

MIDWEST BREEZES

Charles Anfield, CGCS, *Heritage Bluffs Golf Course*



The Ratings Game

I recently had a chance to go on a special golf trip with my good friend Tim Scott from Stoney Creek Golf Club. Tim serves as a Golf Course Panelist for the magazine publication, *Golf Digest*. Tim has been serving in this capacity for 10 years. His job as a Panelist is to contact and travel to golf courses that wish to be rated. He then plays the course and rates it. There are very specific criteria involved on the ratings sheet. Courses are rated on: shot values, design variety, memorability, conditioning, aesthetics, ambiance, walkability and resistance to scoring. Tim then tabulates his scoring on a rater sheet and sends them in to *Golf Digest*. *Golf Digest* tabulates the totals from its Panelists throughout the country and “voila,” an annual top 100 list is born. Courses are also rated within the state. Private and public courses are rated separately. Many courses have made renovations and changes over recent years due to the changing golf equipment technology and normal course wear and degradation. Some courses are new. Almost every big name club you can think of is on Tim’s list. Each club needs a minimum of 35 ratings per year to be considered. In this the ultra competitive, prestige driven

business and struggling economic climate, naturally everyone wants to be on the top of the list.

Our rating trip was to a relatively new, ultra exclusive, private club, located about 3 ½ hours downstate in Marshall, Illinois, just south east of Champaign. The course is called *Canyata* (pronounced can-YaY-tuh). *Canyata* means “back-woods” in the local Native American language. *Canyata* was ranked 7th in the state in 2007 and was the 2nd best new private course in the country 2005. Tim called up Jerry Williams who serves as Director of Golf for both *Canyata* and another course called *Iron Horse* in Tuscola, Illinois. Jerry set us up for an afternoon tee time on a beautiful autumn day on which he would play with us. We found the entrance to the club after an adventurous drive (have you ever rode with Tim?) into rural central Illinois. We were met in the very small parking lot by Rich Erickson. Rich is the Superintendent at *Iron Horse* Golf Club. Rich would also play with us on that day. We then loaded up the wagons and drove past Mr. Forsythe’s (the owner) luxurious and spacious log cabin residence. We drove up to a small log

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Canyata, located in Marshall, Illinois and designed by MAGCS member Michael Benkusky was ranked second best new private course in the country in 2005 by Golf Digest.

cabin clubhouse where we were met by Jerry. He had lunch waiting for us. After lunch, we helped ourselves to tees and yardage books and then headed over to the practice range for a few warm up balls. We were running a little late but that was not a big concern because there was only one other group scheduled for the day. Canyata only has about 400 rounds played on it per year. At this time, Canyata has no members. Future plans do call for a small membership by invitation only.

Canyata is a Michael Benkusky design, built by Lohman Construction. The site is excellent for golf with a combination of native hardwood forest, rocky ravines, lakes and pastures. The course sits on 1200 acres. There are some excellent elevation changes that make for dramatic views and challenging shots. There are no homes or roads on the site and there never will be. Naturally, Tim had to play the back tees and I reluctantly agreed. The back tees play to 7250 yards. The rating is 76.0 and the slope is 149. Fortunately for me the course design features fairways averaging over 50 yards wide. It is designed to be playable and fun. There are a total of six sets of tees for all levels of players. As we moved around the course I was struck by the lack of

divots, ball marks and general wear and tear like we see on most courses. There was no cart directional signage or cart rules because there are so few carts in use. The large, undulating L-93 greens were a challenge to putt. Pace of play was not an issue. The next tee time was 48 hours later.

It was a thrill and a treat to play a course like Canyata. It offers a very unique golfing experience. I enjoyed the challenging design and great playing conditions of the course. It is a world class golf course. Donald Spinner is the Golf Course Superintendent and he does a wonderful job.

Everyone who works at a golf course understands the significance of the ratings by the various magazines, architects, authors, golf experts etc. Those ratings are very important to club members and the general public. All golf courses offer a unique playing experience as no two are the same. What really makes one course superior to another? Certainly some sites are better than others. Elevation changes are important but not essential. St. Andrews in Scotland, one of the top rated courses in the world has very little elevation change. Does having an ocean view make for a better designed golf course? Were the classic architects "better" than today's modern architects? Does it matter how many major championships the course hosted?

All golf courses at any level offer recreational opportunities for people to play golf. Ratings aside, the people we play with and the enjoyment of the game played in the great outdoors is really what it's all about. It's a great form of recreation that can be played for a lifetime. It can be played by different skill levels and be competitive. Unfortunately, in a Prom Queen Contest there can be only one winner. That doesn't mean the other girls are losers. All of us in the golf industry are fortunate to be part of a great game. We're all winners. Canyata is definitely a Queen. **-OC**

