

GOLF COURSE[®] INDUSTRY

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8,000 yards from the tips

Crazy? Justified? Both? A new project in an unlikely spot is poised to create an industry stir.

June 13, 2016

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Leave an iconic resort boasting three 18-hole courses maintained to foster positive experiences among golfers of all levels, curl around town, drive up a mountain and you see one of the biggest curiosities in the construction side of the golf industry.

A billionaire convinced four gigantic names to design a championship course on rugged southern West Virginia terrain.

Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Gary Player and Lee Trevino, along with their associates, are combining on a golf course serving as the centerpiece of the Oakhurst development at The Greenbrier Sporting Club. The project evokes memories of the build-and-boom days of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Big names, big personalities, big scale, big goals.

Intense clearing of the land has started, and Greenbrier owner Jim Justice boasts the course will play 8,042 yards from the tips. Yes, 8-0-4-2. That number will peeve those who say long, difficult courses deter the masses from playing golf. The masses, though, won't be playing this course. Oakhurst is a private development. Justice, a West Virginia gubernatorial candidate, speaks with the moxie of a politician when describing the reasoning for building a course that takes the equivalent of 40 average 3-wood shots to play. He wants to bring a U.S. Open to his part

of the world.

“This thing will be pristine,” Justice says. “Not many courses are 8,000 yards, but we will be playing at 2,700 feet elevation. We need the extra length because of the way these kids hit the ball today. It will have the most unbelievable scenery, almost like infinity greens, where you can just see forever.”

Securing a U.S. Open is the most ambitious goal in golf course development. Only two courses in the last 50 years – Hazeltine National (Minn.) and Chambers Bay (Wash.) – hosted the U.S. Open less than 10 years after completion. Throw in the fact venues such as Oakmont, Pebble Beach, Pinehurst No. 2 and Shinnecock Hills are regular sites, and the odds of the U.S. Open landing in southern West Virginia are longer than what Lloyd Christmas faced in trying to score a date with Mary Swanson in “Dumb and Dumber.”

But personalities like Justice add spice to the industry. Since purchasing The Greenbrier in 2009, he has shown a willingness to invest in every aspect of the property, including the golf operations. His golf-related coups include securing an annual PGA Tour event and getting Nicklaus, Palmer, Player and Trevino to work together.

Asked if four “Type A” personalities are each designing a few holes, Justice quickly quips five strong personalities are involved in Oakhurst. He then offers a glimpse into the backroom conversations involving Oakhurst. “I want to make them get in a room together and decide we are all in,” Justice says. “It’s hard to do. Really, really hard to do. Lee was the easy one. He said, ‘All I want our three par 3s that are dogleg right.’”

Trevino spends the most time at The Greenbrier. He serves as the resort’s golf pro emeritus, a role tailored for the affable six-time major champion. Trevino has the least design experience of the group because he says he enjoys dealing with people more than sketches and dirt. Getting all four legends together at the same time isn’t easy. Nicklaus and Player are world travelers, and Trevino says the 86-year-old Palmer “isn’t doing real well.” When the quartet discusses plans for Oakhurst, the conversations are animated.

“We go back and forth,” Trevino says. “We have a par 5 that’s damn near 700 yards long. But you have to understand it’s down the prevailing wind, it’s downhill and you are 3,000 feet above sea level. When somebody sees it, it’s, ‘Holy moly.’ But even if it’s on flat ground, it’s not too far for somebody like Dustin Johnson.”

The idea of building an 8,000-yard golf course doesn’t surprise Trevino, who points out the Nicklaus-designed Castle Pines (Colo.) Golf Club measured more than 7,500 yards when it opened in 1981. Castle Pines founder Jack Vickers is another energy baron with a zest for golf who brought a PGA Tour event to his property. The PGA Tour ended a 21-year run at Castle Pines after the 2006 season. Before a course’s ultimate yardage causes a stir, Trevino says topography must be considered. “You look at the par 3 up here,” Trevino says pointing to Oakhurst’s location. “You might look at it and say, ‘Oh, my god, that thing is 240. I can’t reach it.’ It’s really 180 with the altitude.”

Trevino adds yardages aren’t the biggest difference between the championship courses of different eras. “Let me tell you what has changed between my Tour and today ... the mowing of the greens,” he says. “That’s the only thing that has changed. If you see a guy playing a golf course today and he’s hitting a 7 iron, we used to hit a 7 iron also. The reasons their scores are lower is because the greens are better.”

The greens at Oakhurst figure to be, well, pristine. Greenbrier director of golf course maintenance Kelly Shumate and his team are visiting courses and research facilities to determine what turf varieties best fit Oakhurst. The Greenbrier team already maintains The Old White TPC for the PGA Tour’s Greenbrier Classic and two grass practice fields for the New Orleans Saints. Justice is eyeing fall 2017 to open the course, although Trevino says spring 2018 is a more realistic target.

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