

Almost 30 years ago, golf architect Rick Smith had a cool idea. Even as a second championship course was about to open at Treetops Resort in Gaylord, Mich., where Smith also served as head instructor, he thought it would be neat if guests at the resort had something else to do after making it through an arduous round of championship golf. Inspired, perhaps, by the Par 3 Course built in 1958 at famed Augusta National, Smith wanted to build nine holes that took maximum advantage of the property's hills and dales. The end-result was a dramatic layout brilliantly named "Threetops" that received national exposure in 2001 when Lee Trevino rang up a hole-in-one on No. 7 to earn a cool \$1,090,000 in the ESPN Par-3 Shootout. The course features intriguing short holes with tees that dramatically tower above large greens – some designed to funnel a tee shot toward the flagstick.

Flash forward 28 years after the opening of Threetops. The golf world – not to mention the rest of the world – is a different place. While some resorts have come and gone since 1992, a number of spectacular "bucket list" golf resorts have opened and thrived. Besides great championship golf and luxurious accommodations, each looked for a unique amenity that would make visits to their properties extra special. What better amenity than a short, nifty and uber-fun par-3 course?

If there is a single parallel between the par-3 courses at Bandon Dunes, Sand Valley, Big Cedar Lodge, Threetops and Forest Dunes, it is the priority placed on providing golfers a fun and thrilling experience. Most everyone can hit a wedge shot 60 or 70 yards onto a large, gathering green. As this distance levels the playing field, high-handicappers have a decent chance of winning closest-to-the-pin contests against single-digit competitors. While Judge Smalls would surely disapprove, these courses have a tendency to generate wagers between individuals and teams. Throw in some on-course cold beverages and you have a veritable Happy Hour for Hackers.

Here is a look at some of the newest and best par-3 courses across the Midwest, along with a preview of two courses now under construction, one of which is out West.

Threetops – Treetops Resort Gaylord, Michigan

It's still amazing that after all these years, this nine-hole northern Michigan course stands out among all others due to the dramatic landscape which makes for disorienting yardage calculations. The 3rd hole, called "Devil's Drop," plays 207 yards from the middle tees

toward a green positioned 145 feet down, in a glen surrounded by the towering mature trees that inspired the Treetops Resort name. In a calm wind, assume three clubs less than you'd normally use from this distance.

The 135-yard No. 7 is called "High Five" due to the reaction fans and the ESPN Shoot-out participants had after Trevino's momentous ace. The severe 90-foot drop can, according to the course guide, "lead to a club selection swing of up to four to five clubs." While you probably won't pocket \$1 million from your friends on this hole, a shot close to the pin is, as the credit card commercials used to say, priceless.

Treetops Resort is home to 81 holes of championship golf designed by the aforementioned Smith, Robert Trent Jones Sr., and Tom Fazio. Another resort golf amenity available at the four-season resort is a dramatic 17,000 square-foot putting course appropriately known as "The Himalayas.."

The Sandbox – Sand Valley Rome, Wisconsin

Designed by the formidable duo of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw in 2018, this 17-hole short course is as playful as its name indicates. Holes are positioned over 25 acres on a sandy ridge and stretch from a diminutive 40 yards up to 140 yards. Golfers familiar with the game's architectural legacy get to enjoy some fascinating green complexes, including a Redan, a Biarritz, and a punch bowl. As the 25 acres used for the course are relatively flat, the putting surfaces serve as the greatest defenses against par. Fortunately, the short distances on many holes allow players to dial in tee shots near the flagstick to prevent against long lag putts over multiple undulations.

Sand Valley is located just outside of Wisconsin Rapids in central Wisconsin. The complex is home to two acclaimed championship courses: Sand Valley, designed by Coore and Crenshaw, and Mammoth Dunes, designed by David McLay Kidd. Both courses are lovingly laid out across unlikely prehistoric sand dunes previously covered up by a tree farm. Elegant accommodations include suites, cottages and lodge rooms.

The Short Course – Forest Dunes Roscommon, Michigan

Resort owner Lew Thompson looked out over the horizon of the short course a day prior to its grand opening in August. His eyes sparkled as he observed the rolling topography of the course, the sprawling sand bunkers, and the vast forest in the distance. "Pretty good stuff, don't you think?" he asked rhetorically before he addressed his tee shot.



Top of the Rock Hole #4

The Short Course – Forest Dunes



Threetops – Treetops Resort 6th Hole

The Short of It

By Neal Kotlarek



Big Cedar Lodge



Tiger Woods Par 3, Pebble Beach Resort

As befits his personality, Thompson vastly understated the quality and enjoyment of the 10-hole 1,135-yard course designed by Keith Riebb and Riley Johns. Presumably inspired by the dramatic green contours of the resort's Tom Doak-designed The Loop course, the putting surfaces on most of the holes feature strategic slopes and banks which can be used to nudge tee shots toward the flagstick.

Forest Dunes is a world-class golf resort nestled on an isolated property just outside the tiny community of Roscommon. The original Forest Dunes course was designed by former British Open champion Tom Weiskopf and is perennially ranked nationally among the top five courses in Michigan. The Loop is a reversible championship course that plays one way on odd days and the other way on even days. Three times during the summer, when months stretch to 31 days, the course hosts The Duel which allows teams of two to play the course in both directions over a single day.

Asked in an interview if the addition of The Short Course along with expanded accommodations at the resort will complete the property, Thompson was coy. "We never stop thinking about how to improve this beautiful property," he said. "There's lots of interesting ideas about what we can do next to make Forest Dunes even better."

Top of the Rock – Big Cedar Lodge Branson, Missouri

Leave it to Jack Nicklaus to take on the challenge of building a par-3 course that features lakes, waterfalls, massive rock formations, wandering creeks, bass-filled ponds and even Arnie's Barn – a 150-year-old storehouse relocated from Arnold Palmer's backyard in Latrobe, Penn. Say what?!?!?!

While every golf hole has been lovingly crafted by Nicklaus, the primary characteristic of the course is breathtaking scenery. Stand on the 1st hole green and enjoy the view of the Chapel of the Ozarks above you and Table Rock Lake in the distance. The course stretches to a modest 1,420 yards and includes a few holes that look suspiciously inspired by Augusta National, home of The Masters, where Nicklaus won six times and finished in the top 10 an amazing 22 times over his career.

Big Cedar Lodge is promoted as "America's Premier Wilderness Resort." Owned by Johnny Morris, founder of Bass Pro Shops, the sprawling property features championship courses designed by Tiger Woods, Tom Fazio, Coore-Crenshaw, and Gary Player.

Baths of Blackwolf Run Kohler, Wisconsin

Just announced in August, this 10-hole course

is planned to open in summer 2021 and rests in the middle of the Blackwolf Run complex. The name is an homage to Kohler Company's design history and is the work of Chris Lutzke. Holes will stretch from 60 to 160 yards.

"The par-3 and putting courses will provide a dynamic experience for our international guests and local community," said Kohler Co. executive chairman Herb Kohler. "It is important for these courses to aid in our continuing efforts to grow the game by creating opportunities for players of all skill levels. The Baths will do it with the Kohler touch to create a unique experience."

Blackwolf Run is a Destination Kohler resort property that features the River Course and the Meadow Valley Course. Nearby, overlooking Lake Michigan, is Whistling Straits, with the Straits Course and the Irish Course. All were designed by legendary architect Pete Dye.

Tiger Woods Par 3, Pebble Beach Resort Pebble Beach, California

Perhaps the most intriguing par-3 course in America is now under construction at the famed Pebble Beach Resort in California. While the 670-yard course is officially called a redesign of an existing par-3 course designed by Peter Hay, the TGR design firm owned by Tiger Woods has basically reconfigured the course which had played counter-clockwise away from the ocean and will now play clockwise toward the ocean. In an exclusive interview, John Sawin, VP and Director of Golf at Pebble Beach, said the entire concept of the course is to make it accessible to players of all skill levels.

"Tiger's philosophy is welcoming and friendly to juniors and beginners," Sawin said. "You won't lose any balls on the course and you can use almost any club in your bag, depending upon how the wind plays on any particular day."

The signature hole on the course, scheduled to open next spring, will undoubtedly be No. 2, a virtual replica of the famous 7th hole on Pebble Beach. "We wanted to create the opportunity for all visitors to experience one of (golf's) most famous holes," Woods said in his announcement of the project.

Even the yardages of each hole will carry meaning. "We connected the yardages with some significant dates in our history," said Sawin. The 9th hole is 100 yards long. Tiger, of course, won the 100th US Open at Pebble Beach."

The Par 3 course will also be complemented by a 20,000 square-foot practice green and a 5,000 square-foot patio.