

Gaylord: The Myrtle Beach of Midwest

BY MIKE TERRELL

Special to the Record-Eagle

Myrtle Beach was the first area of the country to successfully market golf as a region.

In recent years, the Robert Trent Jones Alabama Golf Trail and regional golf destinations in Arizona and Florida have bombarded the Midwest with marketing propaganda designed to lure Great Lakes golfers to those areas of the country.

The Gaylord Golf Mecca, a marketing consortium of resorts, golf courses and lodging properties from the surrounding five-county area, stands alone as the true heartland copy of that Myrtle Beach concept.

"It's true," said Paul Beachnau, executive director of the Gaylord Area Convention & Tourism Bureau. "There is no other group in the Midwest doing what we're doing. We are the only true Myrtle Beach-like operation, and it works really well for our five-county region."

The Gaylord Golf Mecca stretches along either side of I-75, from Black Lake Golf Club near Onaway on its northern boundary, Thunder Bay Resort near Hillman and Garland Resort near Lewiston along its eastern boundary to Fox Run just south of Grayling and Lakes of the Woods Resort on the western boundary.

The Mecca operates as an individual entity and is not part of the Tourism Bureau, Beachnau said.

"The participating properties fund (the Mecca) through a self-assessment. We have a board, an operating budget, and I help administer the group. It works well with my duties as Tourism Bureau direc-

tor," Beachnau said.

"All of the other group marketing in Michigan is done through the Convention and Visitors Bureaus, but each one can market only the golf courses and resorts in their limited geographic boundary."

The Gaylord Golf Mecca is currently anchored by three resorts, 24 golf courses and 24 hotels within a 30-mile radius of the Alpine-accented city.

Some of the best golf course architects in the country have stamped their names on area links: Robert Trent Jones, Sr., his son Rees Jones, Tom Fazio, Rick Smith, Tom Doak, Jerry Matthews and PGA tour veteran Gary Koch, to name just a few.

The awards and accolades from leading industry publications have been numerous — top new courses, top 100 you can play, top 75 resorts in America, top 50 places to play for women — the list goes on.

"Golf Digest selected our region as one of the 12 best golf destinations in the

world," Beachnau said.

The Mecca came out of an aborted attempt to organize the whole northern part of the Lower Peninsula into a Myrtle Beach-type golf destination back in the mid-1980s.

A group called Par-GOLF had some limited success for about three years, but once matching state funds dried up, it dissolved.

At the time, recalled Dave Richards, CEO of Resort Golf Marketing who was then a principal of Par-GOLF, some of the resorts and top-end courses weren't willing to fund the effort by themselves.

"The concept was good, but we couldn't convince them to fund the marketing effort at the same level once the state matching funds dried up," he recalled. "At the outset, we were more interested in booking golf packages, but it evolved into more of a marketing effort."

The larger northern Michigan golf group split into three factions — the Northwest Michigan Golf Council, the Gaylord group and a group on the sunrise



Courtesy of Kevin Frisch

Treetops, Inc. is part of the Gaylord Golf Mecca and consists of four different courses.

side of the Lower Peninsula.

There was one more ill-fated attempt between the three groups to again merge into one, but in the end,

only the Gaylord group stayed together.

"We recognized that we could do more collectively to promote our region of the **PLEASE SEE PAGE 47**

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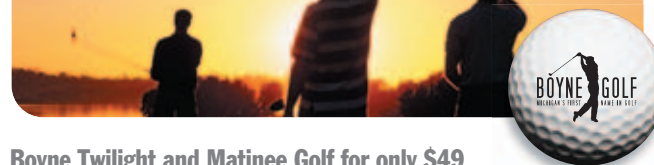
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