



A Jewel Repolished

By: Marc Van Soest

Twenty years ago, *Golf Digest* published its annual list of the “Top 100 Places to Play.” Many readers were surprised to see a sleepy little mid-west town called Grand Haven sneak their local golf club into the

Photo courtesy of Grand Haven GC: “The completion of a \$3 million clubhouse kicked off a revitalization of Grand Haven Golf Club”

top 75 of the list. But, the Grand Haven locals knew what was hidden in the woods just West of US 31: a masterpiece of late 1950’s era golf course design. For the next ten years, the accolades continued as *Golf Digest* named Grand Haven Golf Club among its Top 50 Public Courses.

However, recent years have been unkind to the 6789 yard, W. Bruce Mathews design. The expansion of the Michigan golf industry in the late 90s seemed to

bypass Grand Haven in favor of high priced new construction. Green complexes and tee boxes deteriorated as new ownership took the club in a different direction. The focus was to make the course into what was successful at the time: manicured fairways carved out of towering pines.

What resulted was a course whose resources were simply stretched too thin. “Grass was planted in places where it simply won’t grow,” comments Todd

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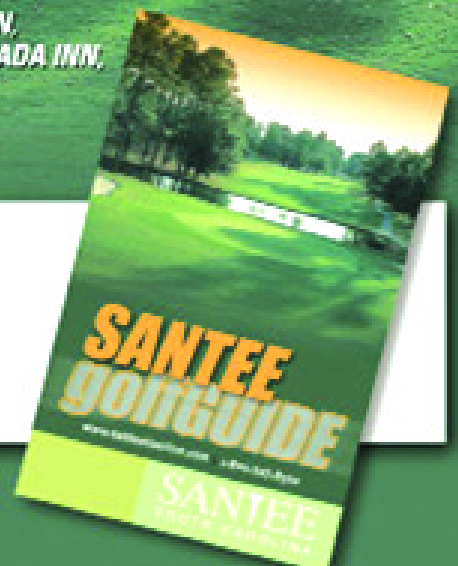
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An Oasis of Recreation





*The challenging par 5, number 3 stands as a testament to the original architecture at Grand Haven.
Photo courtesy of Grand Haven GC.*

Pentrack, the newly appointed Director of Golf. Due to the close proximity of the property to Lake Michigan, Grand Haven sits on natural sand dunes. This makes greens keeping a challenge unless a solid base of topsoil was added during the initial phases of construction.

“We’re not a Northern Michigan golf course,” comments Pentrack “we can’t try to act like one.” This fresh attitude started in 1997 when the Stillwater, Oklahoma based Rooney Golf Group L.L.C. purchased the golf

course and surrounding property. As Pentrack explains, “on the property they saw a phenomenal golf course. All the things are there for a reawakening.”

The reawakening effort started immediately. Most evident to the public was the scrapping of the circa 1965 clubhouse in favor of a \$3 million state of the art clubhouse and kitchen/banquet facility. Pentrack sums up the Rooney philosophy on course ownership, “We want all of our customers to have a quality experience while they are with us.”

That ideal is not simply a dream out there to be realized at some distant time in the future. From the moment a golfer drives into the newly constructed, 300 spot, classic streetlight lit parking lot, until they finish their post-round cocktail, patrons of Grand Haven feel like they are members at a prestigious club. The staff is friendly and accommodating, the food: top notch, the course: of the highest quality. Yet, the greens fees top out at only \$62 for a weekend round during the peak season of May 28 - September 6.

“There are tons of golf courses out there,” comments Pentrack when asked to explain why Grand Haven will continue to improve, “not many of them are doing it right. We want to do it right.”

The course “does it right” from the first tee. A seemingly benign 426 yard par 4, the hole requires two well hit shots to a sharply back-to-front sloped green. The first green demonstrates that great care must be used on all approach shots at Grand Haven. Balls hit to the wrong side of the hole leave difficult sloping putts over shaped mounds.

ard. This addition, combined with old growth pine on the other side of fairway, significantly tightens any attempt to hit the green in two.

Along the length of ninth is another aspect or the Rooney model. Starting in the mid-400,000s, modern home sites are being developed to make Grand Haven more than just the “local golf course.” Three developments of this type are slowly popping up along the course, gradually shifting it into a golfing community.

The back nine includes a stretch of holes between number 12 and

ways are fair and the course plays at face value: what you see is what you get.

When asked what the future holds, Todd Pentrack gets an intense look in his eye, “We will get this golf course back to its Top 75 ranking.” Further improvements are planned for this season and next. But, the bulk of the work is being done behind the scenes, out of eye sight for patrons. “What we have is a gem in the right setting, it just needs to be polished a bit,” says Pentrack. With the continued backing of the Rooney Group, the formerly tired

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Continuing a stretch of excellent holes is the 550 yard, par 5, third hole. After negotiating a slight dogleg to a blind landing area, the golfer is left with challenging second shot or, tough lay up. Laying up on two of Grand Haven’s par fives is the only option. Due to the age of the course, dogleg’s require the golfer to execute three quality shots.

The newly reworked 493 yard, par 5, ninth hole is a testament to the Rooney group and their vision for Grand Haven. In a testament to the original architecture, the tee boxes and green have been untouched. The fairway has been narrowed to include a water haz-

ard. 17 that will challenge any golfer of any skill level. These holes require the low handicapper to work the ball more off the tee than the rest of the course yet, remain extremely playable for the shorter hitter.

While challenging, Grand Haven is not unattainable for the golfer new to the game. As another statement to the quality of the layout, long carries and low percentage shots do not exist. Balls hit short, but straight, will sit find the fairway. In contrast to newer construction which often requires long carries and accuracy within the boundaries of the fairway, there are no tricks here. The fair-

Grand Haven is going to reawaken, and soon.

Editor’s Note: In the spring of 2001, we interviewed W. Bruce Matthews III, about his grandfather and namesake, W. Bruce Matthews. You can click on our video and learn out more about him.

http://michigangolfer.tv/2001shows/show_16/index.html

We also featured W. Bruce Matthews in the Michigan Golfer’s Spring 2004 issue.
<http://MICHIGANGOLFER.COM/spring04/spring0304-4.pdf> **MG**