

# Northern exposure

## Shootout gives Gaylord a boost

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**GAYLORD** – It was the summer of 1999 when the fleet of trucks loaded with TV cameras and equipment came rolling into Otsego County for the first time.

The trucks had been dispatched by the ESPN cable network. The destination was Treetops Resort in Dover Township, northeast of Gaylord. The purpose was national TV coverage of the first-ever Par-3 Shootout, a two-day novelty event that pitted two of the top members of the PGA Tour and two of the top players of the Seniors Tour (now known as the Champions Tour) on the scenic but challenging Threetops Course at Treetops.

It would be a skins-type format and the hilly par-3 course would be the equalizer, assuring that any of the four golfers could win the most prize money.

The Shootout event was the brainchild of the late Harry Melling, the entrepreneur and visionary who converted Treetops Resort into one of the premier golfing destinations in the country and the man who helped to put the Gaylord Golf Mecca on the map.

Melling, with Treetops Director of Golf and famed swing instructor Rick Smith and Treetops Executive Vice President Jerry Albert, worked behind the scenes for three long years to put all the pieces together. Finally, with the approval of ESPN and the financial backing of corporate sponsor DLJ Direct, and the organizational aid provided by Terry Hanson of Hanson Entertainment based in Charlotte, N.C., all the details were ironed out and the green light was procured.

Sadly, Melling passed away on May 29 of 1999, just two months before his dream became a reality.

The inaugural two-day, 18-hole event was played on the warm Monday and Tuesday afternoons of July 26-27, and the foursome featured was a virtual who's who of the golf world: Lee Janzen, the popular 1997 Players Championship victor, and Phil Mickelson, the second-ranked player in the world, representing the PGA Tour; and the Golden Bear himself, Jack Nicklaus, and Raymond Floyd, one of the top money-earners of all-time, representing the Senior Tour.

Smith, who is now the majority owner of Treetops Resort, was largely responsible for bringing the four big names of golf to Otsego County for the Shootout (as he has been each year



**Phil Mickelson watches a tee shot at the Par-3 Shootout.**

since).

Janzen led wire-to-wire in the 1999 Shootout, earning \$260,000 of the \$540,000 in total prize money, followed closely by Mickelson (\$230,000). The Seniors Tour duo of Nicklaus (\$40,000) and Floyd (\$10,000) obviously didn't do as well as they hoped, but the irrepressible Floyd would return to Treetops the following year to earn the most prize money and gain some vindication for the elders.

ESPN broadcast the Par-3 Shootout via tape delay each evening that first year, a policy which has worked well and has continued in succeeding years.

The Shootout has gained in popularity and has become a yearly ritual for ESPN and for Treetops, of course, but no one knew if that would be the case when the event was getting under way. There were a lot more questions than answers in 1999. The network invested a lot of time and money into its coverage of the event, as did DLJ Direct and Treetops itself.

Would the investment be worth it? That was the big question prior to the start of it all. Would the Par-3 Shootout capture the imagination of the viewing public?

There was a pretty quick indication that the Shootout had sparked interest when the 1,400 gallery tickets available to the public sold out in a matter of days. Fortunately for everyone involved in planning and organizing the event, that same kind of interest carried over to the general public.

In TV parlance, the Shootout was a hit. This

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