

By Michael Hiller : Published for Dallas AG March 2010

## Trail Mix



**The odd thing about playing golf** in Alabama, a state in which I know almost nobody, is how identical it is to playing golf on a course at which you know everybody.

So it was recently, on more than a handful of almost-too-beautiful golf courses on the tail edge of the Appalachian Mountains near Birmingham, where time just seemed to pause then release in a long, slow drawl.

Golf bag attendants were quick with a greeting, then whisked our clubs to electric carts standing ready nearby. In the pro shop, we spent too much on a hat and a shirt, and still walked out without a yardage book. And then, of course, on the first tee box, while we were waiting for the group in front of us to mark their balls or play their mulligans or whatever it was they were doing with their ... wait a minute. Something wasn't quite right. The cart girls and the wide-open fairway would have to wait, apparently, while these guys finished arguing. Match play? Wolf? Skins? Nope. College football. Auburn versus Alabama. What else could it have been in this gridiron-crazed part of the Deep South?

Despite what you may think, we're not all that different, Texas and Alabama. Golfers you meet along the way – in barbecue joints and convenience stores, hotels or parking lots – will tell you that football and bass fishing are still the big draws in these parts, but they're quick to tell you that golf is steadily gaining ground, that it's no longer a sport reserved for the country club set.

"A lot has changed since 1990," a local golfer told me. That was the year the PGA Championship at Birmingham's Shoal Creek Country Club erupted into a firestorm over racial discrimination at the club.

Much of that growth has come from the development of the state's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, a sort of public-private venture funded by the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the pension fund for public employees in the state. The Trail's first course opened in 1992 and has since blossomed into a bouquet of 26 courses – 468 holes at 11 locations across Alabama – and the best collection of public courses in America. The Trail takes its name from golf course architect Robert Trent Jones, who, with his team of designers, created each of the courses.

During my visit, I ran into several golfers who admitted that the quality of public golf in Alabama was putting a strain on private clubs.

"I can tell you that I know many people who have left their private clubs and started playing on the Trail instead," admitted one golf pro I met along the way.

The Golf Trail snakes from the wetlands and woods near the Gulf Coast, up through the rolling hills and piney forests of central and northern Alabama. All of the courses on the Trail are within 15 minutes of a major interstate highway and within a two-hour drive of the Trail course closest to it. Green fees at most of the Golf Trail courses average \$50 and peak at \$64, which has put pressure on the state's other public courses to keep prices in check.

If the Golf Trail were stretched from one hole to the next, end-to-end, the holes on the Trail would extend 100 miles. And that's leaving out some worthy courses across the state not affiliated with the Trail. Clearly that's too much territory to cover in a week for even the most ambitious golfer.

On a trip late last fall, I focused instead on a handful of courses – some on the Trail and some off – in the northern and central portions of the state. Together, they could be grouped into a loose cluster around Birmingham.

It would be easy to drive through this state and think, "Hey, that would be a perfect place for a golf course," but, really, the entire state would make a really good golf course.

Up in the northwest corner of Alabama, for example, in Muscle Shoals (an area better known as the home of Helen Keller and for a famous recording studio that cut hits by Aretha Franklin, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Duane Allman), the Fighting Joe Golf Course is now a star.

Part of the RTJ Golf Trail, Fighting Joe opened in 2004 as the first course in the world to unspool more than 8,000 yards. Who in the world needs to play an 8,072-yard golf course from its tips? Even from the third of six tee boxes, the course measures 6,778 yards. Yep, Fighting Joe is long, a parkland course that rides along the Tennessee River and full of WYSIWYG golf. All the obstacles and challenges are easily visible, so the challenge isn't so much finding your way to the green as it is figuring out a way to get there without blowing your handicap. I couldn't.

Fighting Joe's brother, the Schoolmaster, is slightly less threatening from the tips – 7,971 yards – but that turned out to be wishful thinking. Tree-lined fairways and rolling hills follow the natural topography of the riverbanks as they wind to a finish on a high bluff that overlooks the Tennessee River.

Heading south to the center of the state, I stopped in the town of Oneonta, a half-hour outside Birmingham, to see what golfer and course designer Jerry Pate has created. Limestone Springs Golf Club sits in a deep valley between two impressive mountains. The tree-lined fairways make you feel like you're playing deep in a forest peppered with lakes and wild undulations. The course has been open barely 10 years but already feels mature. With green fees between \$49 and \$99, the semi-private course is a good bet, especially if you're looking for a diversion from the Golf Trail.

Hopping back on the Golf Trail on the edge of Birmingham, I found two must-plays – Oxmoor Valley's Ridge Course and Ross Bridge.

Of the three 18-hole courses at Oxmoor Valley, you'll want to play Ridge the most. The course rises then drops like runaway mine train, changing elevation nearly 150 feet in some places. Tall oaks and pines shade tee boxes and fairways in thick canopies, ideal if you're here on a steamy, summer day. The par-5 12th glides past a shelf of exposed shale rock, a reminder of Birmingham's historic association with iron and mining.

The big gun on the Golf Trail near Birmingham is Ross Bridge, a short drive from Oxmoor Valley. Ross Bridge is long. Really long. At 8,191 yards from its impossibly far back tees, Ross Bridge is the third longest golf course in the world. What does that length buy you? An expensive round, for one thing. Green fees from now until mid-November run \$136, the highest on the Golf Trail. As the public golf jewel in this part of the state, the tee sheet stays full. A round of golf can stretch out to five hours. Fortunately, beverage carts are easy to flag down.

As with most of the Golf Trail courses, the RTJ team built Ross Bridge on an exceptional parcel of land. The parkland-style layout splays across rolling terrain pockmarked by forests in some places and wide-open prairie in others, even toying with the edges of two lakes joined by an 80-foot waterfall. There is absolutely nothing easy about Ross Bridge. OK, maybe one thing: There's an excellent Renaissance hotel on the property, which makes

kicking back after an exhausting round worth any pain you may have had to endure on the course.

You could easily wind up your Alabama swing at Ross Bridge and head home from Birmingham. But don't. Instead, find the time to play at least two of the three 18-hole Golf Trail courses at Grand National in Auburn-Opelika, near Auburn University. You can then return to Birmingham or head to Atlanta (the two are about equidistant) to catch a flight home.

Of the three courses at Grand National, the Links Course is the best of the lot. But make time to play the 18-hole Short Course. More than half the holes play along the banks of 600-acre Lake Saugahatchee. The 18-hole single-shot layout is one of the finest short courses in the country.

On my visit, I was paired on the Short Course with two sandbagging scratch golfers and the Mayor of Opelika, an amiable fellow who had probably never met a golfer he didn't like.

Halfway into our round, the Mayor and I were down six strokes to our opponents, a match the Mayor seemed all-too-eager to accept.

"How could you bet straight-up against these guys," I asked the Mayor. "We're running out of money."

"Nah, don't worry", replied the Mayor. "I'm the Mayor! I'll call one of the bank presidents and tell him to open up the vault."

Sounds just like home, doesn't it?

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