

Mother Nature adds to area golf picture



Buddy Whitten, winner of Michigan open 1982-83, plays GT courses.

TRAVERSE CITY — Writing some impressive looking numbers into your scorecard while tackling a tough course is only half the reason for enjoying the challenge of golf on Michigan's Gold Coast.

The other reason is supplied, in breathtaking fashion, by Mother Nature. In fact, the views are so spectacular that who can blame you for not concentrating completely on that little white ball?

There are two dozen golf courses here in the north woods, most of them carved into forests, with doglegs twisting around stands of hardwood, early morning mist rising from creeks, brook trout hovering in the shade of icy pools, cherry orchards blossoming in spring and glowing deep red in early summer, hills and ravines and views that take your breath and leave it on the next elevated green.

Woodpeckers tat-tat and doves coo as you pause before a tee shot — no respectful silence here. Deer rustle in the rough, dancing out of sight over dried leaves as you walk down the fairway. Sun sparkles through leaves, shining out of intensely blue sky and clear air, cities far from thought and far away.

There are courses here as pretty as any in the world. And as tough. But until recently they were some of Michigan's best-kept secrets. Golf? That was just something the ski resorts did so they wouldn't have to lay their employees off in the summer. It was an afterthought to the lucrative winter season, and nothing more.

All that has changed. Five years ago, if you'd asked a writer or an editor for one of the national golf magazines for his impressions of Michigan, he or she may have

said "Oakland Hills." Or something like: "concrete" or "factories." Now, they're likely to say "The Bear" or "The Legend." They came, they saw, they were conquered by the beauty of the area, as a casual reading of the golf literature over the last year shows.

From Boomer Martin, former president of the Golf Writers of America, to Leonard Scandur, retired travel editor of the New York Daily News, to well-known golf photographer Brian Morgan, the praise has been effusive.

"If a golfer dies and can't go to heaven, he or she has an alternative — a golfers' paradise in northwest Michigan," writes Scandur.

Two people who share much of the responsibility for the growing national awareness of the area are an engineer who had a passion for golf, and a promoter who had grown tired of peddling wax.

Doug Paul of Lathrup Village is the engineer, a golf nut who decided to promote northern golf when no one could help him arrange a vacation.

Dave Richards of Plymouth is the promoter and public relations man, a go-getter who sold skis 50 hours a week while going to college full time and who quit a good job as regional sales manager for Johnson's Wax in 1984 because he was bored. They are two key pieces in the public relations machine that is helping to boost the area golf business to record levels.

They have dubbed the area the "Northern Michigan Gold Coast" and are determined the name should fit. They are also determined to see that another of their

slogans fits, as well: Michigan will, they say, become "a summer golf destination." It seems a natural to them and it seems a natural sitting out in the middle of such incredibly beautiful courses as "The Legend" in Bellair; Schuss Mountain or the new "Monument" at Boyne Mountain. Of course, golfers will pay good money to flock here once the word gets out.

Hilton Head, watch out. Myrtle Beach, move over.

But what seems natural now, didn't always seem a natural, or even remotely possible. In 1980, when Paul decided to begin packaging golf vacations to northern Michigan, the idea of marketing the area as a whole — of a bunch of individual courses ending their fierce competition to unite in a promotional campaign — was a remote possibility, at best.

Things began modestly. For Paul, who came up with the concept, it was a variation of his hobby of arranging golf vacations for his buddies. He and his partners, Ron Butkovich and a silent partner, began doing business with the courses in 1981. Their company — Professionally Arranged Golf — booked 300 rounds of golf that summer, or about \$7,500 worth. "That's like one full Saturday," said Paul.

Paul is a 47-year-old Detroit-area native who just ended a 23-year stint at Ford to take an engineering position with Depor Industries, a firm specializing in anti-corrosion applications and processes, which is soon moving its headquarters to Birmingham. He is president of PAR, but draws no salary for his weekend and evening work.

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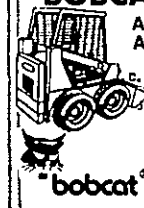
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