

Alabama's RTJ Golf Trail provides a true test

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Courtesy RTJ Golf Trail

Nos. 9 (foreground) and 18 at Ross Bridge

By **James Achenbach**

Monday, February 22, 2010

PRATTVILLE, Ala. – We are standing on the first tee of the Judge Course at Capitol Hill, and we are frightened out of our FootJoys. That happens a lot on Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail.

From the back tees, we face 415 yards of terror, starting with an intimidating 200-foot drop to a fairway that looks about as wide as a garden path and is guarded by water on the right and something resembling a swamp on the left.

Head pro Will Fisher assures us the fairway "is much wider than it looks," but I'm not buying it. The danger here is real and enormous – a foreshadowing of what is to come.

Before you get some headstrong notion that you're going to plow through each and every one of the Judge's 7,794 yards like Alabama tailback Mark Ingram on his way to winning the Heisman Trophy, consider this: The course has three watery, all-carry par 3s that tip out at 229, 231 and 256 yards. You'll be scared straight to the forward tees, and no one will think less of you.

The Alabama Golf Trail, as it is commonly called, was built by the people – it was funded by the Retirement Systems of Alabama, whose members are retired teachers and state employees – for the people. It's accessible both in location – the 11 Trail stops typically are convenient to major highways – and in cost: Green fees range from \$45 to \$64 at 22 of the 26 courses (not including a \$16 cart fee).

It's readily playable for average players, provided they pick the right tees. The first thing visitors notice is the muscular nature of the Trail. Land for the Trail was donated, apparently in portions as generous as a Southern barbecue. Two courses – Ross Bridge in Hoover and Fighting Joe in Florence – stretch to more than 8,000 yards, and eight other courses play more than 7,400.

"I've had people who insist on playing (the back tees), and they can't even reach the fairway," says Jason Vaughn, head professional at The Shoals in Florence. "Some of those carries are 275 or 280 yards to get to the fairway."

Even the Trail's seven par-3 layouts – four 18-holers and three nine-holers – defy their moniker "Short Courses." At Silver Lakes in Gadsden, the back-tee yardages are 232, 192, 225, 236, 199, 254, 186, 211 and 212. Elsewhere, you'll find a handful of "short" holes that stretch to more than 250 yards.

If you're bringing plenty of game to Alabama, try this rota: Play Fighting Joe, the Judge, Ross Bridge and the Links Course at Grand National in Opelika. If you break 300 over those 72 holes, you should quit your day job and send



Courtesy RTJ Golf Trail

No. 1 at the Judge Course at Capitol Hill

Bomb's away

The 10 longest courses on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail in Alabama:

1. Ross Bridge, Hoover: 8,191 yards

in your application for PGA Tour Q-School. My goal was more modest. I hoped to break 80 in each round. I failed.

"This is God's country, son," says Gary Fuller, mayor of Opelika, home to Grand National. "If you thought He played all the time at Pebble Beach, you were wrong. He plays here, although His handicap went up when He started hanging out in Alabama."

None of this, however, is meant to suggest that all of the Trail courses are as big and ornery as the Crimson Tide's defense. Various Trail sites have hosted the LPGA, Champions and Nationwide tours and the NCAA Championship, but they're plenty accommodating to the humble masses who are happy to break 90.

Consider 72-year-old Thomas St. Pierre of Manahawkin, N.J., who recently finished playing every course on the Trail – twice. He got a Trail Passport, the visitor's discount card, and traveled through Alabama on a north-to-south route, a distance of some 400 miles, then turned around and headed back to the north.

"When I first told my friends I was going to Alabama to play golf, they looked at me like I was drunk," St. Pierre said. "Now they want to go with me."

More than 530,000 rounds were played on Trail courses in 2009, and more than half of those came from out-of-staters such as St. Pierre. The Trail has become one of the best marketing tools for a state not usually found on the "A" list of tourist destinations. Since the Trail debuted in 1992, Alabama tourism revenues have grown from less than \$2 billion annually to more than \$9 billion. At some point this year, the Trail is expected to record its 10 millionth round.



Courtesy RTJ Golf Trail

No. 18 at Fighting Joe

I did my part, playing every hole on the Trail during a golf-immersion trip in November. What struck me, as a Trail first-timer, was not just the girth of the courses, but the variety. (One gripe: That can't be said of the clubhouses, which are as mundane as the courses are memorable. There are two basic clubhouse designs, so there is a "Groundhog Day" experience as you travel from one Trail stop to the next.)

The Appalachian Mountains, which cut diagonally from the northeast into the center of the state, create some theatrical settings. The elevated tees at Silver Lakes in Gadsden provide stunning views of the Appalachian foothills, and at Birmingham's Oxmoor Valley, a 54-hole complex set on former U.S. Steel mining land, 150-foot elevation changes are not uncommon.

Just down the road from Oxmoor Valley at Ross Bridge, a Champions Tour site, the ninth and 18th greens at Ross Bridge are framed by an old gristmill and a waterfall that drops 80 feet.

But for sheer drama, it's hard to top the panorama from the 18th hole of Fighting Joe, situated on a bluff overlooking the Tennessee River. It's an odd finishing hole, being a par 3, but the spectacle as you walk off the 18th green will leave you wanting more.

2. The Shoals (Fighting Joe), Florence: 8,092 yards
3. The Shoals (Schoolmaster), Florence: 7,971 yards
4. Capitol Hill (Judge), Prattville: 7,794 yards
5. Capitol Hill (Senator), Prattville: 7,726 yards
6. Highland Oaks (Highlands 9/Marshwood 9), Dothan: 7,704 yards
7. Silver Lakes (Heartbreaker 9/Backbreaker 9), Anniston: 7,674 yards
8. Hampton Cove (River), Huntsville: 7,667 yards
9. Lakewood (Azalea), Point Clear: 7,504 yards
10. Cambrian Ridge (Sherling 9/Canyon 9), Greenville: 7,427 yards