that frustrate any golf course superintendent. Golfer expectations rise and local clubs are challenged to meet unattainable maintenance expectations. The magnitude and intensity of the turf care is justified considering the incredible beauty of the grounds and the drama of the event, its history, and the strategic charm of the golf course. Maintenance demands are an industry-wide problem that will not easily be addressed, and The Masters is not the sole culprit. The Masters only exacerbates the expectations for premium maintenance.

Non-golfers perceive The Masters as a rich man’s sport that promotes excess and self-indulgence. On the surface, some of those criticisms are warranted and scrutiny earned because of success. The success is well documented, but the reasons for that accomplishment are due to smart planning, thoughtful branding, and considerate development. Slow to embrace a more diverse membership, Augusta National should be the leader in developing, nearby hotels offer Play & Stay Packages including Comfort Suites, Country Inn & Suites, and the Holiday Inn. The Eagle package provides two rounds of golf at SentryWorld and one night’s accommodations at the Comfort Suites or Country Inn & Suites for $225 until May 31st, and $285 from June 1 through September 21 (note: prices are subject to change). Packages are per person and do not include tax or gratuity, and are based on single or double occupancy. The Holiday Inn offers a similar package at a slightly higher cost. For tee times and more information, visit the web at www.sentryworld.com.

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