

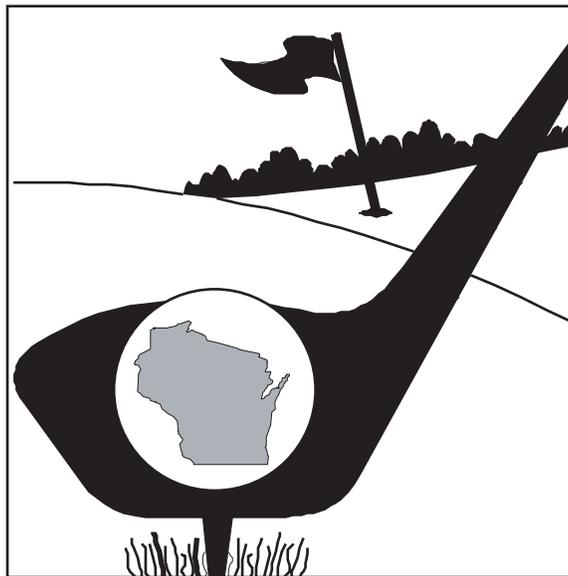
REACHING THE GREEN

GOLF'S IMPACT ON WISCONSIN

THOMAS HRUZ

When Vijay Singh sank his final putt to win the 2004 Professional Golf Association (PGA) Championship, the door closed on the final major golf tournament of the 2004 PGA season. It was a season that witnessed Phil Mickelson finally win his first major tournament (at the Masters in April), thereby permitting him to shed the dreaded moniker of “the best player never to have won a major.” It was also a year in which golf fans watched Tiger Woods fail four more times to win a major tournament, bringing his drought to ten straight major tournament losses after his remarkable stretch of seven major wins in eleven attempts from August 1999 to June 2002. In fact, Woods barely made the weekend cut at this year’s PGA Championship.

But of local concern, 2004 will always be remembered as the season that saw the return of major men’s championship golf to Wisconsin for the first time since the inaugural year of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s presidency. This year’s PGA Championship was held at the majestic, challenging, and (in many ways) “un-Wisconsin” Whistling Straits golf course, located just north of Sheboygan. Golf fans from



across the country, indeed the world, looked upon this infant golf course, which stretches along the shores of Lake Michigan, and watched the world’s best golfers attempt to tame the course, all the while testing their mettle against each other.

The members of Wisconsin’s golf and tourism industries, while themselves enjoying the spectacle of watching the

golfing world’s best players compete in their backyard, have a much more parochial interest in this year’s PGA Championship. The numerous resorts, hotels, golf courses, and other businesses that form the nuclei of these industries are hoping that the Championship will spawn a profitable renaissance in vacation golf in Wisconsin. Their hope is that the millions of viewers who watched the tournament on television or, better yet, who traveled to witness the event in person, occasionally looked beyond the competitors and their golfing talent, and gazed intently at the Whistling Straits golf course and its surrounding area. In doing so, these fans from Wisconsin and elsewhere will, perhaps, remark: “Maybe Wisconsin is the place for my next golf vacation.” Time will tell.

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Bringing Major Professional Golf Back to the Dairy State

To those unfamiliar with professional golf, a brief primer on the professional golf season is necessary to understand why the PGA Championship—a single golf tournament—portends great significance for its host state. The professional golf season roughly coincides with the calendar year, beginning in January at the Mercedes Championships and, for all intents and purposes, concluding by September, although some events continue throughout the fall (such as the biennial Ryder Cup Championship, also occurring this year). Tournaments are played each week throughout the year, always culminating in a four-day, cumulative-score tournament that concludes on Sundays. Besides playing to win the tournament over the entire field (often about 150 golfers), players vie for higher placing, as each player who places after making “the cut” (the poorest-playing golfers are eliminated after the second round of play) receives a winnings check, the amount of which increases along with one’s final placing.

Four of these weekly tournaments, however, have through the years become recognized as “majors,” denoting an added significance and special distinction in the hearts and minds of golfers, and their fans. Major tournaments are the Super Bowl and World Series of professional golf; they include the Master’s (played in April), the United States Open (June), the British Open (July), and the PGA Championship (August).

Professional golfers are measured by their performance in these tournaments far more than any other aspect of their golfing career. In fact, most any golfer would trade in three or four regular tournament wins in any year for just one major win. Just ask Todd Hamilton, a 38-year-old, unknown journeyman who, after failing for years to even qualify for the PGA Tour, won this year’s British Open (or what some golf purists call simply “the Open”) and immediately made a mark in golf history. John Daly splashed onto the scene in 1991 when, sporting a mullet haircut and all, he dramati-

cally won the PGA Championship at the Crooked Stick Golf Club. Major victories can elevate a marginal golfer to elite status or can take a great golfer and place him in the status of legends. As alluded to earlier, many golfing commentators (and perhaps the competitors themselves) believe that Tiger Woods’ career will ultimately be measured by whether he reaches or exceeds Jack Nicklaus’ eighteen major tournament victories (Tiger is currently stalled at eight).

Because of their significance, major tournaments, unlike all other tour events throughout the year, attract all of the world’s most prominent golfers and a concomitant media interest. It also explains the fervor by which the Wisconsin golf industry, golf fans, and so many others have welcomed the PGA Championship to the state.

Prior to this year, the last (and only) major men’s golf championship contested in Wisconsin was the 1933 PGA Championship, which was won by golf legend Gene Sarazen at the Blue Mound Golf & Country Club in Milwaukee. The tournament was then played in a match play, as opposed to the present stroke play, format,¹ and Sarazen earned a cool \$1000 for his efforts — an amount that is barely enough for a professional golfer of today to pay his entry fee for a tournament. All of this occurred long before Mayfair Mall and the massive commercial development on the stretch of Wisconsin Highway 100 that now flanks the Blue Mound Country Club were even glints in the eyes of Milwaukee’s most-astute developers. And it happened long before professional and recreational golf took on the popularity in the sports world that it holds presently.

During the following sixty-plus years, Wisconsin became a relatively popular destination for recreational golfers. Areas such as Lake Geneva and the Wisconsin Dells came to build and boast some high-quality golf resorts. But interest in these resorts often failed to extend much farther than to Wisconsin residents and the golfers of northern Illinois or, to an even lesser extent, other neighboring states.

For the most part, the state has languished in irrelevance with respect to garnering the attention of major professional golfers, golf tournaments, and, perhaps relatedly, *major* recreational golfers. More on the latter point in a minute.

To be sure, each year since 1968 the Milwaukee area has played host to an annual PGA tour stop. The Greater Milwaukee Open (GMO)—renamed this year to the U.S. Bank Championship—has been held at the Northshore (1968-70), Tripoli (1971-73), and Tuckaway (1974-93) country clubs, until finding its current home at Brown Deer Park in 1994. While some of the game’s best golfers have played, although quite sporadically, in the GMO over the years, few of the game’s best have won the event. The most prominent winners include Greg Norman (1989), Corey Pavin (1986), Mark O’Meara (1984), and Ed Sneed (1974). The tournament does lay claim to being the first event in which Tiger Woods competed as a professional. That year was 1996; he finished tied for 60th place, earned \$2,544, and has never

returned to the GMO since. Not to unduly impugn the GMO/U.S. Bank Championship, but the tournament is widely recognized as one of the least noteworthy on tour, as evidenced by its placement in the tour schedule — the week immediately after the third major of the year, the British Open, when most of the PGA’s best players are still digesting their Guinness beers or recovering from jet lag. Still, according to the Milwaukee *Business Journal*, the tournament brings in revenue “well into seven figures,” but, perhaps tellingly, the GMO does not release specific revenue totals.

In any event, one of the best measures of a state’s professional golf prominence is its ability to host major golf tournaments. To be fair,

all of the states in the U.S., save the Peach State, compete over only two of the four majors each year. The Masters is always played at the celebrated Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia, and the British Open is, well, played in Britain. That leaves the PGA Championship and the U.S. Open as the only major tournaments that vary their venue each year, although the U.S. Open tends to return to a handful or two of the most-recognized courses in the country, such as Pinehurst (North Carolina), Pebble Beach, and Torrey Pines (both in California), to name but a few. Alas, the PGA Championship is usually the best chance that a young golf course has for hosting a major, at least its first major.

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Still, even given this competition, seventy years is a very long time. Many other states have fared considerably better at being able to attract the PGA Championship, and these states include Wisconsin’s neighbors. Since 1933, which, again, was the last year Wisconsin hosted a major, Minnesota (three times), Illinois (three times), and Michigan (five times) have each hosted the PGA Championship at least three times. Moreover, these states have collectively hosted the U.S. Open eleven times since 1933. During this time, it seemed as if few Wisconsinites cared about the state’s inability to land a major golf tournament, and even less inquired into the reason or as to what was going to be done about it. Many certainly wondered whether Wisconsin would *ever* again host a major men’s golf tournament.

Things began to change for the better in 1998. That year, Blackwolf Run, a public golf course opened by the Kohler Company in 1988 as an upper echelon course for guests of the company’s American Club Resort, played host to the U.S. Women’s Open, widely regarded as

the most prominent women's professional golf tournament played each year. The tournament's host did a dutiful job running the operation and the tournament set LPGA attendance records that still stand. In addition, the event brought out the beauty and challenge of new Kohler-area golf courses.

The tournament also got the attention of the United States Golf Association (USGA) and the PGA of America, the organizations that run the men's U.S. Open and PGA Championship, respectively. A good thing too, because 1998 was also the year that the Kohler Company opened another course, designed by the venerable and much-revered, golf-course architect Pete Dye. Just east of the tiny town of Haven, which itself is only a few clicks north of Sheboygan, construction finished on Blackwolf Run's jealous younger sister course. The course is Whistling Straits, which was built on an abandoned military base that had been used for years as a depository for trash refuse and, apparently, a rendezvous point for various malcontents.

Straits took little time making a name for itself. Constructed with the "if you build it, they will come" creed ringing in the minds of the Kohler Company executives, not the least of whom was Herbert V. Kohler Jr., Whistling Straits endeavored from its inception to garner major championship golf. Dye and the Kohler Company desired for it to be to Wisconsin what the Hazeltine National Golf Club is to Minnesota, Medinah Country Club is to Illinois, and what Oakwood Hills Country Club is to Michigan. They understood that what was keeping major professional golf from Wisconsin was simply the lack of a championship caliber course; one so impressive that the USGA and PGA just couldn't ignore it.

Whistling Straits got off to a good start, as in 1999, only its second year in existence, it played host to the PGA Club Professional Championship. Around this time, PGA tour player Peter Jacobsen played the course while on a visit, and he left calling it one of the five best golf courses *in the world*. Not bad for a course's sophomore year.

Then came January 2000, when the PGA announced that Whistling Straits would host the 2004 PGA Championship. Story goes that the USGA and the PGA were both so eager to beat out each other in first getting Straits as a major tournament venue, that the PGA went so far as stripping the Vahalla Golf Club in Louisville of hosting the 2004 PGA Championship, even though Vahalla had already been awarded the event.

The major events keep rolling in. Recently, the USGA announced that Whistling Straits will host the 2007 U.S. Senior Open, which the USGA often uses as a testing grounds for a course to subsequently host a U.S. Open for the first time. The U.S. Open sites are spoken for through 2010, but many, especially those at the Kohler Company, believe that Whistling Straits is already being penciled in to host the tournament soon thereafter. Herbert Kohler is even talking about the course hosting a Ryder Cup Championship. It's hard to imagine, but Wisconsin may go from no major men's golf tournaments in seventy-one years to having two in less than ten years.

But first things first. How did Whistling Straits fare in its first performance? Most of the players in this year's PGA Championship were new to the course when they arrived in August. Opinions from the players before play began were, quite frankly, astounding in their degree, if not tone. For example, Sergio Garcia called it unequivocally the toughest course he had *ever* played in his life. In fact, talk before the tournament was that around "even" par would win the Championship. Turns out, in part because the weather held off and the wind never got as bad as expected, the final scores were not remarkably different than in other major golf tournaments. Yet one could see how, if the rough was left longer, if some of the tees were not moved up, and if the wind did blow, few in the field could shoot below par. According to players, fans, sportswriters, and sportscasters, Whistling Straits (and the fans who attended) received rave reviews. To cap it all off the Chairman of the PGA of America told the fans still in attendance at the award ceremony (*and* all who were watching

on television) that they were proud to be the first to “show off” this course and that the event would be back to play there again.

Aiming for the Green: The Economic Impact

Not surprisingly, hosting a major sporting event like the PGA Championship will bring in considerable revenue to Wisconsin. The Governor’s office estimates that the PGA Championship will yield nearly \$75 million in revenue for the state. Final economic impact figures, which will appear in a study by Madison’s NorthStar Economics Inc. (commissioned by the state’s Departments of Tourism and of Commerce), are due out in October, after the writing of this article. Of course, experts quibble with the \$75 million figure and the economic assumptions that underlie the model that generates this figure, especially the use of the multiplier effect to measure the out-of-state impact. But whatever the actual numbers turn out to be, one thing is for certain: the state benefited immensely from hosting this year’s PGA Championship.

Furthermore, while the PGA Tournament will bring in millions of dollars of revenue to Wisconsin this year, another sizable economic benefit from the event may be yet to come. Landing this one tournament could continue to pay dividends, albeit more indirectly, well into the future, as Wisconsin, or at least that portion of it near Kohler, becomes known as a popular destination for serious golf.

At least that is the hope. Wise to the fact that hosting a major PGA golf tournament may generate interest among recreational golfers in the courses of Wisconsin, the state has undertaken a concerted effort to dovetail that interest into promoting Wisconsin as a golf haven, even outside of that notorious course in Haven, Wisconsin. In February of 2004,

Governor Doyle announced the “Golf Wisconsin” program, described as “a series of promotions and events designed to promote golf and golf-related tourism across Wisconsin.” The program is a joint effort of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, the PGA of America, the Golf Course Owners of Wisconsin, the U.S. Bank Championship, and the Wisconsin PGA. According to Governor Doyle, “Wisconsin has spectacular golf resorts and is among the nation’s leaders in the number of courses available for public play. . . . The PGA Championship’s presence here this year provides us with an ideal platform to communicate those facts to the rest of the country — and the world.” Added the Governor:

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“Tourism is a key economic driver in this state, and golf is a growth segment within that sector.” In other words, the notion is simple, yet provocative: namely, highlight golf as one of, if not *the*, number one tourist and recreational activities in Wisconsin.

Ambitious? Perhaps. But it is not an ill-conceived idea. There is perhaps no other sport that is played professionally where the average fan of

the sport also regularly participates as a recreational player. And one of the best selling points for the state’s endeavor is that all of the recent major golf tournaments that have been held in Wisconsin were played on *public* courses. For a hefty greens fee, any golfer can pick up his clubs and give it his best whack at the courses of Blackwolf Run, Whistling Straits, and University Ridge (another top-tier course, which has hosted the women’s NCAA golfing tournament). In fact, according to Golf Wisconsin, there are nearly 500 golf courses located in the state, 432 of which are open to public play.

Yet it is not the number of public golf courses that ultimately matters, it is their qual-

ity. And it is on that score that the state has the Kohler Company to thank. For whatever reason, no one dared to make a golf in course in Wisconsin that reached for the upper echelon of courses in the world until the Kohlers started doing so in the late 1980s. The Company's success causes one to question why there was such a lack of effort. To many, the common statement that, "Well, you can't play year-round in Wisconsin," may have been the end of it. So, Kohler will never be the Myrtle Beach of the golf world — but, then again, nowhere will be. Instead the area is wrestling its way into being in the second or third spot in terms of U.S. golf resorts.

This brings us back to the benefit of this year's PGA Championship to Wisconsin. It is hard, at least presently, to quantify just how much having this major tournament at Whistling Straits is worth to the state in terms of enhancing its image as a premier golfing destination. The anecdotal stories abound about the new infusion of energy into Wisconsin golf. Based on these varied sources, one can conclude that hundreds of thousands of golf fans from across the country and the world who tuned in to watch the tournament were taken aback by what they saw. With majestic bluffs overlooking Lake Michigan and rolling hills reaching back to a soon-to-be iconic clubhouse, the young Whistling Straits was presented to the world as a golfing venue that tempts you with its beauty and aesthetic serenity (in a manner *never* previously associated with Wisconsin), all the while humbling you with your "best ever worst round of golf." And the state's golfing industry was able to achieve this publicity for a price of almost free.

As a result of this enticing portrayal of what golf in Wisconsin has to offer, high-spending golfers who look for serious golfing vacations — the kind who are willing to spend

money-clips worth of money in the process — can turn their eyes to the state. Why? Quite simply, many golfers yearn to play on the famous courses frequented by the professionals, and Wisconsin offers that. Just look at the popularity by which Pebble Beach beckons vacationing golf fans each year. And suffice it to say, if you were to ask any serious recreational golfer if he would pay whatever cost (monetary or otherwise) it took to play just one round at Augusta National, a *private* course that is the home of the Masters, the answer would invariably be yes. So when, in March 2002, *Golf Digest* ranked the golf courses of Kohler the second best golf resort in America, all of this previously delusional thinking started seeming reasonable. Still not convinced? *Golf Odyssey* rates the Kohler golf courses of the American Club as one of the top twenty golf resorts in the world, while *Travel & Leisure Golf* ranked them as the second best golf resort in the United States. The list of such accolades is even longer, and growing these days by the minute.

Welcome to Wisconsin, the growing golf Mecca.

Notes

1. In match play, two golfers play one round against each other with the goal of winning individual holes (i.e., getting a better score than your opponent on each hole). Scoring is kept by comparing the holes won by each player. A player wins a match if the number of holes he has won, minus the number of holes his opponent has won, is greater than the number of holes remaining to play. Winners of each round then can advance to play each other in a tournament bracket format.

In stroke play, which is the more common format, each golfer plays a round of golf in which the score is kept by adding the cumulative total of strokes taken throughout the round. Players' scores are then compared to each other to determine a golfer's rank throughout the length of the tournament.