

## Course Critic

Black Rock Country Club, Hingham, Massachusetts

By Ron Whitten  
GolfDigest.com exclusive

Golf Digest's Best New Private Course of 2003 was a course called The Club at Black Rock in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and I have no quarrel with that. It won fair and square, scoring highest in the collective opinion of Golf Digest panelists, who scrutinized over 150 new courses and judged them on the basis of five different architectural criteria.

But in 2003, there was another new club called Black Rock that I thought was just as good, and maybe even better. Yet Black Rock Golf Club in Hingham, Mass., on Boston's South Shore, didn't challenge for the top spot. Heck, it didn't even sniff a spot in the Top 10 among Best New, and I have no idea why it didn't. Having played both Black Rocks, I think the two are much closer in shot demands, scenery, satisfaction and yes, even surprises, than the 2003 survey indicates.



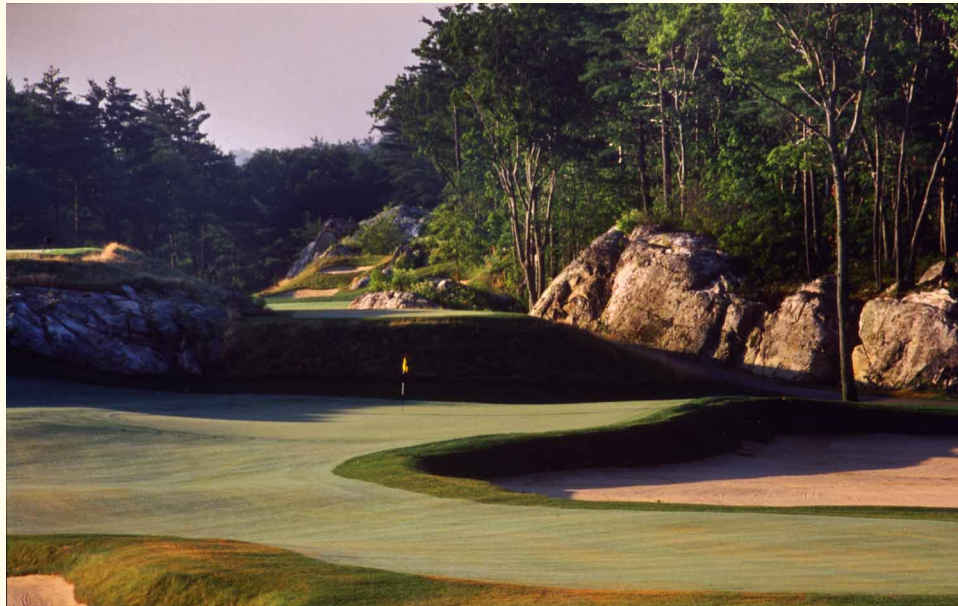
Hole # 1 and #10 at Black Rock.

The Idaho Black Rock was designed by Jim Engh in his now-familiar art deco style, with squiggly bunkers that frame recessed fairways and punchbowl greens. Most features exist to collect, or at least direct, golf shots. The result is fully contemporary New Age golf design.

The Massachusetts Black Rock was designed by Brian Silva, using his now-familiar style that blends the New England bunker style of Donald Ross with the geometric green complexes of Seth Raynor and the lines-and-angles strategies of Pete Dye to create what I call a fully contemporary Old School golf design. Brian was given a promising, if challenging, site – the old Margetts Quarry - and made the most of it. Spread over 200 acres, this was actually several small quarry pits, from which granite

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and quartz were mined, separated by stands of trees. He weaved holes around, between and even over rock outcroppings and boulders. The straight downhill par-4 13th, just 334 yards from a hilltop tee, has a fairway shaped like a pop bottle, between trees left and a mountain of rock to the right. The smart play would seem to be something less than driver off the tee, but the fairway, on this hole dubbed "Narrows" is very narrow at 210 yards off the tee. In truth, Silva wants golfers to hit driver, as the fairway widens out considerably past the bottle neck. For some, it's really a drivable par 4. But visually, with that rock looming on the right, it makes us play defensively instead of offensively. That makes it a great hole, and demonstrates how well Silva can play mind games with our golf games.



The 12th hole at Black Rock.

This Black Rock is well defined, as Silva scattered 108 bunkers randomly about. Typical is the 572-yard par-5 sixth which has a dozen bunkers, including a target one just 155 yards off the tee, one in the middle of the fairway complicating the second shot and three strip bunkers around the perched green that are described in the yardage book as "deep, deeper and deepest."

What makes this Black Rock particularly attractive is the exposed rock (most of it not black) on nearly every hole. The par-4 first green has a neat shelf of rock to the right. The 169-yard par-3 second, called "Moss Rock," is backdropped by outcrops, and there's a proposed new back tee for the par-4 third that will sit atop an escarpment. The short dogleg-left par-4 seventh turns around a vertical wall of granite, with a long strip bunker separating the fairway from the base of the wall. On the back nine, the dogleg-right 16th turns 90-degrees around a 50-foot-high wall of rock, augmented by manmade slabs on this occasion. It started life as a very weak 493-yard par 5, where good players carried the corner and had an 8-iron second shot. Now it's a 493-yard par 4, and it's surprising how much farther that corner now seems.

The 176-yard ninth is called "Redan" and, with its tilted sideways and front-to-back green, it plays like one. But I thought the 227-yard 12th, from elevated tees tucked back in the rocks, played even better and as an aim-for-a-spot-and-let-it-bounce par 3. Everything left of the green pitches down to it, unless you go too far left, where a steep-faced strip bunker separates the hole from a pond.

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I think this Black Rock is just as memorable as the one in Idaho. That one has a most unusual par-4 10th, where the fairway funnels so dramatically downhill from landing area to green that you can, and will, use putter from 150 yards out. But the Massachusetts Black Rock tops even that novelty hole with its 522-yard fourth, where Silva not only hid the green behind a grassed-over hill of rock, but designed it so that second shots funnel down to the hidden punchbowl green. It's called the "Green Monster," but rather than a baseball field, it brings to mind the horseshoe end of a football stadium. Imagine lofting a shot from outside the stadium over the rim, then having it bounce down the steps to a green at the goal line. That's what the approach on Black Rock's fourth is like, as fun and exciting as any par 5 you've ever played.



If Idaho's Black Rock has an advantage, it's that it sits on a hilltop overlooking Lake Coeur d'Alene. Boston's Black Rock has no such offsite vistas, and in fact, over the fence, on tree trunks along the right side of the par-4 eighth hole, there are x-rated signs posted by what must be the world's most disagreeable neighbor, who obviously resents the golf course and thinks golfers are !&\*#@% !s.

Could that simple disparity – sparkling blue water versus shockingly blue language – have been the difference in the results of the two Black Rocks in the 2003 Best New race? I can't believe so. I'm more inclined to think that Silva's design didn't generate more enthusiasm because he did it in his own backyard. Sometimes, architects, especially veteran, prolific ones like Silva, are underestimated by local golfers.

Idaho's Black Rock was a deserving winner, and will contend in the future in Best in State surveys and, who knows, maybe even 100 Greatest surveys. But I'll go on record as saying that Boston's Black Rock is deserving of a second look. It, too, should be a contender in future surveys.

The Details  
Black Rock Golf Club  
19 Clubhouse Dr.  
Hingham, Massachusetts 02043  
Private Club  
For membership information: 781-749-1919  
[www.blackrockcc.com](http://www.blackrockcc.com)

## Course Critic

Black Creek demands good shot-making



The 17th hole at Black Creek Club in Tennessee.

Ron Whitten

GolfDigest.com exclusive

Midway through my round at the new Black Creek Club in Chattanooga, I got to thinking about Alfred Hitchcock, who so dominated the suspense niche of motion pictures that even today directors pay homage to him. Some of those, notably the frame-by-frame remake of "Psycho" by Gus van Sant, seem pointlessly literal. But others, especially Brian dePalma's "Blowout" and "Body Double," carry on the great Hitchcock tradition, and even escalate the terror a bit, by substituting a power tool in place of a knife, for instance.

So it is with Black Creek, designer Brian Silva's homage to the early American golf architecture of C.B. Macdonald and his more prolific assistant Seth Raynor. Silva doesn't offer just a few passing references to Macdonald and Raynor during the round. He gives it full bore for 18 holes, and every so often, surpasses those masters at their own game.

Yes, there is a dead-on reproduction of Macdonald's famous Biarritz par-3 green, with a trench across the center so wide and deep it could have hidden a battery of Union soldiers. But Silva is less like van Sant than he is like dePalma. In fact, call him Brian deSilva. He created several original holes at Black Creek, but they're holes that Macdonald and Raynor could well have conceived were they still around today.

So you have to look hard to find any evidence of Silva's involvement. The only way Black Creek could look more like a real Macdonald-Raynor layout is if it existed in black & white. Every hole starkly reflects the geometric style of 80 years ago. Trapezoidal bunkers duckwalk across the landscape, their sand as flat as a bathmat, their banks as steep as the sides of a bathtub. Huge pedestal greens have right-angle corners so precise that the superintendent must be edging with a T-square. Features are so vast and broad that depth perception is thrown out of kilter.

But capturing the look of this particular architectural style would be of little consequence if Silva hadn't also captured the playing characteristics of it. This is where he far exceeded expectations. Black Creek pulls us back to the past, where I often feel the game belongs. His design is all about lines of play and angles of approach, because that's what Macdonald and Raynor were all about.

So you don't always feel comfortable aiming for the center of a fairway off the tee at Black Creek. Sometimes there's a bunker yawning at the landing zone. Other times there's a seductive one off to the side, pursing her lips with the whisper of a short cut, sneering if you don't take the bait.

At the short, downhill par-4 15th, it's the green itself that does the flirting, urging a bold direct shot over the corner of a water hazard. Turns out it's a gamble worth taking. Those who play safe, to the fat side of the wide fairway, find it drops precipitously down into a swale, leaving a short awkward pitch over a greenside bunker with the water hazard in back of the green. The smart play off the tee is to hit an iron in the direction of the green, just hugging the edge of the hazard, to leave a straightforward pitch.

You don't often fly a ball right at the flag at Black Creek and get rewarded. On a majority of the greens, you aim for a particular spot off to the side, then let the slope of the green feed the ball to the hole once it hits the ground. Good players, I was told, find Black Creek a bit frustrating the first few times around. As it should be for guys who normally treat flagsticks like backboards. For a hack like me, the design of Black Creek fits into my usual approach of tacking my way around a course. Playing the percentages led to some remarkably good fortune on several holes at Black Creek.

It takes a certain leap of faith to play much of this course, particularly on the 562-yard sixth (one of those Silva originals you'd swear was a copy of Macdonald), where the green is hidden behind of massive mound of tall fescue and deep bunkers and the only clue is a bull's eye target atop a pole in the distance. Never fear. The sixth has a 10,000 square-foot punchbowl green. Anything that clears the "wall" will be funneled down onto some part of the putting surface. Trust them.

Not since the debut of Sand Hills nearly eight years ago has there been a course that demands such a full range of shots, not just high and low, left and right, but also in the air and on the ground. It's called shotmaking, a lost art in this age of supersized sweet spots and gyroscopic golf balls. Black Creek's course conditions — dry Bermuda fairways, firm bent-grass greens — enhance the shotmaking by propelling stingers and bump-and-runs toward their destinations.

Black Creek is a residential development course. Normally, homes along fairways annoy me, but the box-like structures along fairways seem to fit right in with the linear nature of its course architecture. I suspect, too, that homeowners appreciate the absence of framing mounds that often hide a golf hole from view. If I have one gripe, it's the homes behind the fifth green. I simply don't think any house should be directly behind a green.

Black Creek is more authentic than some true Raynor designs like nearby Lookout Mountain or Fox Chapel in Pittsburgh or Mountain Lake in Florida, all of which had been emasculated by generations of tree-loving, bunker-filling green chairman, and all of which have undergone rescue attempts by Silva. He did his homework well.

Since Black Creek is a homage, the question often asked of Hitchcock devotees applies here. Is this a bold departure or simply a substitution for original ideas? I concluded it's a bit of both. Silva doesn't lack for ideas, but, quite frankly, there is nothing new in golf architecture, just new variations on old themes. He's used old themes before, but with a softer touch. Black Creek is his first course that uses abrupt angles to define both features and shots. If Black Creek is to be Silva's new "look," more power to him. It's nice to see a architect willing to embrace an earlier design style with the intention of preserving and enriching it.

Black Creek is a private course, but it is presently open to outside play on a limited basis for guests of the Bluff View Inn, a bed & breakfast in downtown Chattanooga. Book a room and play this course. It's a genuine treat.

### **The Verdict**

The name, taken from the stream that wanders through the property, is rather prosaic, but I love those initials. In the small lifespan of golf architecture, this may be the start of the BC era. On Golf Digest's 10 point scale (1 being Unacceptable, 5 being Good, 10 being Absolutely Perfect), I give Black Creek a 9.0.

### **The Details**

Black Creek Club  
4700 Cummings Cove Dr., Chattanooga, Tenn. 37419  
Website: [www.blackcreekclub.com](http://www.blackcreekclub.com)  
For more information: 423-822-2582  
Green fees: \$75  
Walking allowed anytime.



**The 4th hole at Red Tail.**

## Course Critic

Red Tail Golf Club, Devens, Mass.

By Ron Whitten  
GolfDigest.com exclusive

Fort Devens in Massachusetts no longer exists. An army facility dating back to 1917, it was once a city unto itself, housing 10,000 soldiers, with its own water and sewer systems, its own schools, its own airport. Just 35 miles west of Boston, it was both a training ground and stopping-off point for troops fighting in two World Wars. Before heading to Europe, General George Patton taught tank maneuvers there.

In the late 1980s, much of the soil beneath the fort's thousands of acres was found to be polluted, contaminated with the residue of war: arsenic, chromium, nickel, lead, asbestos, battery acid, waste oil and incinerator ash. It became

the focus of an enormous (and enormously expensive) clean-up, first by the military and, after the fort was decommissioned in 1995, as an EPA Superfund project.

It's now called Devens, Mass., an emerging community offering a Commerce Center, business park, private residences, wildlife refuge and a brand new public golf course.

The course is Red Tail Golf Club, and its creation demonstrates just how dramatic the redevelopment of the old fort really is. Fairways on the front nine run atop old barracks foundations, although you'd never guess it. The back nine is partly on an old ammunition storage site, where the Army had stripped the topsoil to eliminate mowing and thus potential sparks from mower blades, and floodlit the property every night. A bit of that heritage has been retained, but you needn't worry about unearthing a shell casing with your divot.

Red Tail was designed by Brian Silva, and it's one of his most imaginative yet, in part because of the constraints of the property (two nines separated by a good quarter mile) but mostly because the guy delights in continually pushing the design envelope. He's done courses inspired by Donald Ross, Seth Raynor and even Pete Dye in the past. Red Tail seems inspired by Alister Mackenzie, particularly in the spectacular nature and placement of its bunkers and the extraordinary contours on some of its greens.

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The course opens boldly with the first tee shot over a gravel pit and diagonal cross bunker. The next several holes work through rolling, tree-lined terrain to the 365-yard sixth, one of the most exciting short par 4s around. The fairway sits on a plateau, edged on the left by oblivion, a canyon of dense vegetation (and probably old military equipment). Silva padded the left side with a sprawling buffer bunker, but that also narrows the landing area, which is placed on a diagonal. A deep bunker on the right front edge of the green dictates the tee shot. The more you hug the buffer bunker and chasm on the left, the more the approach to the green opens up. Hit to the right, and you must carry that deep bunker at the green.

The seventh through ninth each have their own personalities too. I especially liked the deep chipping swale left of the ninth green. After a good strong par-5 to start the back nine, the 169-yard 11th demands a shot down into another old gravel pit to a pedestal green. It's a quarry hole reminiscent of the 17th at Black Diamond Ranch.

Then come three par 4s that seem mighty tight (but only in comparison to today's super-wide fairways; each was 40 yards wide or more). At 14, Red Tail begins what might be the best stretch of closing holes built this year.

From the elevated tees on the 440-yard 14th, the entire hole is visible, including its gigantic green. But once you've reached the fairway, the green has disappeared beyond a ridge. You hit uphill with blind faith, and find when you reach the green that it's an enormous punchbowl of bent grass. Anything fired within 25 yards of the correct line will likely bounce and roll onto the green. There's no guaranteed of an easy two-putt, but at least you're putting.

Next is the 216-yard 15th, over a small gravel pit and diagonal bunkers well short of the surface. The 413-yard 16th demands a straight tee shot to get past a tree line on the right, then an approach downhill to a wide but shallow "Mackenzie" green with distinct levels.

The 406-yard 17th also doglegs to the right, but the fairway here is girdled by broad waste areas of gravel. Off to the right are real ammunition bunkers, Quonset-type huts covered in soil, each with a concrete "blast wall" meant to contain any explosion. They're empty now, of course. A wicked slice could end up against, or even atop, one of them. I played conservatively down the left side from tee to green.

Red Tail's 18th is reachable par-5, 572 yards from the back tees (but downhill most of the way), 499 yards or less for the rest of us. Crank out a tee shot to catch the downslope and you might have an iron into the green. But it must carry the natural kettle hole pond that protects the putting surface. When I first saw the 18th (from the nearby 10th tee), I silently scoffed at the buffer bunker Silva had installed at the base of a hill short of the pond, but when I played the hole, my dribbled lay-up would have reached the pond had that bunker not stopped it.

Did I mention how spectacular the bunkers are? The fairway bunkers are big and bold with long fingers of grass, but you don't have to challenge them unless you want to shorten a hole. Silva used only a dozen bunkers around Red Tail's greens, but each is big and deep and each influences how you'll play the hole.

Alister Mackenzie would have been proud.

## The Verdict

High tail it to Red Tail. Between its Mackenzie bunkers and its military ones, it's a blast to play. On Golf Digest's 10 point scale (1 being Unacceptable, 5 being Good, 10 being Absolutely Perfect), I rate Red Tail Golf Club at 8.5.

## Course Critic

Worth the 'Pilgrim' age to Plymouth



The par-3 8th at Waverly Oaks Golf Club.

Photo: Ron Whitten

Ron Whitten

GolfDigest.com exclusive

*Golf Digest's Ron Whitten, the preeminent golf course architecture critic, reviews a course each week for GolfDigest.com*

Plymouth rocks.

The little Massachusetts town, on Route 3 as you travel from Boston to Cape Cod, is a mother lode of great golf, thanks to a riff of neat sand dunes and kettle holes deposited along the edge of Plymouth Bay. Within these sand ridges are several terrific courses. There's Plymouth Country Club, a short, quaint, beguiling Donald Ross design that's basically a private club but amenable to some outside play. There's the pine-lined Atlantic Golf Club, one of Mark Mungeam's early works, and Pinehills Golf Club, featuring a recently-opened Rees Jones extravaganza, with another 18 by Team Nicklaus due to open this fall. But my pick on this strip is Waverly Oaks Golf Club, created by Mungeam's partner Brian Silva.

Early in his career, Silva was enamored with Pete Dye's style, and he imitated Pete's pitch-dark pot bunkers ad nauseam, even when charged with replicating Donald Ross architecture. He's beyond that stage now. After 15 years of studying old Ross courses throughout New England, Silva finally figured out that there's as much merit in Donald's long flowing lines as in Pete's tiny piles of earth, and Waverly was his first design that reflected his change in attitude.

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Waverly is a crisp, clean design, where nearly every bunker fits perfectly into the land and no feature looks the least bit artificial. There were plenty of cuts and fills, to be sure, in creating this 18 on hilly ground, but the routing flows over the land like molasses without much indication that a million cubic yards of earth were shoved around. Waverly's greens hug the natural contours. You can, and should, roll the ball onto the par-3 third, as well as the par-4 fifth, the latter playing down a natural valley to a beautiful punchbowl green that nature provided and Silva unearthed.

But it's not all bump-and-run at Waverly Oaks. The par-3 eighth plays over an old sink hole to a green edged by the sort of serpentine bunker that Seth Raynor (another Silva favorite) made proud. It plays 207 from the back tees, but that's a mere chip shot compared to the 251-yard par-3 17th, which plays uphill over another sink hole, dubbed "The Black Hole." If there's a more eye-popping par 3 that doesn't involve water, I don't know of it.

By far the most controversial hole is the 370-yard ninth, shaped like a question mark with a pond in front of the tee and a green perched on a shelf some 50 feet above another pond. Some have called it a rinky-dink hole, unworthy of this course. I like it, precisely because it's so different. It's unlike any hole I've ever seen. The fairway's so big even I can hit it, but the second shot over the pond and up the hill is as hard as any on the course. On any course.

I can't leave Waverly Oaks without mentioning its bunkers. They look and feel like grand old Donald Ross things. Not just in their sizes and shapes (big amorphous things with beveled edges of grass) but in their placements. Rip-ping a handful of pages from Ross, Silva scattered bunkers all over the place, using artistic license instead of scientific principles. What's more, he positioned many of them — especially the fairway bunkers — perpendicular to the line of play — the way Ross used to do — instead of parallel to play. This is absolutely some of the best bunkering done on any new course in the past decade.

I may be leaving the impression that Waverly Oaks is one tough public course. Actually, it strikes a fine balance between beaut and brute. If you travel any distance to play this course, book a room. You'll want to play it more than once.

### The Verdict

On Golf Digest's 10 point scale (1 being Unacceptable, 5 being Good, 10 being Absolutely Perfect), I give Waverly Oaks an enthusiastic 8.3.

### The Details

Waverly Oaks Golf Club  
444 Long Pond Rd., Plymouth, Mass. 02360  
For tee times: 508-224-6016  
Green fees: \$85 every day, including cart.  
Walking allowed anytime.