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Truth and Beauty in Northern Michigan

By Rory Hughes



I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
“For beauty,” I replied.
“And I for truth,—the two are one;
We brethren are,” he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

Emily Dickinson

You could have been half asleep in your English class and grasped Emily Dickinson’s central message: beauty and truth are interchangeable; we cannot have one without the other. Everything truthful is beautiful, and everything beautiful is truthful. About four hundred miles north of Chicago, at the tip of the ring finger of the Michigan hand, is situated a perfect exemplification of Dickinson’s thesis: True North Golf Club.

Even as a native Michigander, I struggle with drawing comparisons to other places. And I have to stress the word place; the golf at True North is first-rate, the place is something more; something transcendent and unique, something that compels a visitor to say, “You just have to go there and see for yourself.”

Though just a short drive from Harbor Springs and Lake Michigan, once you enter the property the feel is otherworldly. An eternal, winding drive up a hill crescendos at a gorgeous clubhouse perched on the side of a hill, towering over a course teeming with as much wildlife—in my short stay I came across a fox, several deer, and a flock of wild turkey—as character.

And what a course it is. World-renowned designer Jim Engh must have had a blast with this one thanks to the existing, quintessentially breathtaking Northern Michigan landscape. His signature hidden bunkers around the green test the eye and nerves alike; so like any true test of golf, you must lock in on your target and commit. And while water and other trouble is not gratuitous, he places it in the right places on enough holes to make you, if you’re smart, back off some of the pins. Most of the par 3s offer



photo-worthy vistas, and the par 5s are either uphill for miles or downhill and reachable. If you lock in on a yardage and make a good swing, your ball is bound to be within a putter-length of the ball mark. The greens are, without question, the best I've ever played. And I have never seen so many putts die in the hole—if you pick a line, trust it, and get the ball rolling, you have only yourself to blame if you miss.

True North is a private national club, so they brought in a staff with apt experience and an affinity for the area. Terry Carlson, an Illinois golf stalwart (former head pro at Elgin Golf Club and former president of the Illinois section of the PGA), came over from Estancia in Arizona and brought a few members of his staff, most notably Mike, a caddy to whom I owe at least 10 strokes. General Manager Matt Payne was lured from Ballyneal in Colorado and brings expertise in managing a low-membership, low-traffic, high-value, members-only club. To illustrate what I mean by “low-traffic,” when I asked one of the assistant pros about the tee sheet, his forehead crinkled. “Out here, people just show up and play whenever they want.” This statement and the condition of the greens almost had me filling out a membership application on the spot.

True North is not a “country” club, not a place to tell people you belong, not a place for singles wine mixers and bridge tournaments (although I'm sure they wouldn't revoke your membership for participating in such things). It's a place for people who love Northern Michigan about as much as they love golf; a place where you can show up, play 18 holes, wash down a couple of fish sliders with a pint of Michigan beer—the grill menu is terrific—then play a solo nine with only the sound of birds, the flag hitting the green as you line up a putt, and the ball rattling in the cup; a place where your night might consist of a cigar and a scotch on the back porch in North Woods silence.

While, like most national clubs, dues for locals are more than that of national members, True North offers something that I've never encountered. Their Generational Golf Membership allows any member to transfer his or her membership to a dependent at any point, until the end of time. Thus, a family pays the initiation fee just once, and for years, decades, centuries in the future, another initiation fee will never

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GOLFChicago: *You've performed brilliantly on Tour event courses you are playing for the first time. What's your secret to pulling off that feat?*

JS: In junior golf, I went to golf courses I'd never seen before and played them very well. I played college golf for only a year-and-a-half and only went back to one place twice. So it's nothing new coming out on Tour and playing courses I hadn't seen before. I just go through the same stuff I went through the years before and have learned to adjust my game.

GC: *Today is your first visit back to TPC at John Deere golf course since your victory last July. I imagine the visit stirs some great memories.*

JS: Coming off a four-week stretch, I came back in here and it didn't take long for everything to kind of come back to me. Just pulling into the driveway and walking through the locker room ... the last time I was in the locker room I was scrambling around trying to make the plane trip over to Scotland because I made it to the British Open.

That morning was funny. I teed off well in front of the leaders. I was six back to start the day. I needed to shoot 10 under. It's not that easy of a golf course, [yet] guys were tearing it up. I had a really rough range session, and I never really have any kind of pain. But if I remember right, it was my left wrist was really killing me, and I was taking some I took a couple Advil. I couldn't even keep it on the driving range, and this is a big driving range, and I couldn't keep it on it. I just went out there and I bogeyed the first hole and just thought, all right, well, let's kind of scramble around today.

Obviously, with the closing and the nice bounce off the pin on the bunker shot to get into the playoff, and five holes

later, the two-footer to win was obviously something that will always be in my head and something I'll never forget.

G.C. *You holed out from the sand bunker on No. 18 to get into the playoff. Can you take us through that shot?*

JS: I got up to the bunker and looked at it and said, "if there's ever a bunker shot that you need to make, this is about the easiest one that I think I could have." I mean, it was just sitting so perfectly. Somebody had already been there. It was raked, raked perfectly. It was just kind of teed up, and I just had just a little downslope to the hole, which you want. I just popped it out, and I struck it a little closer to the ball than I wanted, just a little bit. It really bugs me when



people tell me it was going in the water, because it wasn't going in the water.

I struck it a little [too] close to the ball, and I remember looking up afterwards. Later, I saw a photo of when the ball came off. I remember looking up and saying, just hit the pin, find the hole, and it just did [that]. It was such a shock. I didn't expect that it would find the pin and go in.

G.C. *The John Deere gallery seemed to rally behind you even though you ended up facing off against local*

hero Zach Johnson in the playoff.

JS: To be a champion of this tournament is humbling. Steve Stricker and Zach Johnson—two favorites here that everybody loves to root for—and how couldn't you? They're just two of the best guys out there. I've become very close to them.

GC. *When did it sink in what the victory here would do for your career?*

JS: It must have been halfway through the plane ride to Scotland. I definitely just kind of thought what it could mean to me. I was trying to move up on that money list. And I remember being on the plane ride saying, "I'm going to this major and now I'm in the PGA." It all happened so fast, but I would say that the moment that I realized it could

possibly change my golf life was about halfway through that plane ride when it all kind of sunk in a little bit.

G.C. *Two months after the John Deere Classic, you played in the BMW Championship at Conway Farms in Chicago. What did you think of the course?*

JS: Chicago has to be one of the greatest cities in the world for golf. Conway Farms was a cool experience. I had it going pretty well (finishing in a tie for 16th place). I didn't think there was a 59 out there, but apparently Jim Furyk did! It's difficult, it's

challenging but it's fair. I really enjoyed it. There's a whole mix of shots you have to hit off the tee.

G.C. *And what do you think of the Chicago golf fans?*

JS: You go to any large city and there will be golf fans. But they really love their golf in Chicago. You have the giant city, but at the same time you still have the Midwestern feel of how nice everybody is, how appreciative they are, and how respectful they are on the course.

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be charged. One family, one initiation fee. There is something comforting about knowing that when you're long gone, your legacy can carry on in perpetuity in the form of such a serene place.

And though True North perfectly suits a buddies golf getaway or corporate event (corporate memberships are also available and the clubhouse is equipped to handle any size meeting), its proximity to the quaint, lakeside town of Harbor Springs and the myriad leisure activities that come with it (kayaking, hiking, fly fishing, sailing, canoeing), makes it a destination for even that non-golfer in the family. Historic Mackinac Island and bustling Traverse City alone will keep them busy while you finish up 36 on the course. Ultimately, Payne would like for True North to serve as a sort of dashboard for the aforementioned activities, whereby you contact a concierge service who could then coordinate day trips. But with cottages on site equipped with anything you will ever need—most notably a rustically decorated screened-in porch

bordering a practice green and chipotle pepper jerky—your stay can be complete without ever leaving the property.

In a world where nothing is constant or guaranteed, where tradition is trumped by impermanence, everything about True North just feels like it's here to stay: from the massive Michigan pines to understated, rustic hole markers, to the attentive, golf-loving staff. No doubt, it's primed to become a stalwart on the Northern Michigan golf scene and the owners—who are also founding members—are committed to bringing in only those people who, like Dickinson, appreciate true, enduring beauty. True North offers a chance for everyone to play the course once, so make your way to the top of Michigan and see for yourself where truth and beauty collide in pastoral bliss.

For tee times and membership inquiries contact: Matt Payne | True North Golf Club | Harbor Springs, MI 49740 | 231-526-3300 | www.truenorthgolf.com.

