



Bear Mountain Golf *The Valley Course*

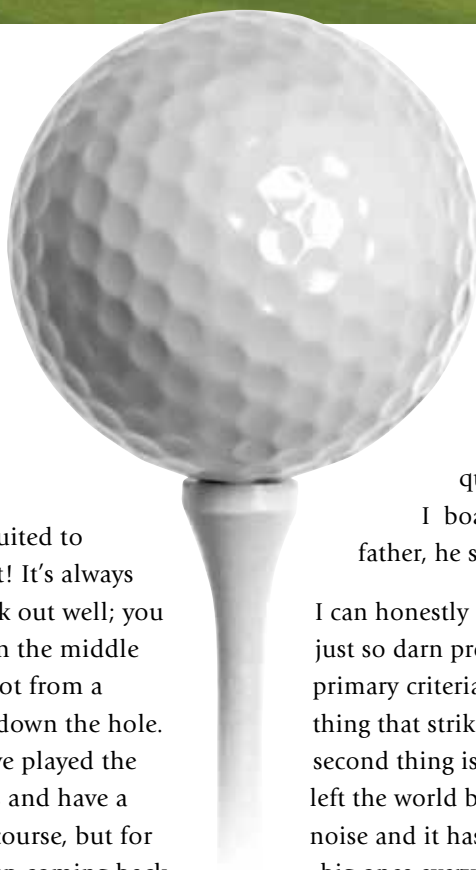
by Mike Wicks

Once there was a Mountain and now there is a Valley. I'm talking golf courses. Bear Mountain has just opened its new Valley course, a 7,000 yard, 18-hole, par 71, Nicklaus-designed wonder! When it is finished it will have cost more than the \$17 million the Mountain course took to construct, in part due to blasting 350,000 cubic meters of rock and using 283,000 tons of sand – not to mention the 27 miles of irrigation pipe and 1,400 heads it required!



When people talk of valleys it's usually in some way detrimental – we've all heard about peaks and valleys and when was the valley ever good? Well, in my modest opinion the valley in this case is dwarfing the mountain!

Now, I have to admit that I am somewhat of a hacker. When people ask me what my handicap is, I usually say that it's my clubs. I actually believe that I am psychologically unsuited to the game of the golf, but man, I really enjoy it! It's always those one or two shots a game that really work out well; you know them - the long shot that lands smack in the middle of the fairway and rolls forever, or the chip shot from a bunker that disappears like a gopher straight down the hole. It's those shots that keep you coming back. I've played the Mountain course at the Bear quite a few times and have a love-hate relationship with it; it's a fabulous course, but for a hacker it can be quite tricky. Of course, I keep coming back and that's the secret of a good golf course, it gets you hooked (no pun intended).



My preconception of the Valley course therefore, was that it would live in the shadow of the Mountain, figuratively as well as literally. It took an afternoon with Tyler Morris, Bear Mountain's Golf Operations Manager, to change my mind.

I wrote this article in mid-April - about 45 days before the new course opened. Feeling quite privileged to be getting this sneak peek,




I boarded a golf cart with Tyler, and like a proud father, he showed off his pride and joy.



I can honestly say that within minutes I was in love– it's just so darn pretty. I know that beauty is not necessarily the primary criteria for assessing a golf course, but it's the first thing that strikes you about this incredible new course. The second thing is that after just a few holes it feels that you have left the world behind. It's quiet, very quiet; there's no road noise and it has a wilderness feel about it. There are boulders – big ones everywhere – and they stand guard around greens and in the middle of fairways like Neolithic markers. All this may, in part, be due to the fact that the Valley course alternates




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between 300 and 400 feet above sea level compared with the 1,100 feet of the Mountain course at its peak.

But I am getting ahead of myself; I need to talk golf here. Some general observations: the bunkers are rustic, reminding me of a few links courses I have played; golfing hairdressers will undoubtedly be tempted to give the fescue a trim, but these bunkers give the course a very different feel to the old man up the hill. Most, but not all, of the tees are elevated – this is something that helps less accomplished golfers feel less intimidated and is a winner all the way with me! This is not to say that the course is easy. Not by any means. Good golfers will be tested with tempting long hits to get over rocks, streams, trees and sundry other obstacles, while shorter hitters will be able to safely lay up. It is a course for all levels and will offer challenges to every handicap. The greens are a different story, they undulate like the back of the Loch Ness Monster – they will provide a challenge to golfers of every stripe. I could go on and on about the many positive attributes of the Valley, but I just have to give you a rundown of my favourite holes – those that I long to play, the ones that I dread playing and the ones that are just stunningly beautiful.

The early holes take you down into the valley with arbutus and fir trees lining the fairways; it's here that we get our first look at the course and you just know this is going to be a great day's golf. Mark Twain once said that golf is a good walk spoiled, and with the Valley I can almost see his point – almost. The thing with the Valley course is that it meanders through the outstanding Highlands countryside in such a natural way that you will not be able to ignore the beauty all around you, however captivated you are by the golf.

By hole number seven you are at a lower elevation and the fairway borders a lake to the left, and beyond it nestled in the trees you can just about see a house, the only one that's even remotely close to the course. At eight, a rock wall has been built on top of yet another huge moss-covered boulder. A fish ladder juts out into a stream to assist spawning trout.

Eleven is a tough par 4, and is a classic risk and reward hole. A creek bisects the fairway at the point where most golfers will start to question whether they can manage to clear it. It becomes a matter of a short iron from an uphill lie, or a long iron from a downhill one into a small green surrounded by forest and rocks. It's a great hole, especially because of the amazing aquamarine lake behind the green!

The next hole, number 12, is the one where you will need to take a moment to just stop and stare. At 250 yards out, look back at the lake and let your eyes wander skyward to the clubhouse high on the hill – it almost looks like a chateau looking down over its estate. But don't get too carried away by the spectacular view, peril awaits you in the form of rock outcroppings on each side of the fairway and a cluster of bunkers all around the putting surface.

My favourite hole though, has to be the fifteenth – not because it's easy, in fact I am petrified of the tee shot, but it is a beautiful hole with fabulous views. This one will give any golfer, no matter how low their handicap, a test they won't soon forget. It's a par 5 with a lake to the left and trees to the right, and will require a long tee shot to reach safety. However, a well-positioned bunker waits patiently for just such an ambitious shot! Then to lull you into a false sense of security the green is left unguarded by bunkers, trees or rocks. The devil though is in the details – the green has great swales around it and has more slopes than Whistler Blackcomb. Possibly the toughest hole on the course – but what fun!

The seventeenth is a magnificent downhill par 4, which tempts the braver golfer to keep right, but there lies risk. It is better to play left and use the slope to feed the ball back to the centre; then you just need to carry the water hazard and bunker, which lie short of the green. Once on the green it is time to admire the beauty of the Valley once again – look back up the fairway, through the maples to a waterfall in the distance.

And so, to reward you for all your hard work on the first 17 holes, the 550-yard eighteenth hole is fairly straight all the way home. Starting from yet another elevated tee with the clubhouse as the backdrop,

this is a hole to let loose on. The bunkers (watch for the long swaying fescue!) to the left and right of a three-tier green must be avoided at all costs and putting from the wrong tier may be a gentle reminder that this is no course to be toyed with!

So, is it better than the Mountain? That's hard to tell from my perspective, sitting in a golf cart, but I will say this – I've never been more excited at the prospect of playing a golf course – ever! **WS**



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