

Whistling Straits: Destined to be One of the World's Greatest Golf Courses

By Monroe S. Miller

I wasn't prepared for it. The little I had read about Whistling Straits was all flattering but clearly understated compared to what we saw on the WGCSA tour, led by Mike Lee last August. This newest Kohler Co./Pete Dye creation is going to be stunning.

No one should be surprised. Kohler Co.'s dynamic Blackwolf Run — so successful that the two golf courses are too busy — demonstrated how Herb Kohler Jr. insists on doing things. The intention with the new course was made clear by Mr. Kohler: "Instead of doing just another course, we're going for something spectacular." No kidding.

Spectacular it will be. During the background given by Mike Lee and his staff prior to the walking tour, we learned that before earth moving equipment moved in the grade change from the lake (eastern) edge of the course to the construction headquarters was only ten feet. It was, after all, a military base. It seemed impossible to believe as I looked eastward at a mountainous sand dune looming above me. It was man made.

It takes a lot of work and imagination to transform flat ground in Wisconsin so it looks like links land on the shore of Scotland. It also takes a lot of material.

The Kohler intention is to make Whistling Straits a singular golf experience by recreating the feel of a links land golf course in Scotland. It will be a walking course only — no golf cars and no cart paths — with greens and tees in close proximity. The massive sand dunes on the west edge of the Straits course segregate it from the rest of the world, and pretty much all you see from the course is the course itself and Lake Michigan. The lake could well be the Atlantic!



Tour host and golf course superintendent of the Kohler courses — Michael Lee.



There we were, from all over Wisconsin, tromping through the mud. With no complaining!

Like many Scottish courses, the Straits course will, according to Mike Lee, have vast naturalized areas and a minimum of inputs. Irrigation will be infrequent with the use of lots of fescues. So serious is their desire to give us a true links course, they even considered not providing any irrigation at all and letting the cool lakeside temperatures and natural rainfall take care of water needs.

Even though the course wasn't completed the day we walked it, you got that somewhat wild, natural feeling from

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the surroundings. It was hot on the trip over to Haven from Madison, and as we sloshed through the mud on the way to construction headquarters I was dreading the heat of the day. Miraculously, as we crossed through and beyond the dunes, we caught an easterly breeze and it was 20 degrees F. cooler. Their plan is working brilliantly; I thought I was somewhere else.

Pete Dye has said a lot about the opportunity Whistling Straits is presenting to him. The property is dramatic. Mr. Kohler wants a course that will compare with the top 20 courses in the world. "There's nothing like it," Dye has said of the site.

He also has high regard for Wisconsin golfers. Witness: "These people up here in Wisconsin don't want a patsy. They want a fight." Our tour showed us Whistling Straits will be anything but a patsy.

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Also: "There are more ardent golfers in Wisconsin than anywhere I know. You have more people around here with that type of enthusiasm." Most WGCSA members would agree with Pete on that.

The summer of 1996 will be memorable for many of us because of the generosity and hospitality of Kohler Co. Watching this spectacular course come into play in 1998 will be more interesting for those who were there.

I enjoyed the day for another reason; walking tours were the essence of WGCSA meetings two and three generations ago. Education was everything to our forefathers, even in the summer months. This trip made it clear that our summer meeting schedule can include things other than playing golf. For that reminder, special thanks to Kohler. And to Michael Lee for making it happen for his colleagues. ♣

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