

# The Search for the Perfect Golf Course

## *A Golf Course Architect's Account*

ARTICLE BY TOM DOAK

**G**olf is a compelling game for perfectionists because it is impossible to play a "perfect" round. But in the quest for this perfection, today's golfers still expect an ideal, mature golf course on opening day from both the architect and golf course superintendent. This demand has led many modern architects to smooth over the subtle and quirky contours of the landscape—the foundation of the sport's natural appeal.

Lost Dunes Golf Club—located in Bridgman, Michigan—attempts to find the correct balance between nature and perfection. It is a private golf-only club—a rarity in today's market when the public willingly pays \$100 or more for a round of golf at "upscale" metropolitan daily-fee courses. But there was a market for a more exclusive retreat here on the Lake Michigan shore, where the target audience is summer residents from Chicago and Indiana.

The name Lost Dunes is a play on the course's location. Before redevelopment as a golf course it was the home of Technisand, which for twenty years excavated the dunes on the property for construction material. The only dunes left for the golf course were 40-foot banks of sand at the property boundaries and a few 10-foot banks.

■ *Right* The dramatic 15th hole plays to an elevated green following a tee shot over





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When planning the 18 holes for Lost Dunes, I encountered several design problems. The foremost worry was Interstate 94—the main traffic artery from Chicago to anywhere in Michigan—and the traffic noise it produced. I tried to reduce the highway's impact by avoiding holes parallel with the traffic, using the highway underpass only once during the 18-hole round. In the end, the first seven holes and the practice range were located on the east side of the highway by the entrance, and the remainder of the course on the secluded west side, which can be reached by an underpass.

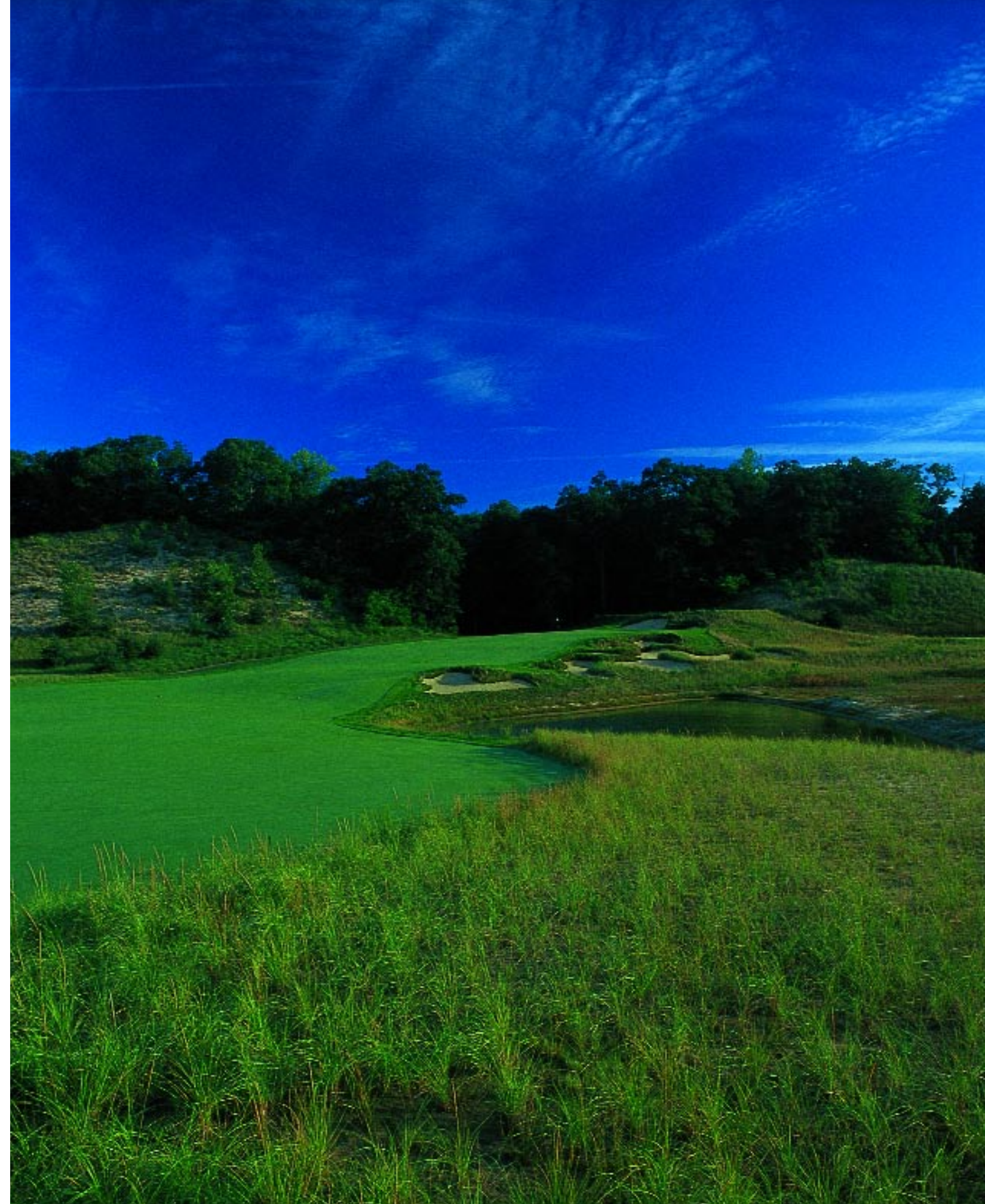
The clubhouse, designed by Chicago-based John Chipman & Associates, was situated between a shallow pond and a wooded wetland conservation easement. It is the perfect location: a secluded setting away from the highway, overlooking the ninth and eighteenth greens. And as it turned out, it was the only use for this narrow strip of land since it was not wide enough for a fairway.

With this initial framework for the 18 holes in place, the driving force behind the layout was to use the existing features around the edges of the property as effectively as possible. The mining company created a very flat interior with some large lakes; and the only real topographic features were on



the perimeter—close to the highway or back in the corners—where the mining company didn't want to dig. Many of the greens and tees were placed around these natural features. The first tee and seventh green sit atop a small dune, which was expanded with fill so the trees could be preserved as a buffer from the adjacent highway; the second green is tucked partially behind a small dune, which was left intact at the edge of the put-

■ *Above Top* The long 8th hole is buffered from the highway by a steep bank and mature hardwoods. *Above* On the plan of the course, the entrance drive winds across the first seven holes, providing a dramatic first impression of golf. *Opposite Page* Dune grass, water, and sand all prominently figure into the challenge of Lost Dunes.



“THERE WERE ALSO ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES. WETLANDS WERE AVOIDED OR DESIGNED OVER TO AVOID PERMITTING DELAYS...”



ting surface; and the eleventh green is set in a wooded bowl close to the highway.

But even in the center of the property, we used the landscape's natural features. The land in the first fairway was almost flat, except for one abrupt four-foot rise. By locating this feature at the distance where people's tee shots are likely to land and carving a dramatic bunker into the slope at the left edge of the fairway, it doesn't appear as a flat hole.

The other main feature of the property were the two large lakes, plus a third smaller one which had to be created to generate fill material for the fairways. I normally avoid digging water hazards on my courses because more distinctive-looking difficulties can be designed with contour and sand. But when beautiful water features already exist, I'd be foolish not to use them; balance then becomes the main objective. I tried to use the water to the right of some holes and to the left of others, either diagonally or parallel to the line of play. By doing this, threatening drives and approach shots were alternated throughout the 18 holes.

There were also environmental challenges. Wetlands were avoided or designed around to avoid permitting delays; other areas were so close to groundwater that they had to be filled 1-2 feet to support turfgrass. But the biggest obstacle was rose pink, a wildflower scattered intermittently over the site (it is a "threatened" flower in Michigan).

■ *Above* The 13th green sits in a secluded corner closest to Lake Michigan.  
*Right* With native grasses to define the fairways instead of mounding, views across the course could be left open.





■ *Above* The informal, rugged edge of the bunkers blend into the landscape and reduces maintenance costs.

Early in the planning process, I asked environmental engineers to mark up a map of the property with red for areas where we'd never get permission to place holes and yellow where it could be done after a great deal of work. (It came back looking like an early Jackson Pollock—a few big red blotches and yellow marks sprinkled all over it). After studying the map, there was no way to avoid the wildflower rose pink entirely. Three or four mitigation areas were set aside for replacing the rose pink that needed to be pulled out. In the end, with the existing wetlands, the conservation easement set aside, and the protected 'critical dunes' around the perimeter, the 255-acre property was just barely enough space for Lost Dunes.

The stark contrast of a manicured fairway and sandy waste makes Lost Dunes a striking golf course to the casual observer. But no golf course can be successful if it fails to provide an interesting game, and for me, that lies in the detailing of greens and bunkers. These variously-sized greens, which have multiple levels and have different interior contours, give the course its variety so no two holes feel the same. Depending on which part of the green the hole is cut in, a different type of shot or angle of approach may be rewarded from one day to the next. This is especially valued at a private club which has members that play the course several days in a row and appreciate how to play the hole differently depending on the setup.

In the end, every project is a product of the people involved. At Lost Dunes, four others deserve partial credit—Tom Mead, my on-site associate; Joel Prince, the director of golf and project manager;

shaper Jerame Miller, the art student turned bulldozer operator who sculpted the greens; and most of all, the client, Jeff Shearer.

One of the great joys of my job is getting to play the finished product in the years ahead. Although Lost Dunes is a four-hour drive from home, I look forward to making the trip often. It may be the best course I've done yet but it isn't perfect. Like today's golfers, I am still searching for that perfection.

**Project:** *An 18-hole golf course at 9300 Red Arrow Highway, Bridgman, Michigan*

**Size of Landscaped Area:** *255 acres*

**Hardscape:** *Asphalt golf paths*

**Softscape:** *Bentgrass, fine fescue rough, dune grass*

**Approximate Cost:** *\$2.2 million (entire golf course construction budget)*

**Golf Course Architect:** *Tom Doak and Tom Mead of Traverse, Michigan-based Renaissance Golf Design*

**Clubhouse Architect:** *John Chipman, Chipman Adams Ltd., Park Ridge, IL*

**Project Contractor:** *Landscapes Unlimited, Lincoln, Nebraska*

**Environmental Engineer:** *Resource Management, Grand Haven, MI*