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Lake Placid is synonymous with golf, really

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You hear Lake Placid and you think: Winter Olympics, skiing, ice-skating and all that snow and cold stuff. Fair enough.

But golf? Whaddaya, nuts? No, as a matter of fact.

A lot of golf is played in Lake Placid, N.Y., and its immediate environs. Indeed, the game had a foothold there before people began to journey to this Adirondack resort to tie wooden boards on their feet and put their life and limbs up for grabs.

Would you believe that from Lake Placid, born and raised, came one of America's greatest professional golfers -- winner of a U.S. Open and Masters (and loser of each in a playoff, as well)? His name was Craig Wood. And would you believe, even further, that Ben Hogan came to Lake Placid one summer to work on the hook that was keeping him from becoming *Ben Hogan*? True. One summer in the late 1930s he spent a couple of weeks under the eye of "Hyke" Terrell, a local pro with a big reputation for curing what ails golf swings.

Walter Hagen and Joe Kirkwood Sr. played an exhibition in Lake Placid in 1922 -- the same year The Haig won the British Open. One of the Hagen/Kirkwood competitors was Seymour Dunn, a member of one of Scotland's most anointed golf families. Dunn spent most of his career in the United States. He taught in a studio in New York City, built courses, wrote a classic book of instruction and had a clubmaking factory in Lake Placid.

Lake Placid has a lot of golf history. And why not? Once the snow melts and the temperature gets into the 60s and 70s, it's a beautiful place to visit, let alone play golf. The countryside is beautiful -- plenty of mountains, lakes, streams and thick woods to wander. There's plenty of good food and drink, as well. It may be a shortish season -- lasting from mid-May usually through the end of September and with a bit of luck into an exceptionally colorful autumn -- but while it's on, it's a good place to tee it up.

Where? There are 99 holes distributed among four courses in Lake Placid alone.

Craig Wood Golf Course: This is a municipal operation not far from downtown Lake Placid. The course is in fine condition, and while relatively flat and uncomplicated, it is a nice, par-72 test at 6,554 yards. The course sits in a meadow-like expanse of green near the base of the mountains and offers a very pleasing visual ambiance. Seymour Dunn designed the Craig Wood in 1925 and it's a good place to get your game in shape for tougher duty elsewhere.

Lake Placid Resort Golf Club: This is the largest operation in the area. It has a hotel located on top of a hill in the center of town, and its three courses -- the 18-hole Links, 18-hole Mountain, and a 9-hole Executive -- are not very far away. The resort features a well-conditioned putting green in front of the hotel.

There's lots of history, here. The resort was founded in 1895 by Melvil Dewey, of Dewey Decimal System fame. In 1901 he commissioned Alex Findlay, a legendary Scots émigré who came to the United States about the time the game got here, to build the Mountain Course. This was remodeled a bit by Alister MacKenzie, whose other works in golf architecture include Cypress Point and Augusta National. So, the Mountain Course has a considerable pedigree.

It was continued when Mr. Dewey assigned Seymour Dunn to build the Links, in 1909. Dunn, by the way, was the director of the Lake Placid club for 21 years.

The Links, as its name implies, is a Scottish-style layout -- fairly flat -- but it runs to over 6,700 yards and plays to a par of 71. It's lush and has plenty of good bunkering and slippery greens with undulation -- not to mention, superb views of the Adirondacks everywhere you turn. It was designed by Dunn and has been described by one of the major golf publications as like "playing in Scotland without the airfare." It is a very nice place to play golf for all levels of players.

The Mountain course, which measures 6,216 yards and plays to a par of 70, is shorter than the Links but is, of course, hillier. Quite a bit, in fact. You get a good sense of this from the clubhouse, an Adirondack-style lodge set on a hill overlooking the course and New York's highest peaks, Mt. Marcy and Mt. Colden.

The Executive, also known as Pristine, has seven par 3s in the 90- to 200-yard range, and two par 4s of over 260 yards. It's an enjoyable way to sharpen the short game, as all executive layouts are.

Saranac Inn Course: The course was once part of the celebrated Saranac Inn, which in its heyday -- the 1920s -- was equivalent to such watering holes for the affluent as the Greenbriar and the Homestead. The hotel is long gone, but the course remains and it is a real beauty. It was in mint country-club condition on a recent visit and at \$55 with a cart, a real steal.

Dunn did the course, and considered it his "masterpiece." There aren't a lot of bunkers or water hazards, but the lay of the land, which Dunn kept pretty much intact, offers all the golf you want. The par-72 course runs to 6,631 yards, features fast, bent greens and has knock-out views from everywhere.

The course is on the upper Saranac Lake, which is about a 20-minute drive from Lake Placid. If you can manage it, try staying in one of the 10 rooms that are available just a few steps from the pro shop and first tee. It's hard to imagine anything better than getting up on a fine June morning and stepping out of your room onto this splendidly conditioned golf course. Or hanging around the putting green in the evening, after dinner, then jumping into the sack a few yards away.

Whiteface Mountain Golf Course: This one is on Lake Placid, and is absolutely a gem. Walter Hagen designed it, along with John Van Kleeck, and it has a lot of the brio for which Hagen was famous. The par-72 layout measures 6,450 yards from the back tees but never mind the numbers. This one is special. It starts out extremely narrow and short, as well as a little funky, then opens up into a pastureland course, and finishes up back in the trees with some shortish, narrow holes. It's a terrific deal at \$50 with a cart or \$36 if you want to walk and carry or pull. It's a mere \$20 after 2 p.m., too. The pro is J. Peter Martin, an interesting guy who has written a good book on the history of golf in Adirondacks.

So there you have it -- golf in and around Lake Placid. The town itself is more or less quaint, and it must be said, has a lot of skiing character to it even in summer. The high, swooping structure from which the Olympic ski jumpers launch themselves into the air can be seen from almost everywhere.

For high-level food there is the Mirror Lake Inn, a three-star restaurant with excellent cuisine, including venison. The lobby and side rooms are warmly woody and carpeted. The Inn features old-fashioned style, no glitz.

Across the street is The Cottage, which doesn't have quite the same ambiance and is mostly a lunch spot, but it is quite nice in every way. A good variety of different foods is available throughout Lake Placid in sports bars, diners and ethnic restaurants.

And if you really want to go upper, upper class there is a place called The Point, which is a seven-room inn that lets you stay for \$1,200 a night. A French chef does the bacon and eggs. And wherever you go on the grounds -- to the dock for a boating excursion or a walk in the woods -- your favorite beverage will be immediately at hand. They ask you at check-in what it is, and regardless of whether it's champagne, bourbon or 7-Up, it is there every where you go. .

If your budget isn't quite as expansive, there are many very nice hotels, from the Lake Placid Resort to the Northwoods Inn to Howard Johnson.

History is abundant in the area, as well. Robert Louis Stevenson lived and wrote in a cottage on Saranac Lake. John Brown, the famous abolitionist, owned a farm outside Lake Placid and was buried there after he was hanged in Virginia for his assault on the U.S. arsenal at Harper's Ferry. A fine statue of Brown is on the grounds of his farm, which includes a museum.

You'll probably drive to Lake Placid but it's mostly interstate -- and where it isn't, the roads are pretty. For all the information you need, call the Lake Placid/Essex County Visitors Bureau, at 800-447-5224, or check out www.lakeplacid.com

Editor's note: *Historian Al Barkow appears every month on GolfWeb and PGATOUR.COM.*

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