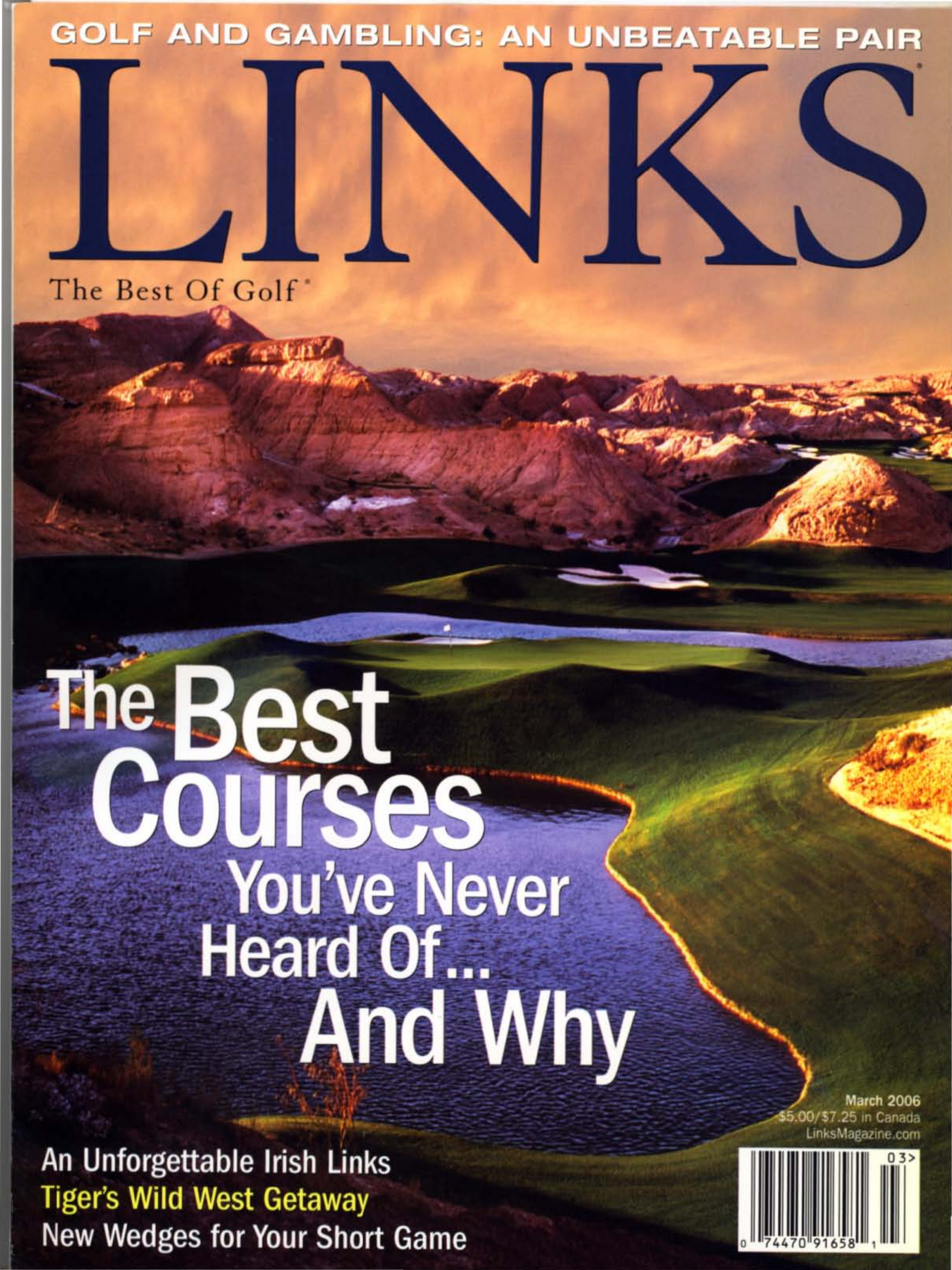


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The man behind the original world's Top 100 list shines a light on some of the layouts ignored by his creation

OUT OF THE Shadows

By George Peper



The Country Club of Fairfield eschews publicity, but its beauty is impossible to conceal.

L.C. LANGRISH/CONTR



Island in a sea of red rock: The 215-yard 11th is typical of Wolf Creek's dazzling visual appeal.

Twenty-seven years ago, while editor-in-chief of *GOLF Magazine*, I perpetrated something called the "Top 100 Courses in the World." For that mistake, and everything it has wrought, I am deeply and eternally **SORRY.**

Hey, it seemed like a good idea at the time. The magazine got great publicity and sold more ads and copies, and I was proud of our biennial list, the first to rank courses from one to 100. Over time, however, I came to realize I'd created a monster.

"You've done our club a tremendous disservice," Pine Valley president Ernie Ransom told me after we pegged his course as No. 1 in the world. "Everyone wants to play here now, and 99 percent of the requests can't be granted."

Indeed, clubs like Pine Valley, Cypress Point and Seminole—ultra-private enclaves that had long flown under the radar—suddenly gained rock-star status, with their exclusionary practices bared for the world to see. Some didn't handle it well.

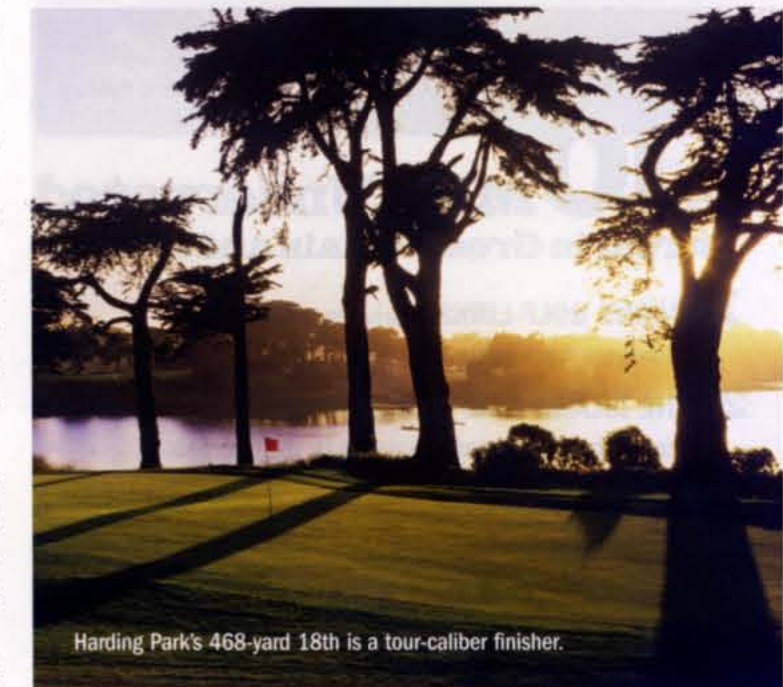
"We do not wish our course to be ranked, visited or for that matter, known. Please convey that message to your panelists," said a representative of Fishers Island, the remote and remarkable Seth Raynor course accessible only by ferry from New London, Connecticut.

Others milked their status and bilked their visitors. The best example is surely Pebble Beach. In 1980 you could play there for \$50. Now it costs \$450, and I can't help thinking that about \$150 of that is attributable to Pebble's position among the world's top handful of courses.

Among today's golf architects, getting a course into the Top 100 (on either *GOLF's* "Top 100 Courses in the World" list or *Golf Digest's* "America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses") is what winning a major is to a tour pro in terms of prestige and marketability. Egomaniacal developers who once said, "Build me a great course," now say, "Build me a Top 100 course, no matter the cost," knowing that a sufficiently grand creation will buy a gander from the judges. As an absurd consequence, course designers have become multimillionaires and multimillionaires have become course designers.

Among golfers, we've seen the spawning of a new species: the conspicuous course collector, whose life mission is to play as many of the Top 100 as possible. Then there is the subspecies, the conspicuous club *joiner*, who collects Top 100 memberships as if they were bag tags—which essentially they are.

This wretched excess would be harmless if not for two problems. First, the lists are inherently flawed. No matter how experienced and knowledgeable, a selection panel will not—cannot—get the ratings right, simply because there is no "right." Rankings are no more than a collective guess, an objective average of subjective opinions.



Harding Park's 468-yard 18th is a tour-caliber finisher.

The magazines do their best to screen raters; *GOLF* vets candidates by asking them which courses they've seen from the current ballot. My recollection is that the minimum standard is 55 percent of the World list and 40 percent of the courses on the ballot. The problem, of course, is that there is no way to verify whether candidates have actually visited all the courses they claim.

The *GOLF* panel is small and elite—fewer than 100 people—to keep the levels of knowledge and discernment high. The risk is that they don't see enough courses.

The group includes golf course architects—among them Tom Doak (who ran the rankings until his design career presented a conflict), Pete Dye, Jack Nicklaus—under the theory that they are the most perceptive judges. There is a



Rye's rumpled linksland was a favorite of legendary golf writer Bernard Darwin.

The **10** Most Underrated Courses in Great Britain and Ireland

- 1. CARNE GOLF LINKS**, Carne, Ireland
There's no more exhilarating finish in golf.
- 2. THE ISLAND GOLF CLUB**, Donabate, Ireland
Rugged beauty in serene isolation by the Irish Sea.
- 3. THE MACHRIE GOLF LINKS**, Isle of Islay, Scotland
Well worth every minute of the two-hour ferry ride.
- 4. RYE GOLF CLUB**, Rye, England
A splendid anachronism—nothing has changed in a century.
- 5. ROYAL PORTHCAWL GOLF CLUB**, Porthcawl, Wales
Walker Cup site that brought Tiger to his knees.
- 6. ST. ANDREWS (New)**, St. Andrews, Scotland
The fairest test in the Auld Grey Toon.
- 7. FORMBY GOLF CLUB**, Formby, England
Links and heathland in perfect harmony.
- 8. ROYAL ABERDEEN GOLF CLUB**, Aberdeen, Scotland
The front nine is as good as links golf gets.
- 9. ST. ENODOC GOLF CLUB**, Rock, England
A must-see, for the Himalaya Bunker alone.
- 10. DOWNFIELD GOLF CLUB**, Dundee, Scotland
It's Dundee, but you'd swear it's Colorado or Carolina.

—G.P.

stipulation that they may not vote for their own courses, but I'm not sure that does the whole job.

My suspicion always has been that competitive instinct compels architects to give low grades to each other's courses, to the benefit of Donald Ross, Alister Mackenzie, et al., who are not competitors for contracts. Nicklaus once asked me why more of his courses weren't on the list. (At the time, he didn't realize his votes for his own courses didn't count.) "It's partly because we have people like you on the panel," I replied.

The *GOLF* panel also includes public relations execs, resort owners, tour operators, photographers, writers and others with close links to courses. The last I knew, all these conflict-of-interest votes counted.

I have little knowledge of the *Golf Digest* panel, except that it includes more than 800 low-handicap golfers, whose identities, unlike *GOLF*'s panelists, are kept anonymous. With a group that size, some raters inevitably will be more knowledgeable and responsible than others. I'm also not sure whether all low handicappers may be able to judge the capacity of a course to be enjoyed by all levels of player.

But the aspect I've always questioned is their ultra-anal grading system. Whereas *GOLF* simply asks panelists to rate each course from A to F, using his or her own definition of greatness, *Golf Digest* requires a grade from one to 10 in eight different categories. I can assure you that giving even a single mark to several hundred courses requires a fair amount of concentration. I can't imagine filling in several thousand boxes, at least not with any sustained diligence and accuracy.

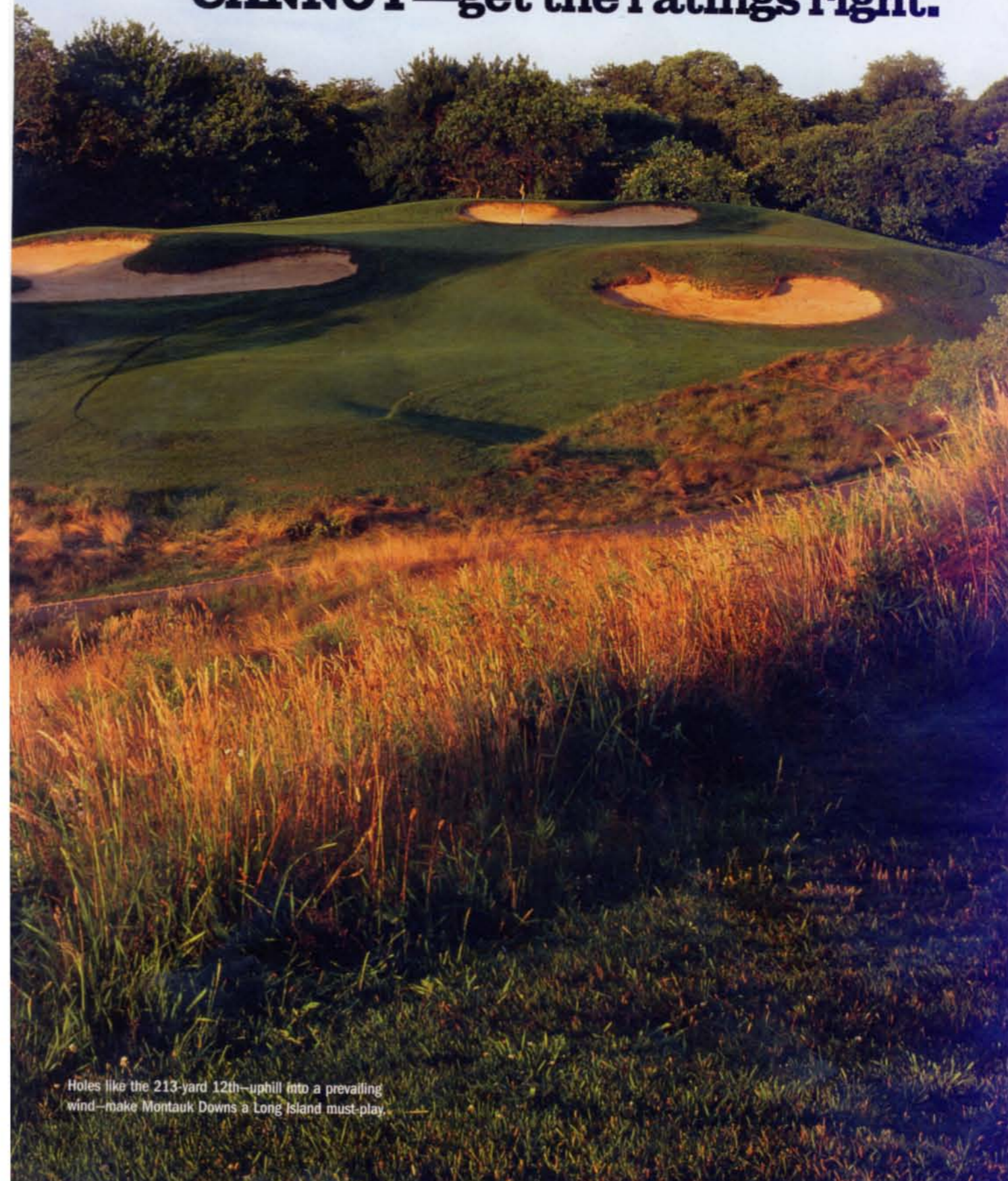
It's no wonder the rankings are a source of constant consternation to the magazines. Over the last two decades *Golf Digest* has tweaked its methodology more often than Katie Couric has changed her hairdo, and *GOLF* quietly began a wholesale re-evaluation of its ranking system recently.

The second weakness of the rankings is more important. The magic number—100—is simply too small. There are more than 30,000 courses in the world; to celebrate only 100 is ludicrous. Hell, there are 100 great courses within a three-hour drive of Manhattan!

As a consequence, countless courses have gone without the recognition they deserve. I'd like to repair the mess I've made, but I don't really see a solution. I could rank the 100 most underrated courses, but the moment that list was published, those would no longer be the 100 most underrated. All I can do is try to figure out why some deserving courses miss out, and give a kiss to a few of the fairest bridesmaids.

I can think of six reasons that great courses are ignored. The first three, as in real estate, involve location.

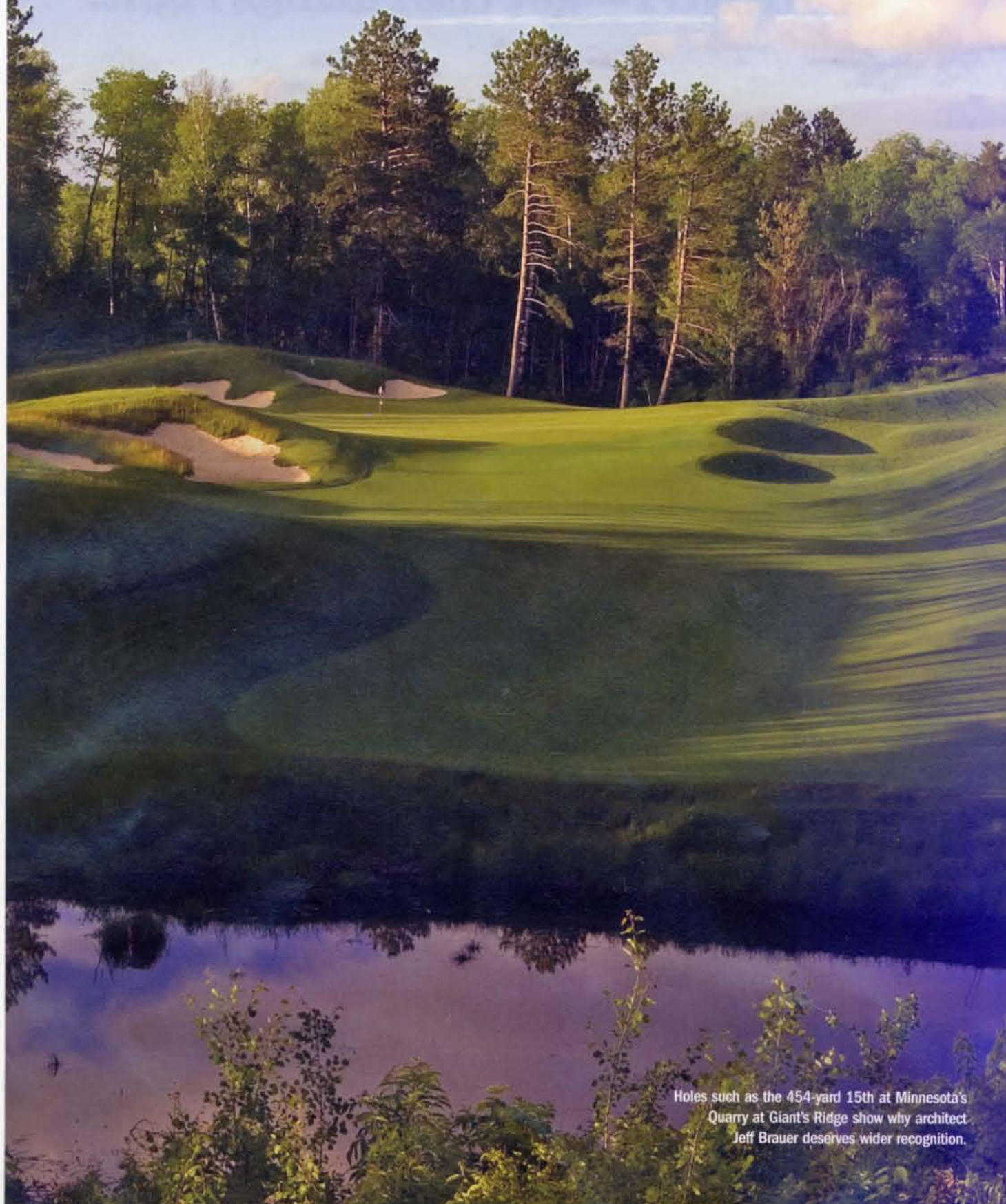
No matter how experienced
and knowledgeable,
a selection panel will not—
CANNOT—get the ratings right.



Holes like the 213-yard 12th—uphill into a prevailing wind—make Montauk Downs a Long Island must-play.

CHARLES BRISCE/ANAPIC; EVAN SCHILLER

**Egomaniacal developers now say,
'Build me a Top 100 course,
no matter what it costs.'**



Holes such as the 454-yard 15th at Minnesota's Quarry at Giant's Ridge show why architect Jeff Brauer deserves wider recognition.

In the Middle of Nowhere

On the most recent rankings, only 30 states are represented on *GOLF*'s "Top 100 Courses in the U.S." list (a companion to its world rankings), and 33 on the *Golf Digest* list. You could argue effectively that the best courses happen to be in those states, but it's also true that unless induced by a big-name designer or a brilliant marketing campaign, course raters are not inclined to travel beyond cell-phone networks.

Courses such as **The Links of North Dakota** thus have an uphill fight. But those who make it to this distant outpost are rewarded. Though it's not a true links, the windswept fairways and prairie-grass rough make for a reasonable facsimile. And while renowned Sand Hills may be more serene, the views here—overlooking Lake Sakakawea—are better.

Few places in North America are more remote than the north shore of Prince Edward Island, where **The Links at Crowbush Cove** unfolds on a range of seaside dunes. Nearby Highland Links has gotten all the attention, including a berth on *GOLF*'s list, but this 12-year-old Thomas McBroom design is in better condition and has earned the loyalty of the locals.

There are more reasons to go Cooperstown, New York, than the National Baseball Hall of Fame. One is **Leatherstocking**, a 1909 Devereux Emmet design. The par-5 18th, a classic Cape hole with an island tee and a green backdropped by the Otesaga Hotel verandah, alone is worth the trip. Also in upstate New York, check out **The Sagamore**, one of the most scenic Ross courses this side of Dornoch.

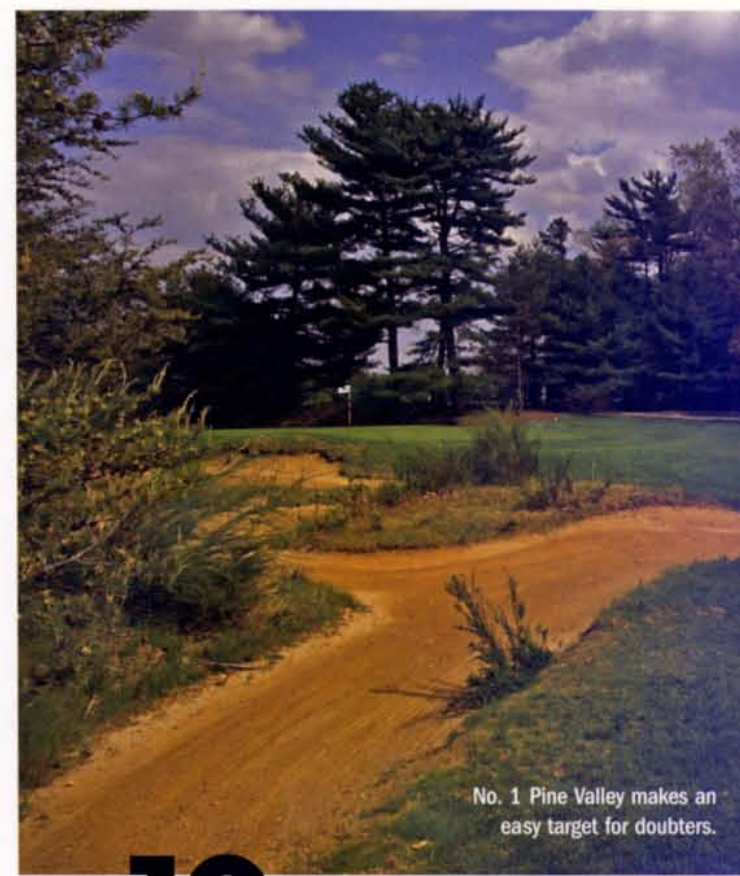
Mesquite, Nevada, may not sound like a place you'd want to visit, but after seeing **Wolf Creek**, you may not want to leave. Set high above the desert floor in a theater of red-rock canyons, teeming waterfalls and glistening creeks, it is breathtaking in every sense. But bring your A game—from the back tees the Slope Rating is 154, the third highest in the country.

Then there is **Black Mesa**, whose name is almost as forbidding as its location: 5,400 feet up in the mountains north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. It is one of the more spectacular courses anywhere, with holes climbing, diving and weaving through massive sandstone formations. With no sign of civilization other than the clubhouse, Black Mesa can look like the moon, but the golf is heavenly.

A few years ago financiers Charles Schwab and George Roberts decided they wanted a very private playground. On the Big Island of Hawaii they found a tract of land at the foot of a volcano overlooking the Pacific, then gave David McLay Kidd an unlimited budget. The result is **Nanea**—few panelists have seen it, but those who have are raving.

PETER WONG PHOTOGRAPHY; L.C. LAMBIERCH

MARCH 2006



No. 1 Pine Valley makes an easy target for doubters.

The **10** Most Overrated Courses in the World

1. PINEHURST RESORT & C.C. (No. 2), Pinehurst, N.C.

Sorry, those greens are borderline Goofy Golf.

2. ROYAL MELBOURNE G.C. (Composite), Melbourne, Australia

The ranked course is a composite of two 18s that no one plays.

3. THE COUNTRY CLUB (Composite), Brookline, Mass.

Same situation—a composite used only for major tournaments.

4. MUIRFIELD GOLF CLUB, Gullane, Scotland

A fine, straightforward test of championship golf—and utterly charmless.

5. BALTUSROL GOLF CLUB (Lower), Springfield, N.J.

America's Muirfield.

6. AUGUSTA NATIONAL GOLF CLUB, Augusta, Ga.

If it's so great, why do they change it every year?

7. PINE VALLEY GOLF CLUB, Pine Valley, N.J.

Superb, but not No. 1—too many holes where you don't see a tee shot land.

8. ROYAL TROON GOLF CLUB, Troon, Scotland

Six dull holes—six interesting holes—six dull holes.

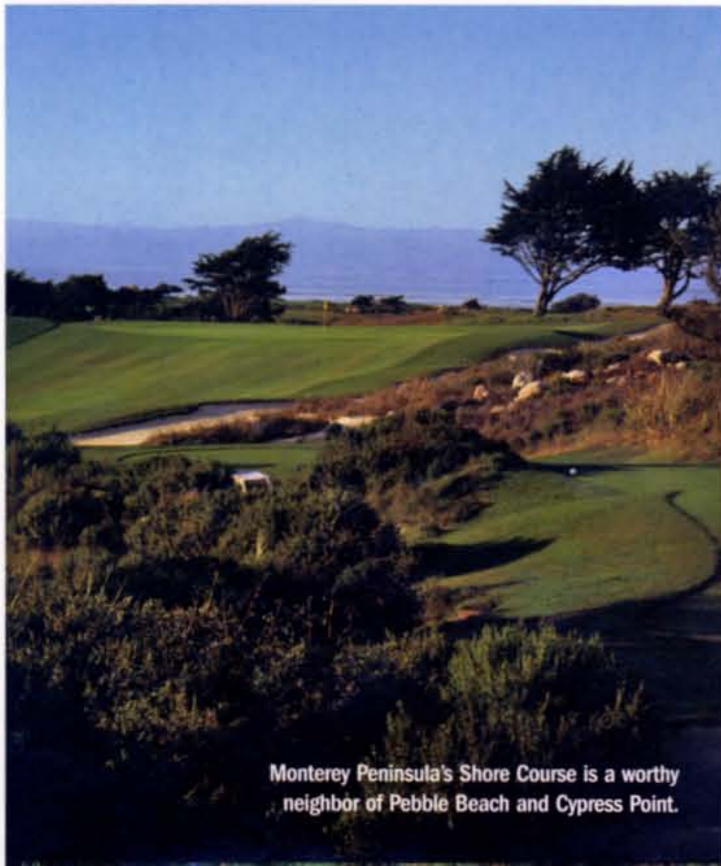
9. SEMINOLE GOLF CLUB, Juno Beach, Fla.

Elite membership, world-class locker room, typical Florida golf course.

10. THE K CLUB, Straffan, Ireland

Dublin meets Doral.

—G.P.



Monterey Peninsula's Shore Course is a worthy neighbor of Pebble Beach and Cypress Point.



Like its famous Pinehurst neighbor, Pine Needles (two U.S. Women's Opens) has a major-championship pedigree.

In the Shadow of a Titan

Golfers visit St. Andrews for one reason and only one reason: the Old Course. Among locals, however, the Old isn't even the best in town. That distinction goes to the **New Course**, all but ignored by visitors and raters. If the New were in any other village in Scotland, it would surely rank among the top courses in the world.

In California, where Pebble Beach and Cypress Point certainly merit their high rankings, golf cognoscenti and *LINKS* readers know all about their gem of a neighbor, **Monterey Peninsula's Shore Course**, profiled in the January/February issue. But how can this masterful redesign by the late Mike Strantz be excluded from the lists?

Up the coast, a magnificent public layout has resided just across Lake Merced from the venerable Olympic Club and San Francisco Golf Club. I hope newly restored **Harding Park**, having hosted a successful tour event (the 2005 WGC-American Express Championship), will take its rightful place in someone's Top 100.

Across the country in the Hamptons, the great triumvirate of Shinnecock, National and Maidstone has been joined with great fanfare by Atlantic, The Bridge and Friar's Head. All are exclusive clubs. Meanwhile, on the very tip of Long Island, the marvelous muni **Montauk Downs** sits on a wind-whipped stretch with views of where the Atlantic Ocean and Long Island Sound meet. A renovation by Rees Jones is afoot and perhaps will bring Montauk the recognition it has always deserved.

In Florida, one of the most overrated courses in the world, Seminole, is just minutes from one of the most underrated: **Pine Tree**, a test of strategy and ball control that you appreciate more every time you play it. Sam Snead called it "the best course in the South," and Ben Hogan wrote in the guest book, "The best course I've ever seen."

In my humble view, **Pinehurst No. 2** is a definite second to its younger siblings, **4**, **7** and **8**, not to mention two contemporaries down the road, **Pine Needles** and **Mid Pines**, where you can enjoy the Ross experience on greens that aren't nearly as silly.

The 800-pound gorilla in Northern Michigan is Crystal Downs, and the many courses that have sprung up around it have had a tough act to follow. But one with the right pedigree is the **Kingsley Club**, a minimalist design whose architect, Mike DeVries, grew up playing Crystal Downs. It's only four years old, but seems destined to move up the charts. Another throwback is Tom Weiskopf's **Forest Dunes**, where the Pine Valley-like inward nine is equal to his finest work at Troon North in Arizona and Loch Lomond in Scotland.

JOHN R. JOHNSON/ISTOCKPHOTOS.COM © JONAS DOST



Reflection Bay's 199-yard eighth is the first of two par 3s requiring a tee shot to a peninsula green.

Wrong Side of the Tracks

The aforementioned Long Island courses are all fine layouts, set on the sandy soil that has long been regarded as ideal for golf, but let's be honest: There's also a Gatsby factor.

Andrew Carnegie called golf "the natural adjunct of high civilization," and civilization doesn't get much higher than in the Hamptons, Westchester County, N.Y., Philadelphia's Main Line, Hobe Sound, Fla., and Pebble Beach, all areas that sport lofty representatives on the Top 100 lists. *Golf Digest*, after all, has always rated "tradition" and "ambiance" highly.

The frightfully posh spots always have had an advantage over places like Las Vegas. Unless you're Steve Wynn and willing to spend \$50 million, your casino course isn't likely to crack anyone's Top 100.

Over the past two decades, as Vegas has expanded well beyond The Strip, several excellent courses have sprouted—to widespread critical indifference. But **Reflection Bay** deserves a look, as do **Rio Secco** and **Southern Highlands**.

Atlantic City fights a similar stigma: an image borne of gambling and exacerbated by "The Sopranos." Galloway National has won just acclaim, but a pair of aces remains unplayed—visually arresting **Shore Gate** and **Atlantic City Country Club**.

Despite giving us songs like "Mama Get The Hammer, There's A Fly On Papa's Head" and "I Can't Get Over You Till You Get Out From Underneath Him," Nashville has failed to attract attention from panelists. But between shows at the Grand Ole Opry, by all means play **The Hermitage** or **GreyStone**, perennial host to the men's and women's state championships.

Initial Private Offering

New top-of-the-line private clubs still seek exclusivity. They do it differently than their older brethren, by actively pursuing panelists.

That's because they need members to recoup the millions spent building the course. Creating a national "buzz" equates to prestige that attracts members. That usually means opening up the curtain just enough to journalists and panelists.

"Ratings are like liquid gold," says Pat Norton of Norton Communications, a public relations company for several clubs, including Long Island's Sebonack, which already has attracted national publicity before its planned opening later this year. "Sometimes owners are in a panic to get raters there as soon as the grass is in, before the course is ready. That can actually end up undermining membership efforts, if the course doesn't make the rankings."

A hopeful club may host a charity outing with celebrities and pros, or even a tour event. The PGA Tour is a tough entry, but there's always the "Silly Season," the Champions Tour and the LPGA Tour.

Even if a course is not featured in the national publications, an influential group of design junkies, many of whom are panelists, quickly track down new layouts and offer their opinions. Still, despite the amount of information available, it is possible for a bona fide hidden gem to slip past the ever-widening net.

"There are definitely courses that are overlooked," says architect Tom Doak. "Most attention goes to the top five or 10 architects. For any other architect, odds are 50-50 they will be overlooked."

No matter the approach, it's safe to say geography is no longer a factor in whether a great new course—public or private—receives attention. "There's a lot of competition these days to build the next great hidden gem," says Doak. "People are doing it on a pretty regular basis."

In fact, remoteness has become such a publicity tool that to find a true hidden gem, you have to look past the courses that give themselves that label.

—David Barrett

The Garbo Factor

While most courses work hard—and some become obnoxiously aggressive—in pursuit of a Top 100 berth, a few just want to be left alone. They'd rather be underrated than overrun. Fishers Island didn't succeed in its quest for obscurity because it was too good to be ignored, but I wonder whether the enthralling courses at **Deepdale**, **Piping Rock** and **The**

Creek on Long Island and **The Country Club of Fairfield** in Connecticut might be more highly regarded had they been more open to panelists. But since they don't like publicity, I'll just leave it at that.

Size Matters

There seems to be a bias against courses that literally don't measure up. How else to explain the oversight of Ross'

Wannamoisett in Rhode Island, a terrific test of driving with artful bunkering and 18 engaging green complexes—but with a par of 69. Ditto cypress-lined **Lincoln Park**, one of the sites of the San Francisco City Championships, with captivating views of the Golden Gate Bridge. It will never make anyone's list because it's a 5,149-yard par 68. In Michigan, there's **The Dunes Club**. For a while it was on the *GOLF* list, but no longer. Why? Probably because it's a nine-holer.

Author Anonymous

Between the two primary lists, the majority of the architects are deceased, with fewer than two dozen still practicing. The sad truth is that if your name doesn't happen to be Fazio or Jones, or you've never played the PGA Tour, getting your course recognized is next to impossible.

The roster of unsung heroes is lengthy, but several designers deserve mention for their recent work: Jeff Brauer (**The Quarry at Giant's Ridge**, Minnesota), Eric Bergstol (**Pine Barrens**, New Jersey), Gil Hanse (**Rustic Canyon**, California) and Steve Smyers (**Wolf Run**, Indiana). If there's any justice, these fellows will win their majors soon.

In the meantime, you can sample six no-name architects for the price of one at **Pilgrim's Run** near Grand Rapids, Michigan, where venture capitalist Robert Van Kampen unleashed six friends to design three holes each. DeVries oversaw the project, but the features and routing are purely from the amateurs. It's wonderful.

Now that I have cleansed myself of the burden I've been carrying around for nearly three decades, I leave you with this final thought: For every course touted by the rankings, many equally good ones exist. For every architect whose name you recognize, at least one other's best course deserves a visit. Please, please keep an open mind and look beyond the Top 100. You'll be doing yourself—and me—a big favor.

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