

"THEY'LL DO IT EVERY TIME!"



DIGESTING THE DIGEST

By Rod Johnson

GOLF DIGEST magazine, in what it considers a service to its readers and yes, even a much awaited treat, biennially prints a listing of America's 100 greatest golf courses. Also included is a list of the best golf courses in each state. State lists contain either the 5 or 10 best courses. Whether an individual state has a list of 5 best courses or 10 best courses seems to have nothing to do with quality but rather population; more people translates to more golf courses and then, of course, more readers.

Anytime a rating list is published, be it best golf courses, best dressed women, worst dressed men, and so on down the list of published ratings, controversy seems to follow. Controversy is good for magazine sales, but I wonder how much good it does for the game of golf.

GOLF DIGEST centers its attention on the national rankings and that makes the most sense. I have always questioned and continue to question their publication of individual states' best courses and, in particular, Wisconsin and its five best courses. I hasten to add that anyone of us, myself included,

who reads the GOLF DIGEST best courses listed article would be hard pressed to name 6 of the 10 courses named as America's best but could name those listed as Wisconsin's best and probably in descending order.

Assuming that the state lists generate the most interest and desiring to become more knowledgeable in state selections, I have composed this article. What better forum to exchange the knowledge gained and be able to editorialize as I go. The research and writing of this article have given me new insights into the rating process, but I probably still am not agreeable with the publishing of them.

GOLF DIGEST is very clear on the criteria to be used by its national panel and as I found, it was the same used by individual state selectors. Courses are judged in 7 categories with a rating of a 1 — 10 scale given to each. The categories are: shot values, resistance to scoring, design balance, memorability, aesthetics, conditioning and tradition. The rating number for each category are not just totaled. The magic

formula includes doubling the shot value category and halving the tradition number. That's not too confusing when you understand that the Lord's best, Heavenly Acres Golf Club, would probably score a total of 75 points in 7 categories rated on a 1 — 10 scale! Maybe the Olympic Committee should look into this rating system.

In a sincere effort to understand the published Wisconsin rankings, I compiled and sent questionnaires to the 5 State Selectors for Wisconsin and to each of the Superintendents employed by the courses listed as Wisconsin's Top 5. It was never my intention to discredit any of the courses named or the state selectors. While the results of the questionnaire were predictable, the comments shared were enjoyable.

All five Superintendents responded and gave complete answers to all questions. As you would expect, common denominators among the courses were intense maintenance practices and unique designs. Four of the top five courses would be considered "old courses," built in 1930 or before. The fifth course is of recent construction. I found it interesting that three of the five courses had original architects whose names are readily recognized, but the other two courses have no named architects. By the way, architects are not allowed to be on the GOLF DIGEST panel for fear of bias.

Maintenance practices are amazingly similar at all five courses. All have large crews, employ lightweight fairway mowing practices (most pick up clippings), and all have automatic irrigation systems. All have bentgrass or *Poa annua* or admitted combinations on greens, tees and fairways. All maintain these areas at heights of cut considered suicidal a few years ago. Interesting was the fact that all five Superintendents owned stimp-meters and claimed green speeds of 9'6" or less for regular membership play.

Of the five State Selection Panelists surveyed, three responded by returning completed questionnaires and two responded by other means. Since this was the area I had hoped to gain the most new information from, I thank the panelists for taking their time to

respond. The Wisconsin panel is made up of three golf professionals and two amateurs, all well known and well travelled golfers. The geographic location of their homes was to have no influence on their selections. I found complete integrity and little bias in their answers.

The panelists responding to the questionnaire play a lot of golf, from 50 to 208 rounds of golf in 1985. A good deal of their golf is played in competitions, but a majority is played on a social basis. Two of the three respondents played on all five of the courses lists as Wisconsin's best in either 1984 or 1985. All panelists used the seven criteria previously mentioned in their rating of the Wisconsin golf courses. What I found most interesting was that all panelists receive a format sheet from GOLF DIGEST, rate approximately 25 golf courses of their choice on the 1 — 10 scale, and submit them directly to GOLF DIGEST. There is not a secret meeting of Wisconsin panelists where the Top 5 courses are named and then submitted to GOLF DIGEST.

In researching this article my attitudes have mellowed. One Superintendent commented that "like taxes, comparisons of golf courses will always be with us. We don't have to like them or agree with them, but they are thought provoking, to say the least."

I have intentionally not listed GOLF DIGEST's list of Wisconsin's Top 5 courses nor Wisconsin's Selection Panelists. If you don't already have that information, you'll have to retreat to GOLF DIGEST, November 1985. I thank all Superintendents and Panelists for their responses in one form or another. I hope I have shed some light on the topic. The research and writing of the article have served a personal function much more appropriate and productive than kicking a chair!

If like the majority, you are employed by a golf course that you feel is worthy of consideration, take heart in the wisdom of one responding Superintendent: "Sure, being on the list is nice. Club officials and members acknowledge it and think highly of it. But what happens if next time for some unknown reason out of my control, we fall out of the Top 5 list?"



Mike Semler, Sue Norton, Jack Soderberg, Jerry O'Donnell and Tom Parent visiting at the UW Turf Alumni meeting in San Francisco. O'Donnell took honors as "oldest grad" present!

UW TURF ALUMNI MEET

One current student and fifteen graduates of the University of Wisconsin—Madison gathered for the third annual meeting of the UW Turf Alumni Association. The meeting was held during the GCSAA Conference in San Francisco. Joining the group of over thirty were many spouses and children. All but two were former students of Professor Jim Love — one architect and one plant pathologist were given special exemptions!

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