

Mississippi



By Michael Patrick Shiels

Michigan golfers and gamers who frequent the state's casinos in Detroit, Traverse City, Mt. Pleasant, Manistee, Petoskey, St. Ignace, and Sault Ste. Marie, are in for an eye-opener if they visit Mississippi - which is now billing itself as "The South's Casino Capital."

Photos courtesy of the Tunica Convention and Visitor Bureau (TCVB), www.tunicamiss.com

I visited the "Hospitality State" in late March and, as a well-traveled golfer who has seen his share of casinos as well, it was one hell of an eye-opener for me.

I confess to having a complete ignorance about Mississippi as a tourist destination before I flew to Jackson - the state's capital. My vision of Mississippi was mosquitoes, swamps and the threat of backwoods sheriff's deputies. And I guess I'd been hearing a

thing or two about Biloxi and gambling.

Well I didn't go to Biloxi on the visit in question, but rather I went to a place called Tunica: Tunica County and Historic Downtown Tunica, Mississippi.

Where?

Tunica, pronounced "Toon-eh-kuh."

Meanderings



Okay, but, where?

Tunica is across the river from Arkansas, across the border from Tennessee, and a million miles ahead of Michigan. Logistically speaking, Tunica is 30 minutes south of Memphis, 300 miles southeast of St. Louis, 199 miles north of Jackson, 244 miles west of Huntsville, and 700 miles from Detroit. The Mississippi Delta, along “Old Man River,” is as flat as Olive Oyl, except for what is called the “Tunica Miracle” - nine casino

resorts that loom over the otherwise featureless landscape: Bally’s, Harrah’s, Hollywood, Sam’s Town, Fitzgerald’s, Gold Strike, Horseshoe, Sheraton, and Grand Casino.

In 1990, Tunica was the poorest county in the nation and had the highest unemployment rate in Mississippi. That year, the Mississippi legislature legalized gaming for counties along the Mighty Mississippi River. 14,202 slot machines and 465 table games later, 17,700 new jobs were creat-

ed in Tunica and the county budget grew from \$3.5 million to \$60.2 million. New schools, youth and family recreation facilities, an arena, a RiverPark museum, airport expansion, 30 miles of new roads, new residential developments, and library expansion are just a few of the benefits local residents enjoyed thanks to the \$3 billion invested in Tunica by the casino gaming industry.

What the residents and the visitors can now also enjoy are golf



opportunities as well.

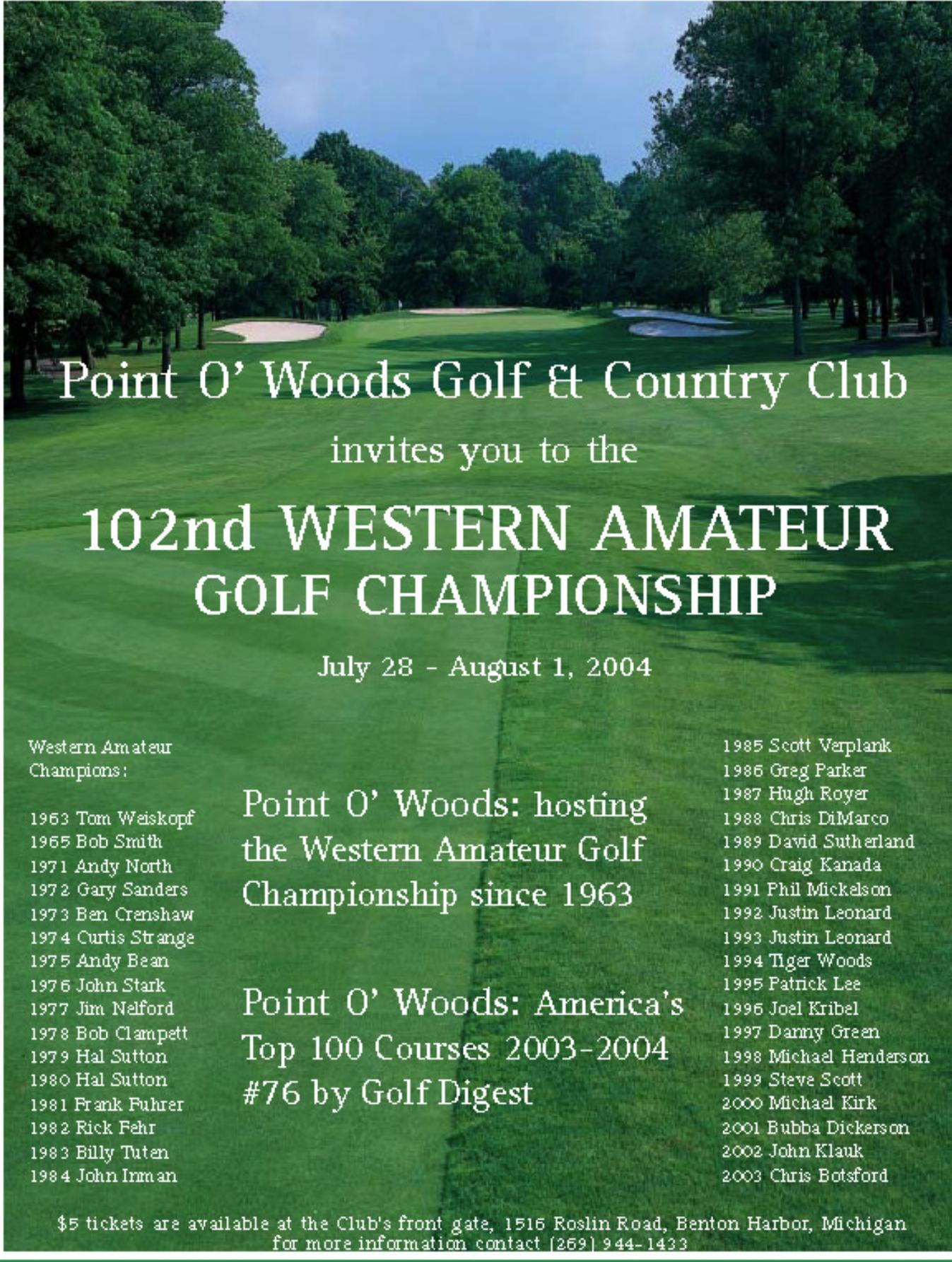
Tunica National Golf and Tennis Club, Cottonwoods Golf Course, and River Bend Links are each moments away from the gaming tables by shuttle or your own car, and due to the treeless terrain, the glamour palaces are always in sight. River Bend Links, closest to Sam's Town, Hollywood and Harrah's - Casino Strip Resorts - enthusiastically embraces the gaming theme - the merchandise in its golf shop is displayed on authentic gaming tables - craps, black jack

and the big wheel. There's even a slot machine with its coin tray overflowing with golf balls. It's five sets of tees, from back to forward, are dubbed "Blackjack," "The Gambler," "High Roller," "Jokers Wild," and "Lady Luck."

Except for the ever-present ponds, a result of having to dig to create mounds from the flat land, River Bend Links embraces a traditional links style with sod-faced bunkers and striped marker poles. River Bend even went so far as to offer the "Strokesaver" yardage

guide "favoured" by so many of the United Kingdom's famous golf clubs. Former PGA of America President Gary Schall presides.

Cottonwoods Golf Course, my personal favorite of the three, is a Hale Irwin-design that does more than look traditional: it plays hard and fast with biscuit-brown fescue and square tees. I love to play the pitch-and-run, and the Cottonwoods design is wise to make it an option with the seemingly ever-present wind painting the open terrain. Three large lakes



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are present, but they are plainly visible and not as pesky as the 80 bunkers that dot and lurk. Stay and play golf packages at Grand Casino's Veranda Hotel can be had for as low as \$71.50 per-person and top-out at \$124.00.

Tunica National Golf and Tennis Club, basically "Tunica Municipal," is the newest of the bunch, and the most ambitious. A \$12-million, 20,000-square-foot clubhouse presents four indoor clay courts with plans to build an outdoor tennis facility in the works. Practice all you want on Tunica's 360-degree driving range and at the soon-to-open golf academy. The most startling thing about

Tunica National is the price: never more than \$55 for 18 holes with a cart. Former PGA Tour player Mark McCumber designed the golf course, and Bob Wolcott, who played on Tour for a number of years, is General Manager.

Understand that Tunica is growing, and while it does offer golf, tennis, river cruising on the Tunica Queen, antique and outlet shopping, clay shooting, and golf, gaming is the name of the game, but rest easy in the knowledge that gaming is where Tunica excels. The casinos are sparkling clean and jazzy with live entertainment in the Las Vegas-style - not like Michigan's dowdy and tattered downscale gaming

halls. Drinks are free and table limits as low as \$3 can be found. The dining options are thoughtful - from international gourmet elegance to southern casual. Comedy clubs, sports bars, jazz cafes, Jacuzzi rooms, swimming pools, delis, and toe-tapping bands are yours to choose from.

The proximity of Memphis, like Detroit a Northwest Airlines hub, makes air travel to Tunica easy, though a huge amount of Tunica's 15-million annual visitors arrive via car.

For more information, log on to www.tunicamiss.com or phone 1-888-4Tunica. **MG**