

Swinging Saluki-Style

Carbondale is *The Down State* Destination for Golf

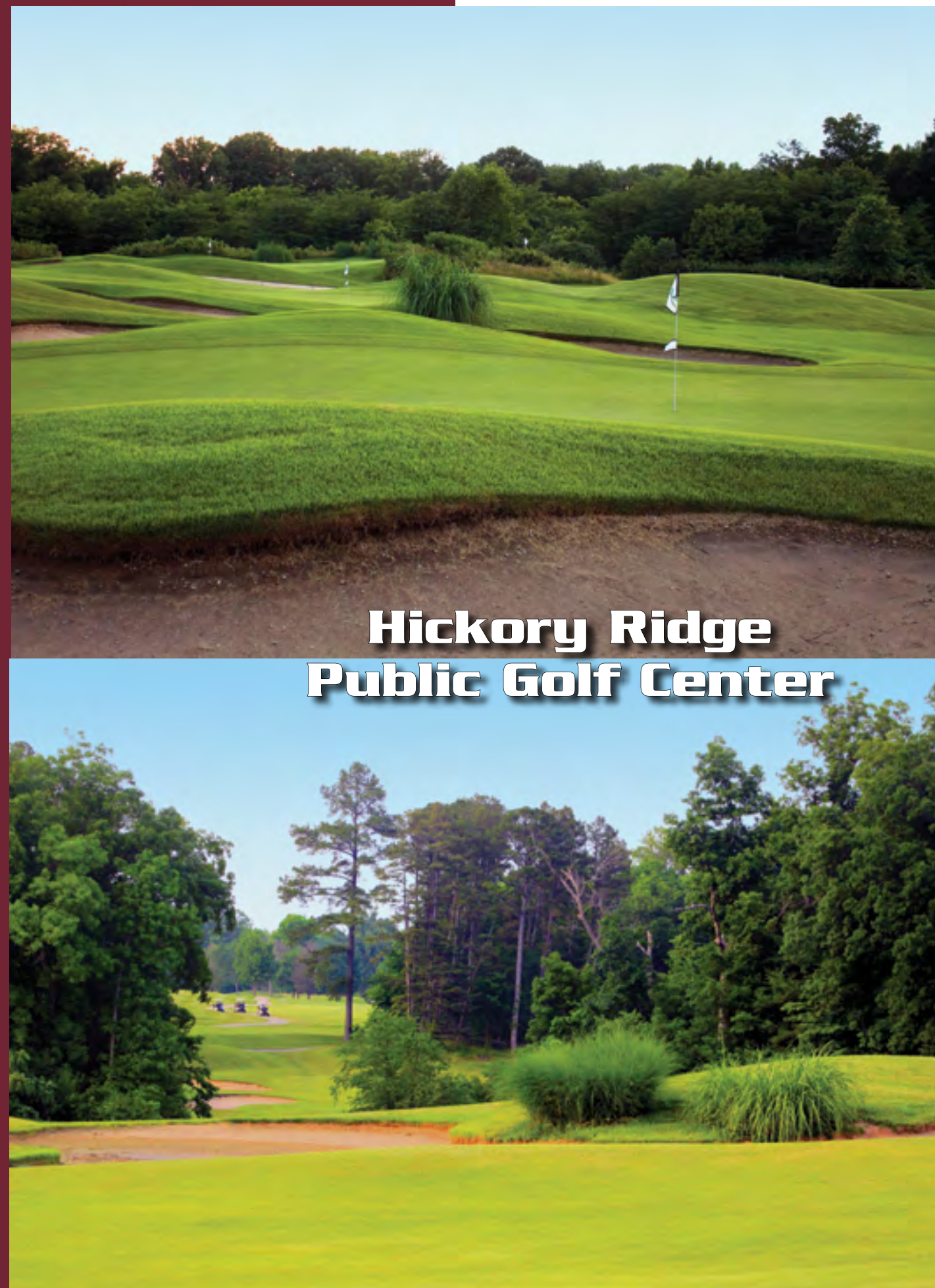
By Neal Kotlarek

Chicagoans tend to be creatures of habit. When it's summertime, we head north to the family cabin in Rhinelander, Hayward, Tomahawk or some other rural Wisconsin town. When it's wintertime, we'll book a flight out to Scottsdale, Vegas, or Tampa for some fun in the sun. Early springtime and late fall present a different challenge all together. It may be too cool to take in a baseball game and too damp to schedule a tee time. What to do?

Many area golfers have resolved the seasonal transition problem by hopping in their cars and heading Down State. Not too far south, mind you. But just far enough south on I-57 to locate mild temperatures and golf courses in great condition for most of the year. Mention Carbondale to a sports fan and they'll immediately think of Southern Illinois University and its proud Saluki football and basketball programs. Indeed, the school is celebrated across this city of 26,000. If you ever get lost looking for the university, just follow the massive Saluki paw prints painted on the streets leading toward the football stadium.

Over the past few decades, Carbondale has worked hard to expand its scope from college community to a vacation destination. Micro-breweries have popped up around the city and tours are available for the area's multiple wineries including Von Jakob Vineyard and Bluff's Vineyard and Winery. Where one can find cold beer and fine wine, of course, one tends to also find golfers and golf courses. And, indeed, golfers are flocking to courses in and around Carbondale which provide outstanding quality, great conditioning, and highly affordable green fees.

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Hickory Ridge Public Golf Center

Designed by William J. Spear, this 6,863-yard course was opened in 1993 and is managed by the Carbondale Park District. Hilly terrain, dense forests and sprawling sand bunkers give the layout distinctive character. Four sets of tees cater to golfers of all handicap levels.

The 420-yard 1st hole is a dogleg left that introduces players to hilly topography that makes Hickory Ridge a joy to play. While the tee shot landing area is flat, the green is located far below your feet and is protected by sand and mature trees. A mid-iron hit short of the green is far preferable than anything hit long or to the left.

The signature hole on the front nine—and over the entire 18, truth be told—is the 406-yard No. 7. The par 4 calls for a challenging approach shot to a green protected in the front and left side by water. Push the ball too far to the right on this hole and you're faced with a delicate chip shot to a fast green. A par on this hole feels a lot like a birdie.

The back nine is highlighted by two very difficult holes. The 529-yard No. 15 is tightened by a terraced fairway on the second shot, while the approach shot is pinched by trees. The 417-yard No. 16 serves up a tight, tree-lined landing area heading toward a putting surface made even more difficult to reach by trees.

Along with its outstanding golf course, Hickory Ridge has excellent practice facilities which are used regularly by both the SIU men's and women's teams. The course hosted the annual women's Saluki Invitational in late March, pitting over a dozen top collegiate teams against one another in this annual two-day tournament. www.hickoryridgegolf.org.



Crab Orchard Golf Club



Golfers looking for classic course design and impeccable conditioning served up with a dash of friendly service must book a tee time at this fun-filled 6,420-yard property. The greens are as smooth as a pool table and the fairways are perfectly manicured. The course was built in 1959 and is an example of traditional parkland design. Most greens can be seen from off the tee and holes are protected on both sides by stands of mature trees. My favorite hole on the front nine is the 526-yard No. 5. This par 5 calls for a good drive and a precisely hit second shot just short of water bisecting the fairway. A short-iron over the water to an unprotected green should leave a decent chance at birdie.

The 313-yard No. 17 may be the most interesting hole on the course. A creek bisects the fairway about 170 yards off the tee. While the club's website warns golfers not to gamble, better players can easily carry the water to set up a short pitch shot to the green tucked on the right side of the fairway. www.craborchardgolfclub.com.

Located in nearby Marion, the delightful Kokopelli Golf Club was designed by Steve Smyers and features rolling hills and dramatic vistas from hole 1 to hole 18. Opened in 1997, the course was in 2014 ranked by *Golfweek* magazine as one of America's "Best Places You Can Play." Reached by phone in late March, head golf professional Jessie Barge was proud to state that the course entered the 2015 season in outstanding shape following a difficult 2014 when ice storms damaged many

fairways. "We replanted with three types of grasses to make sure that the course would return to top shape," Barge said.

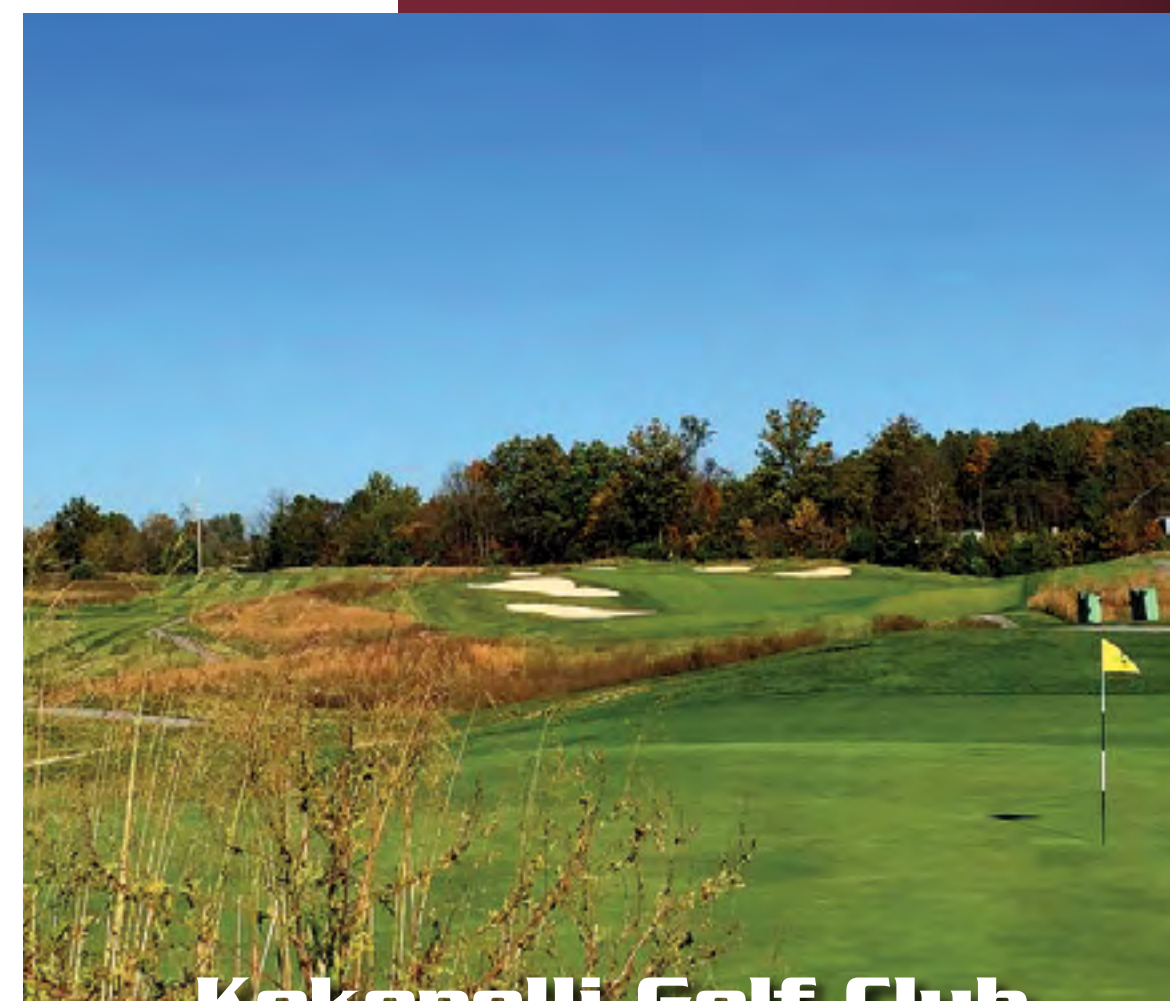
Once used as a coal strip-mine, the 176-acre property features a rolling topography, 92 sand bunkers and large, smooth greens. The final three holes on the course are as good as any you'll find in the state. The uphill hole 16 is a 444-yard dogleg left that plays slightly shorter from its elevated tee. A good tee shot leaves a mid-iron second shot to a putting surface protected front, left, and right by sand bunkers.

Hole 17, a par 3, is protected by three large bunkers to the left, right and behind the green. There are two more bunkers to the front right. Take a par here to finish your round in style.

The majestic hole 18 is a long par 5 calling for an uphill tee shot avoiding three devious fairway bunkers on the right side of the landing area. A good second shot leaves a mid-iron approach to a wide open green.

Don't leave the property without enjoying a cold beverage and dinner at Kokopelli's spacious and grand clubhouse which features a full-service restaurant as well as sports bar and grill. www.kokopelligolf.com.

Sold yet on planning a golf trip to the Carbondale area? Play and stay packages are available through the Carbondale Convention and Tourism Bureau. Beyond great deals on golf and hotels, the bureau can also offer recommendations on the area's acclaimed microbreweries and wineries. www.carbondaletourism.org.



Kokopelli Golf Club

