

BY DEREK DUNCAN + RON WHITTEN In 1965, the great Dan Jenkins picked an All-Star team of golf holes for Sports Illustrated, The Best 18 Golf Holes in America, selected by a committee of one, although he allowed Ben Hogan a nod or two. What set Jenkins' list apart from other pretenders was a self-imposed restriction. His All-Star team, he said, couldn't have five quarterbacks and three tight ends. Each hole had to play the position it occupied on the real course: best first hole from among all starting holes in America, best second hole, and so on. His article later became an influential book, and today each club he featured still treats Dan's selection as a papal blessing. ▶ Jenkins joined Golf Digest in 1985, and in the early 1990s it was suggested that he reprise his list, selecting from among golf holes that didn't exist in '65. He was lukewarm, partly because he hadn't played many of the newly built country-clubs-for-a-day, or the hundreds of O.B.-laden tract-home layouts or even any of the ultra-private, guard-gated, one-owner Augusta National wannabes. But he soon returned to the game with renewed en-

AMERICA'S BEST 18 HOLES

SINCE 2000



thusiasm and finally agreed to pick a new Best 18, this time with some help, as there were some courses he wanted no part of. His Second-Generation list appeared in this magazine in early 2000, covering holes built from 1965-'99. ▶ Sadly, Jenkins is gone now, but a good idea remains a good idea, even if it has been milked twice before. As Golf Digest is celebrating its 70th anniversary, we believe an updated list seems appropriate, this time choosing from among golf holes built from 2000-'19. ▶ Our approach was a bit different than Dan's. His original list drew from the usual courses, the architectural classics like Merion and Pine Valley, spiced with a few "modern" twists like Champions in Houston (definitely not a Hogan thumbs up) and The Dunes in Myrtle Beach. Thirty-five years later, he searched for holes that looked great on calendars and gave tour pros heartburn, hence his embracing of holes like the 14th at Muirfield Village and the 17th at TPC Sawgrass. ▶

BUCKLE UP
The par-5 11th hole at Arcadia Bluffs is a 633-yard thrill ride.



WE FOCUSED ON FINDING HOLES THAT ARE FUN TO PLAY, BECAUSE THAT'S THE OVERWHELMING TREND THUS FAR IN THIS CENTURY.



assembling version 3.0, we stayed true to the Jenkins requirement of comparing apples to apples. But we self-imposed two additional limitations: an architect or architectural firm could be listed only once, and a club or facility could not be represented more than once. Beyond that, no other strait jackets, no consideration of total par, hole length, scorecard balance, regional balance, grass type, bunker style or flag pattern. Ours was just a quest to identify the most memorable and meritorious holes that represent early 21st-century trends in golf architecture in America.

For instance, there's a renewed emphasis on strategic lines and angles that incorporate far more width than 1990s housing-development courses could provide, so a couple of our holes are astonishingly wide. We mined rugged, far-flung regions of the United States, which is where present-day architects have been finding work. Sometimes it's on great land, which resulted in a rustic aesthetic that's represented in some picks, but sometimes it was marginal land, a landfill or abandoned quarry, where talented people rose to the challenge. But mostly, we focused on finding holes that are fun to play, because that's the overwhelming trend thus far in this century.

Speaking of fun, many of the most unique and fascinating holes built in the past 20 years have been short par 4s, those tantalizing, entertaining, match-swinging half-par holes: some days a cinch birdie, other days a hard par. That's why four such creations made our 2020 list. ▶

WHOA ON THE LEFT That's a drop of more than 350 feet on the par-4 18th at McLemore Club in Georgia.

Photograph by Evan Schiller

1

KINGSLEY CLUB
KINGSLEY • MICHIGAN
PAR 5 • 602 YARDS
ARCHITECT • MIKE DEVRIES
2001

► Our opening hole, with its 90-yard-wide corridor, would seem to be a comfortable par 5 to ease us into the round. The first hole at the private Kingsley Club, near Traverse City, actually has two fairways, a high-right avenue and a lower-left route, the two separated by a cluster of bunkers. But here’s where Mike DeVries messes with our heads (the goal of every great architect), by making us pick and choose on the first shot of the day. Do we play up the narrow right side? Can we reach the crest? Or do we aim at the wider left side, at the risk of rolling down into the trees? Or do we split the difference and try to carry over that frightful field of pits? Kingsley’s wonderful glacial domes and hollows provide brain teasers and aggravating options throughout the round, demanding that our mental game be focused on the shot in front of us and nothing else. Which is good, as golf is meant to be an escape. —RW

2

GAMBLE SANDS
BREWSTER • WASHINGTON
PAR 4 • 340 YARDS
DAVID MCLAY KIDD
2014

► The “drivable” par 4 has been a wildly popular architectural conceit the past two decades. But typically, they’re only drivable if you slug the ball around 300 yards or more. With flexible tees playing off an elevated bluff—and 10-mile views across central Washington’s broad Columbia River Valley—this downhill hole delivers on the promise, offering

players of various abilities the chance to get home with one swing, providing they hit from the right markers. But it’s no lay-up. The tee shot must challenge a centerline bunker 40 yards short of the green, either straight over it or curving around it on the right and then rolling in on the helping contours. Gamble Sands is where David Kidd, after remembering that golf should be fun, introduced the concept of defending birdie but offering par, and no hole epitomizes that come-hither ethos better than this one. —DD

3

TOT HILL FARM G.C.
ASHBORO • NORTH CAROLINA
PAR 3 • 180 YARDS
MIKE STRANTZ
2000

► Extremely rocky sites can produce dramatic golf scenery, but they can also produce extremely expensive headaches for architects who must clear and maneuver around the unwieldy obstacles. But at Tot Hill Farm, the late Mike Strantz did what he always did and went the opposite direction, embracing extremity by using the site’s ubiquitous rocks as large, outlandish garnishes. The par-3 third is the most triumphant example, a fiesta of stone that plays from hillside tees surrounded by boulders, across an avalanche of cascading rock, over a creek, and onto a green that boomerangs around an enormous flashed sand feature. Strantz enjoyed pushing golfers’ buttons, and temperatures certainly elevate here as hole locations migrate from the wide, accessible front lobe back toward the obscured rear finger of green that curls behind the raised bunker. —DD



4

CANYATA G.C.
MARSHALL • ILLINOIS
PAR 4 • 485 YARDS
BOB LOHMANN
& MIKE BENKUSKY
2005

► The “Cape hole” is revered in golf design, with its daunting diagonal drive over a hazard to the fairway, the length of the diagonal carry determined by the courage of each individual. The par-4 fourth at Canyata, a marvelous private retreat in east-central Illinois, is a unique variation of the Cape concept. On a normal Cape, after the tee shot, the hole

continues to curve along the edge of the hazard. But at Canyata, Bob Lohmann and his then-associate Mike Benkusky chose to turn the hole in the other direction, away from the water and up a hill. The challenge of the tee shot remains the same—carry the water—but position is also important. Hit it too far to the right, and a second shot could be blocked by overhanging trees. Bail out long left, and a string of bunkers can come into play. Those bunkers are huge. “We wanted the features to complement the vast site,” Benkusky says. “Tight fairways and small greens would have looked out of place.” —RW

OPENING PAGES: COURTESY OF ARCADIA BLUFFS

5

STREAMSONG BLACK
BOWLING GREEN • FLORIDA
PAR 3 • 211 YARDS
GIL HANSE & JIM WAGNER
2017

► In the past 20 years, sand has become golf design’s most precious substance, sparking a global, gold-rush-like quest for sand-based properties and turning places like Streamsong in remote south-central Florida—built on the formerly unusable sand

spoils of a defunct phosphate-mining operation—into an international destination. No hole better typifies the dramatic potential of these sites than the Black course’s par-3 fifth, which gives the impression it’s erupting from a sandy gash of earth. The difficult tee shot plays uphill to a skyline green with a wicked false front and a deep, punishing wash on the right. The entire left side of the tilted, 22,000-square-foot green area is a series of bubbling, knee-high knobs that can deflect balls toward the hole or, if misplayed, in the opposite direction, leaving long putts with mind-bending degrees of break. —DD

6

BLACK CREEK CLUB
CHATTANOOGA
PAR 5 • 559 YARDS
BRIAN SILVA
2000

► Brian Silva deserves recognition for being one of the first architects to rediscover, restore and popularize the architecture of Seth Raynor. At Black Creek Club, Silva was able to build his versions of Raynor and C.B. Macdonald’s “ideal holes” like the Short

and the Biarritz, but the most remarkable one here, or almost anywhere else, is a Silva original. The par-5 sixth plays across mostly open space, though drives must contend with bunkers jutting into the fairway from the left. The real engagement begins on the second and third shots. Golfers cannot see the green ahead, only a tall, fortress-like embankment of long grass and bunkers. At some point the rampart must be breached, and on the other side awaits a punchbowl arena of more than 55,000 square feet that would make Raynor blush, with sloping banks that funnel shots toward a large, square green perched against a creek. —DD

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GAMBLE SANDS DELIVERS ON THE PROMISE OF THE DRIVABLE PAR 4—IF YOU PLAY FROM THE RIGHT MARKERS.

1 The Kingsley (Mich.) Club
Par 5 / 602 yards
Mike DeVries, architect

2 Gamble Sands
Par 4 / 340 yards
David McLay Kidd
Brewster, Wash.

3 Tot Hill Farm G.C.
Par 3 / 180 yards
Mike Strantz
Asheboro, N.C.

4 Canyata G.C.
Par 4 / 485 yards
Mike Benkuský & Bob Lohmann
Marshall, Ill.

5 Streamsong Black
Par 3 / 211 yards
Gil Hanse & Jim Wagner
Bowling Green, Fla.

6 Black Creek Club
Par 5 / 559 yards
Brian Silva
Chattanooga

7 Ballyneal G.C.
Par 4 / 352 yards
Tom Doak
Holyoke, Colo.

8 Pikewood National G.C.
Par 5 / 562 yards
Robert Gwynne & John Raese
Morgantown, W.Va.

9 Chicago Highlands Club
Par 4 / 344 yards
Arthur Hills & Joe Hills
Westchester, Ill.

10 Friar's Head G.C.
Par 3 / 210 yards
Bill Coore & Ben Crenshaw
Riverhead, N.Y.

11 Arcadia (Mich.) Bluffs G.C. (Bluffs)
Par 5 / 633 yards
Warren Henderson & Rick Smith

12 Chambers Bay
Par 4 / 281 yards
Robert Trent Jones II & Bruce Charlton
University Place, Wash.

13 The Quarry at Giants Ridge
Par 4 / 323 yards
Jeff Brauer
Biwabik, Minn.

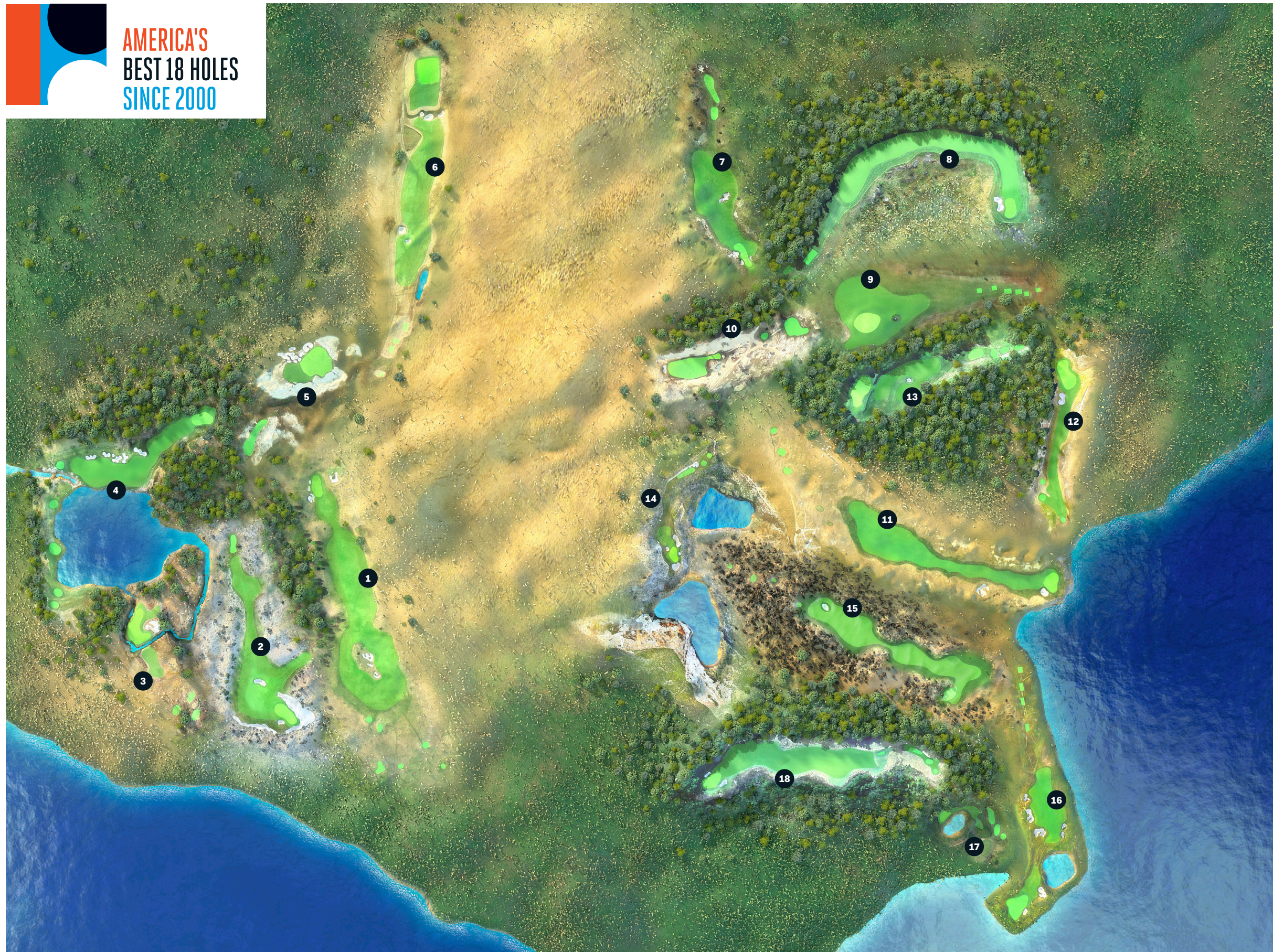
14 Oak Quarry G.C.
Par 3 / 214 yards
Lee Schmidt & Brian Curley
Riverside, Calif.

15 Four Mile Ranch G.C.
Par 5 / 579 yards
Jim Engh
Cañon City, Colo.

16 Bayonne (N.J.) G.C.
Par 4 / 486 yards
Eric Bergstol

17 Brooksville (Fla.) C.C.
Par 3 / 146 yards
Bobby Weed

18 McLemore Club
Par 4 / 435 yards
Bill Bergin & Rees Jones
Rising Fawn, Ga.



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7

BALLYNEAL G.C.

HOLYOKE • COLORADO
PAR 4 • 352 YARDS
TOM DOAK
2006

► The idea behind the flowing, unmarked tees at Ballyneal, in the appropriately named Chop Hills of northeast Colorado, is to experience the holes from a variety of undefined distances. (The winner of the previous hole usually picks the starting spot.) As such, the downhill seventh can be played as short as 250 yards to a blind fairway tumbling toward a three-tiered green nestled snugly into a saddle of shaggy dunes and shaped like an elongated E. That flirtatious little emerald goads you into firing drives directly at it on the danger line over a raised bunker when prudence would urge a safer route off the banking slopes down the right side. On the other hand, best plans might not matter much because the ground is a tilt-a-whirl ride that sends balls in unpredictable directions, sometimes helping, sometimes not. You never know, and that’s part of the joy. —DD

8

PIKEWOOD NATIONAL G.C.

MORGANTOWN • WEST VIRGINIA
PAR 5 • 562 YARDS
JOHN RAESE & BOB GWYNNE
2008

► Once John Raese and Bob Gwynne, the CEO and VP of Greer Industries, a mining concern, decided to build the private Pikewood National on surplus company property, they spent years traversing the forested mountaintop searching for lay-of-the-land golf holes. On one trek, they discovered a crescent-shape rim around a deep kettle hole, all covered in trees, and agreed it would make a helluva gambling Cape hole. The trees were clear-cut to the width of a boomerang fairway, and the bowl was deforested as well. After a little nudging from a bulldozer to form a green on the far horizon, Pikewood’s eighth hole was grassed and put into play. It stands today as one of this century’s most natural holes, a true risk-reward par 5 with bite-off-what-you-dare opportunities on all three shots. When Golf Digest named Pikewood National its Best New Private Course of 2009, we wrote the eighth hole was “the sort of audacity one would expect from amateur architects.” The club promptly renamed the eighth hole Audacity. —RW

9

CHICAGO HIGHLANDS CLUB

WESTCHESTER • ILLINOIS
PAR 4 • 344 YARDS
ARTHUR HILLS & JOE HILLS
2010

► A dozen years ago, Joe Hills, a son of architect Art Hills, had a desire to follow his dad into the business, so he was given responsibility for Chicago Highlands, a private club built on a garbage dump across the interstate from Butler National. Joe did the routing and grading plans, supervised its construction and even shaped some holes on a dozer. Because the entire landfill had to be covered with soil, Joe had some of it piled into a dome 40 feet high on which he would carve out the ninth, a hole brilliant in its simplicity. A reachable par 4 from all six tee boxes, it’s basically a volcano with a flag at the top. The slopes surrounding the small hilltop green drop off in every direction and are mowed tight, so errant shots will often roll to the base of the slope some 50 yards or more away. From there, recoveries can be like pingpong if one gets sloppy. A few years back, the slope beyond the green was filled in a bit, in an act of mercy for shots swept long by prevailing winds, but the other slopes, particularly the left one, are still long and steep. —RW

10

FRIAR’S HEAD G.C.

BAITING HOLLOW • NEW YORK
PAR 3 / 210 YARDS
BILL COORE & BEN CRENSHAW
2003

► By now it should be apparent that we love blind shots, the kind that require visualization before you swing and invoke anticipation as you rush to see where the ball ended up. The par-3 10th at Friar’s Head, on Long Island’s North Shore, is only partially blind, most of the green blocked by a lone, tall,

wide sand dune, what Bill Coore called a “giant anthill” when he first viewed it. In keeping with the philosophy of his design partner, Ben Crenshaw, the 10th lets us each play our game, so we can hit all sorts of tee shots—high fade or low draw, parabola or worm burner—and still find some portion of the putting surface. It’s just that you probably won’t see the result until you reach the green, which is more than 60 yards deep and 18,000 square feet. It takes a truly bad shot to miss, and the smart money says to overclub off the tee to avoid the anthill, and then rely on your approach putting. —RW

11

ARCADIA BLUFFS G.C.

ARCADIA • MICHIGAN
PAR 5 • 633 YARDS
RICK SMITH &
WARREN HENDERSON
2000

► As you stand on the 11th tee and gaze upon this breathtaking hole, you’re inclined to wonder, *What kind of bizarre architectural minds could conjure such a thing?* It’s a good question. Set on a section of bluffs above Lake Michigan, this entire course was radically transformed

from a forest into a denuded, hyper-realistic dunescape, with this magnetic par 5 unfurling down its left flank like a mythological creature reticulating urgently toward the sea. Many of our holes on this list present some type of strategic conundrum, but after a drive to a 70-yard-wide landing zone, there are no options but to sling accurate, unflinching arrows at a fairway that bulges and writhes through an increasingly narrow valley of gnarly, fescue-covered hills. The reward for clear passage, however, is a moment of sublime tranquility on the wavy green overlooking the watery blue horizon. —DD

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THE PAR-3 10TH AT FRIAR'S HEAD
IS ONLY PARTIALLY BLIND, GUARDED BY
A 'GIANT ANTHILL' SAND DUNE.





12

CHAMBERS BAY
UNIVERSITY PLACE • WASHINGTON
PAR 4 • 281 YARDS
ROBERT TRENT JONES JR.
& BRUCE CHARLTON
2007

► Chambers Bay, the Tacoma-area gravel pit turned U.S. Open site, has a number of unique golf holes. Our favorite is the drivable par-4 12th, which looks from the tee like a super-extended par 3, mainly because the fairway between sand dunes isn’t much wider than a gravel-truck haul road, which it was for decades, until Robert Trent Jones Jr. and Bruce Charlton turned it into a ribbon of turf leading to a 12,000-square-foot punchbowl green. The beauty of the 12th is that mere mortals have a genuine chance of reaching the green from the appropriate tee box without using driver. If you can bounce the ball past the lone bunker up the left side, to a spot some 260 yards from the back tee and just 200 yards from the whites, the contour of the land will feed the ball down onto the green, where depending upon the flagstick location and the rubs of this green, you could face a makable eagle putt or one of 60 feet with eight feet of break. But still, it’s for an eagle. —RW

13

THE QUARRY AT GIANTS RIDGE
BIWABIK • MINNESOTA
PAR 4 • 323 YARDS
JEFF BRAUER
2003

► Yes, we picked back-to-back drivable par 4s, but they’re different. The 12th at Chambers Bay is narrow, half-hidden and favors the ground game, and the 13th at The Quarry at Giants Ridge is bold, brawny and encourages an aerial assault. When he found a small rock quarry of perfect dimensions for the hole, Jeff Brauer placed the wide fairway and the equally wide green on diagonals (the latter atop a ledge) to provide at least four options of attack. For those not willing to gamble off the tee, it plays, as should all good short par 4s, as consecutive par 3s. That grassy ramp leading up to the perched green wasn’t part of the quarry. Construction workers built it to get their heavy equipment up the shelf to build the green. Brauer saw it and kept it as an alluring temptation for those who think they can bounce their drive onto the putting surface. Don’t try it unless you can bull’s-eye a 10-yard-wide fairway from 300 yards. —RW

14

OAK QUARRY G.C.
RIVERSIDE • CALIFORNIA
PAR 3 • 214 YARDS
LEE SCHMIDT & BRIAN CURLEY
2000

► We also chose back-to-back quarry holes, although again, each is different. Oak Quarry is a massive pit-mine reclamation project an hour east of Los Angeles, and its 14th is a long par 3 that plays much shorter because of a 40-foot drop from hilltop tees to the surprisingly small putting surface that’s surrounded by deep bunkers and dark pools of water on the left and behind. What sets this hole apart is its awesome backdrop, a mammoth limestone vertical cliff, a mountain seemingly split in half by a giant meat cleaver. This rock, which in 2000 we dubbed golf’s “El Capitan” (after the monolith at Yosemite National Park), dwarfs everything in its shadow. It’s a compelling distraction to those on the 14th tee because it skewers scale, perspective and depth perception. You can’t play to the yardage on No. 14, and it’s hard to eyeball the shot. Good luck. —RW

15

FOUR MILE RANCH G.C.
CAÑON CITY • COLORADO
PAR 5 • 579 YARDS
JIM ENGH
2008

► Jim Engh has developed a number of template-like holes that he likes to incorporate into most of his designs. One is a par 5 resembling a long leg with a severely dislocated ankle, the green cocked at a 90-degree angle to the line of play around a bunker, a water feature, or often both. At Four Mile Ranch, in a bare foothill desert of southern Colorado, he notched the green into a cavity hooked around the backside of a natural rock formation. Playing off a high ridge, the hole is a gambler’s delight that requires long players to assess whether they can first squeeze a drive through a narrow fairway notch between two stony outcroppings, and then whether they should launch a long approach up and over the rock ridge into the blind green cavity. Everyone else can hit their second shots well out to the left and then pitch almost backward into the green, but whatever the tactic, the results aren’t fully revealed until the corner of the natural amphitheater is turned. —DD

16

BAYONNE G.C.
BAYONNE • NEW JERSEY
PAR 4 • 486 YARDS
ERIC BERGSTOL
2006

► Tucked among the docks and storage tanks of New York Harbor is the private Bayonne Golf Club, a faux Ballybunion with recessed fairways among towering dunes formed from half a decade’s worth of deposits dredged from the harbor bottom. The juxtaposition of green grass and golden rough against gunmetal-gray warehouses and rusted oil tankers in the foreground and the sparkling Manhattan skyline in the distance is one of the great visuals in golf, particularly from the dune-top tee of Bayonne’s 16th. We confess this long dogleg-right par 4 is absolutely the hardest among our Best 18, the fairway blunted at 300 yards by a spot of wetlands, the green at the far end of a bumpy neck of landfill poking into the harbor, a hole sometimes played by tacking against the wind in the manner of a sailboat. Our pick of Bayonne’s 16th is in part symbolic, a reminder that at the end of each round, the real world awaits. —DD

17

BROOKSVILLE C.C.
BROOKSVILLE • FLORIDA
PAR 3 • 146 YARDS
BOBBY WEED
2006

► Great golf holes often look like they were simply discovered in their landscape. When Bobby Weed and associate Chris Monti added nine new holes to this modest public course in west-central Florida, they were thrilled to be able to incorporate several of them into the terrain of an old calcite mine. Though

18

MCLEMORE CLUB
RISING FAWN • GEORGIA
PAR 4 • 435 YARDS
BILL BERGIN & REES JONES
2008

► The old 18th at this property on Lookout Mountain was an attractive hole, playing along a high ridge with distant views off the left into northwest Georgia. But in the process of performing a full remodel of the course, Bill Bergin and Rees Jones discovered that there was a densely forested shelf down below the old hole,

and that it possessed enough width to accommodate a new, even more spectacular ending. After clearing the ledge and solving the problem of how to get down to it and back up, they created what is likely to become one of the most recognizable holes in American golf. The strong par 4 plays along the edge of a sheer precipice that drops more than 350 feet down to the floor of McLemore Cove, the fairway rising to meet a green that seems to hover in midair. Great finishing holes should leave an impression, and few anywhere are more memorable or more resplendent than this one. —DD

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**BOLD AND BRAWNY:
THE PAR-4 13TH AT THE QUARRY
AT GIANTS RIDGE.**

