




Home / Articles / Feature Stories / Year in review: My five-star golf courses in 2014

Reviewing 2014: Golf travels were replete with five-star courses

Share this article: [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [e](#)

Comments: [»](#)


 By Mike Bailey
 Senior Staff Writer
 Dec 22, 2014

Okay, I have to admit, what constitutes a five-star golf course for me might be different than other critics. Perhaps that's why in 2014 I gave five stars to 13 golf courses. Perhaps it was a bit generous, but I had a lot of fun playing every one of them.

I look at golf courses the same way I do films, almost purely from an enjoyment factor. After all, isn't that why we play golf or go to the movies?

The questions I ask are: Can I remember all or most of the holes after playing it just once? Could I play this golf course every week for the rest of my life and enjoy it? Is it challenging from the right tees?

It doesn't have to be playable for every level, but it shouldn't be so hard that only scratch players or professionals can get through it. With that said, I gave Erin Hills near Milwaukee a high five, and it's really difficult, especially in the wind. But it's so incredibly breathtaking and interesting that I didn't care about my score.

More factors: How scenic is the course? Are there ocean or mountain views, rolling terrain and elevation change? How interesting are the greens complexes?

Conditioning is important, but it's down the list for me. Quite frankly, Americans put too much stock in it, which is one of the reasons I think Chambers Bay near Seattle hasn't been universally lauded. I like a golf course to play firm and fast, and a little brown doesn't bother me at all. And I really enjoy courses that are walkable, even when taking a cart.

The difference between a five-star and four-star golf course for me is that the five-star course scores high in most of if not all the categories above. Obviously, I played some real gems in 2014. Here's a look:

Five-star golf courses played in 2014

Straits Course at Whistling Straits, Sheboygan, Wisc.: A true bucket list course, I found everything about the Straits Course enjoyable. Incredible views, fantastic walk, and it actually looked more intimidating than it was to play, which you won't often hear me say about Pete Dye. (I only lost one golf ball.) I don't care that it's not natural. It was pure joy, from the caddie experience to the last putt.

University of Georgia Golf Course, Athens, Ga.: This was a real pleasant surprise for me, sort of a poor man's Augusta and a fantastic Robert Trent Jones layout. The greens, the hills, and the holes have an Augusta National feel to them. Good but not impeccable conditioning, which was just fine with me, especially at \$50 or so to play.

Mountain Course at Bear Mountain Resort, Victoria, B.C., Canada: Views abound at this super interesting Nicklaus design. Elevated tees, superior conditions, the course is a roller coaster ride through the most mountainous golf course site on Vancouver Island.

Old White TPC at Greenbrier Resort, White Sulphur Springs, W.V.: A renovation of this original CB Macdonald and Seth Raynor design has put Old White over the top. With elements of Scottish links design combined with classic American golf, the course is in a resort setting unlike anywhere else in the world. A definite bucket list play.

Bethpage State Park, Red Course, Farmingdale, NY: The locals will tell you the Red ranks right up there with the famed Black Course. In fact, if the Red got the same attention as the two-time U.S. Open course, it might be on par with the Black, and it's a little more playable and much cheaper to play..

Chambers Bay Golf Course, University Park, Wash.: There's nothing else in America like Chambers Bay, next year's U.S. Open course, and I thought Robert Trent Jones Jr. knocked it out of the park. It's walking only and quite a walk at that. This is a links players delight coupled with great scenery and quirks like the trains that run along the course.

Erin Hills Golf Club, Erin, Wisc.: Another future U.S. Open course (2017), Erin Hills is a hybrid of links and target golf. It's pretty difficult, but it's also one of the most beautiful and unique golf courses in America. The views on the horizon never stop, there are elevated tees everywhere, and you'll never get bored. The ninth is one of the most difficult short par 3s you'll ever play.

University of Michigan Golf Club, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Classic Alister MacKenzie at its best, the University of Michigan Golf Course is oh so interesting. In fact, the greens alone are enough to keep you coming back. Every putt is an adventure (in a good way), and no two holes are remotely alike.

Pete Dye Golf Club, Bridgeport, W.V.: This is one of the top three Pete Dye designs I've ever played. It's actually fairly generous off the tee, but progressively more challenging as you get closer to the greens. Plus, it's on an incredible site with elevation change, lakes and great views. The old mining tunnel that you can drive through to the seventh hole is also a nice touch.

River Course at Blackwolf Run, Kohler, Wisc.: While the Straits Course at Whistling Straits gets most of the press, Blackwolf Run is a must-play, too. Completely different than the Straits, it actually looks a bit more natural – because it is. The holes around the river valley may be the most scenic, but the course features one imaginative hole after another. Greens are tricky and fast.

Clear Creek Tahoe Golf Club, Carson City, Nev.: Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw never whiff as designers, and they certainly hit a home run on one of their rare mountain courses here. With great views, it's just one good hole after another in perfect condition. The greens may be the most challenging part of the golf course with a few buried elephants. Also surprisingly walkable.


Makai Course at Princeville Resort, Princeville, Hawaii: The difficult Prince Course, which is turning private, gets the accolades, but the Makai Course is actually prettier, in better shape and really a lot more fun. While visitors might look forward to the ocean holes, including the signature par-3 seventh, the inland holes are just as impressive. In fact, architect Robert Trent Jones II tabs the downhill par 3 third, an inland hole with mountain and ocean background, as his favorite, and I wouldn't debate him.

Monterey Peninsula Country Club, Pebble Beach, Calif.: If you can get on the private Dunes Course at Monterey Peninsula CC, do it. This is Pebble Beach golf at its finest, and when you reach the part that borders the beach, you'll want to take in all of it. Also, be sure to stop at the halfway house by the 10th hole for gourmet grub in one of the best golf settings in the world.

Dec 22, 2014

Share this article: [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [e](#)

Join the conversation




0 Comments

Sort [Subscribe](#) [RSS](#)

Related Links

- > [From New York to Kauai: Best pictures from my 2014 golf travels](#)
- > [Bagpipes offer a taste of Scotland on the golf course: Enjoy the sounds of the Auld Sod in the U.S.](#)
- > [Swing away: Top 10 tips for a perfect golf trip](#)


Mike Bailey
 Senior Staff Writer
 Mike Bailey is a senior staff writer based in the Houston area. Focusing primarily on golf in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean and Latin America, he contributes reader reviews, travel stories and features as well as the occasional equipment review. An award-winning writer and past president of Texas Golf Writers Association, he has more than 20 years in the golf industry. Before accepting his current position in 2008, he was on staff at PGA Magazine, The Golfweek Group and AvidGolfer Magazine. Follow Mike on Twitter at [@AccidentGolfer](#).

Related Articles

- > [Road Trip: Taking on Cog Hill and Whistling Straits](#)
- > [Good luck trying to tame The Bull at Pinehurst Farms near Kohler, Wis.](#)