

Beauty of a beast

Tree-lined Teal Wing tests players' nerves and accuracy but also provides a rewarding commune with nature.

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HAYWARD, Wis. — Nestled in the northwestern corner of Wisconsin, a gallon of gas from the nearest fill up, buried deep in a centuries-old forest, is the toughest, tightest golf course you've never played.

Teal Wing Golf Club, 20 miles northeast of Hayward on state Highway 77, has averaged 5,000 rounds a year since opening in the mid-1990s, about one-tenth the number of golfers who play a busy municipal course in the Twin Cities. On a recent sun-splashed weekday, a mere 32 players were on the course.

Those who have taken on Teal Wing and lived to tell about it have left behind several hundred thousand souvenirs - Titleists, Top-Flites, Callaways and assorted other golf balls deposited into the thick forest of trees that engulfs each hole, sometimes coming to rest unseen just inches off the narrow, well-manicured fairways.

Golf Digest finally outed Teal Wing Golf Club in its March 2007 issue, ranking it as one of "America's 50 Toughest Golf Courses" with this disclaimer: "Some fairways are no wider than their tee boxes.

"Apparently, no trees were harmed in the making of this golf course."

That dig came straight from an article in the November 1999 issue of Golf Digest, in which writer Ron Whitten wrote: "We have nothing against tree-hugging. We just don't want to do it during our backswing or follow-through. Our rule: If the fairway is no wider than the tee box, it's Architecture."

Those words still sting Tim and Prudence Ross, owners and operators of Ross' Teal Wing Resort, who built the golf course themselves. In fact, when Golf Digest singled out Teal Wing as one of America's toughest courses, "I was aghast," Tim Ross said. "Phil (Meyer, Teal Wing's golf pro) says it's terrific news, that it lifts us above the crowd. I just don't know. I'm coming around to Phil's viewpoint, but slowly."

That's because the Ross family has been in the customer service business for generations, trying to make a visit to their 103-year-old resort a pleasant experience.

But 18 holes at their golf course isn't all fun and games, especially for those who don't know what they're getting into.

"You either love this golf course or you hate it," Meyer said. "I'd say you'll add eight to 10 strokes to your normal score here, and if you don't understand that coming in you could leave pretty frustrated."

"If you try to bring macho into it or take it head on, this course will eat you alive," Tim Ross said.

"If your complaint about the course is that it's too tough, my answer is absolutely," said Victoria Ross, the director of golf who runs the resort with her parents.

Meyer hears his share of complaints about the difficulty of the course. "One out of 50 golfers might reach the level where they're upset enough to vent about it," he said. "The normal quote is, 'This place is too tough and I'm never coming back.' You're used to shooting 82 and all the sudden you shoot 98; that bothers some people."

The course record from the championship tees is 1-over-par 73, set by Chase Parson in 2003 and matched by Dave Riffey in 2004. Meyer says he has played the course "about 500 times;" his best score is 74.

The difficulty isn't in the length. From the championship tees, the course plays 6,379 yards, short by today's standards. In fact, there are 15 courses in Wisconsin with higher slope ratings, which measure difficulty, than Teal Wing's 139.

But few courses play tougher, and that's because of Teal Wing's narrow, winding fairways and the wall of trees that tower over

them. Of the 10 par 4s and four par 5s, all but three are sharp doglegs with putting greens that aren't visible from the tee.

"The doglegs take driver out of your hands," said Tim Wiese of Eau Claire during a round last week.

"The course obviously puts a premium on the tee shot," Meyer said. "If you can get past that, it sets up pretty well. Here, it's all about the tee shot."

The trees are the very essence of Teal Wing. In fact, the course was designed around the 10-acre grove of hemlock trees right in the middle of the 140-acre layout, between the 10th green and 11th tee. One hemlock tree dates to the mid-15th century; the Ross family estimates a dozen trees on the course are more than 400 years old.

"Our philosophy when we built the course," Prudence Ross said, "was to cut down enough trees but no more."

Meyer would like to remove a 125-foot maple tree that juts menacingly into the left side of the fairway on the par-5, dogleg ninth hole, 60 yards in front of the green, to give players the chance to reach the putting surface with two well-struck shots.

That won't happen anytime soon. The 300-year-old tree was immortalized in a poem, "Mother Maple," that Dan Ross wrote a decade ago to his mother, Prudence. Like it or not, it is part of the hole "for as long as I live, I can promise you that," Prudence Ross said.

The Ross family has allowed Meyer to tweak the course in other ways since he arrived in 2002.

"We've taken on a lot of little projects that have widened landing areas where they count by eight or nine yards. They're things that don't change the character of the holes but make them more playable in the right spots," Meyer said. "You'll hit shots from the fairway today that would have been lost in the woods five or six years ago."

Still, there are balls in the woods. Lots of them.

Dimitri Hoteko, a retired postal employee from Bridgeview, Ill., who spends summers in the area, lost 10 balls to the woods in one round. "But I found 17 that day, so it all kind of balances out," he said. "It just goes along with the territory."

Brian Graffin of Stoughton, Wis., lost six balls during a round last week "and I didn't try to look for any of them," he said. "It wouldn't do you any good. Once they're in (the woods), they're gone."

Meyer says losing balls is part of playing Teal Wing. But so is finding them.

"Go down about 180 yards off every tee, turn right, take five or six steps into the bushes and trees, and you'll find enough balls to fill up your golf bag," Meyer said. "(The golf course employees) purposefully don't go into the woods to retrieve balls, ever; we leave them there for people who play. We want them to walk away with something."

If not balls, a memorable stroll through nature.

"There's no other place like this. It's just a pristine wilderness," Hoteko said. "It's not just the golf, it's the wilderness. You see all kinds of animals and nature that you can't find anywhere else. This place has a rugged beauty about it that leaves you breathless."

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