



No. 5 at Bull's Bridge

No Bull: Connecticut Course A Great Walk In The Woods

BY JOHN STEINBREDER

SOUTH KENT, CONNECTICUT | As a golfer, I prefer to play my rounds on links-style courses that run along big bodies of water. But as a native New Englander, I also appreciate a good walk in the woods. Which is why I have fallen so hard for the course Tom Fazio built at the Bull's Bridge Golf Club in this sleepy, north-west Connecticut town.

I find peace amid the stands of old-growth maples and oaks on the property, and in meadows bordered by stone walls that in many cases were built by settlers centuries ago. I also admire the weathered wood barns I pass as I drive the narrow, two-lane roads that cut through this country, and the glimpses I catch of the Housatonic River. That waterway runs for roughly 150 miles from the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts to Long Island Sound in Connecticut and is crossed in this area by a pair of covered bridges dating back to Colonial times, one of which gives the club its name as well as its logo.

The visuals are stunning. So is the sense of history.

I also enjoy the layout, which begins and ends on a ridge that affords sweeping views of the Berkshire foothills. The par-72 course is well conditioned and both fair and fun, with a variety of holes that take advantage of the movement in the ground and compel golfers to hit both fades and draws. Some of the tees are set on rock outcroppings, and the greens possess just the right amount of spice and speed. Every now and then, Fazio throws a bit of a blind shot into the mix. But most of the course is right out in front of the golfer, with the four sets of tees and two additional hybrid layouts. It measures at a tick less than 7,000 yards from the tips and more than 5,100 yards from the forward markers. That makes the layout accessible to players of all ages and abilities – and as challenging as they want it to be.



The director of golf and club manager, Paul Ramee Jr. – a protégé of Bob Ford's who worked as an assistant at Oakmont in the mid-1990s and has been at Bull's Bridge since its founding nearly two decades ago – quite accurately describes it as a "second-shot course." And as I play the blue/white hybrids at just under 6,300 yards, I find myself hitting everything from short irons to hybrids on my approaches. Which is just as it should be.

As for the picnic tables arrayed outside a small, shingled clubhouse that boasts a proper bar and a compact locker room, they are a wonderful place to kick back with an adult beverage after a game.

"The Appalachian Trail runs through those hills," said my caddie, nodding to the north as he cleaned my clubs after my round. "And this area was populated mostly by the Mohicans back in the 1600s."

These days, it is populated in no small part by New Yorkers looking for a much lower-key escape from the city than they could ever find in the Hamptons. And they are the ones who make up most of the club's membership rolls, which currently stands at just more than 200 families. Most of them have homes within 25 miles of the club, and among the most notable of that group is actor Peter Gallagher, who is best known for his roles in the films "The Player" and "American Beauty."



No. 11 at Bull's Bridge, which features a caddie program with as many as 30 loopers at its busiest.



At the turn of the 21st century, this part of Connecticut had a handful of rather rudimentary, nine-hole courses but nothing else golf-wise. That void was filled when a couple of developers induced Fazio to design and then build the 18-hole layout that exists today, with his eldest son, Logan, serving as project manager. Parts of the course were ready for play in 2003, but it did not open fully until the following summer. In addition to constructing its modest clubhouse, where breakfast is served on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays and lunch each day of the week, the founders also built a range as well as a short-game area and a practice fairway and putting green.

"There are no tee times, and no lodging, and we will serve only a few dinners a year," said Ramee. "Typically, annual rounds played come to 8,500, but we will do more than 11,000 in 2021, mainly because of COVID and how the pandemic has impacted golf.

"There is a big emphasis on junior golf," he added. "And we are very family oriented because people tend to come up to their homes here with their families. We'll run junior clinics from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on weekends, so mom and dad can get out and play nine holes by themselves. And there is such light traffic on the course most days that families can head out for a round together without worrying about being pushed or holding anybody up."

Ramee also organizes week-long golf camps as well as interclub matches and junior club tournaments.

In addition, Bull's Bridge operates a caddie program that features as many as 30 loopers in the height of the summer season. "We do all we can to support the caddies, and one way we keep the program going is by allowing unaccompanied play during the weeks," he said.

As a senior design associate for Fazio Golf, Tom Marzolf is familiar with the course – and pleased with how it turned out. "This is a beautiful site, a very dramatic site, and I think the course fits the terrain very well," he said. "The green shapes are quite interesting, too, and in many cases long and linear, which gives them a one- or two-club difference from front to back."

"I really like the way it turned out, and my sense is that the members do, too," he added.

As ideal as its location may have been – and as well-received as Fazio's work was at the course's opening – Bull's Bridge got off to something of a slow start, in part due to the Great Recession that took hold in 2007 and lasted a couple of years. As a result, club leaders could not go quite as big in some areas as they

might have liked. But things picked up once the economy did, and the club has been working with Fazio Design on a master plan that will likely lead to a bigger clubhouse and renovations on the golf course and practice facility.

"Generally speaking, we want to make the course fairer for the higher handicappers and a little more challenging for the better golfers," Ramee explained.

There is also some discussion about constructing a handful of cabins on club grounds, the idea being that all these elements will improve an already very good experience and keep people on site a little longer. For dinners. For overnights. For tournaments that may stretch over a couple of days.

It makes me want to head to the woods more often.

