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Master Plans

By Rob Carey

Through national retailer Bass Pro Shops, founder John Morris is inspiring people to enjoy the great outdoors. At Big Cedar Lodge, he's betting big that golf will further advance his mission

Three years ago, Big Cedar Lodge in southern Missouri had no golf facility of its own to serve guests. Today, the 260-unit resort boasts Top of the Rock, a Jack Nicklaus-designed, nine-hole par-3 layout with astonishing vistas that's home to the PGA Tour's Champions Bass Pro Shops Legends of Golf each April. Big Cedar also has Buffalo Ridge Springs Golf Course, a Tom Fazio design recently rated the top public course in the state by GOLF Magazine.

And all that was just Act 1. Come early 2017, the resort will debut a 12-hole, Gary Player-designed, family-friendly course, and the following year will see an undulating but walkable Coore/Crenshaw championship layout come online alongside Buffalo Ridge. A large instructional facility is slated to be built sometime after the Coore/Crenshaw course debut.

The resort sits in the Ozark Mountains above Table Rock Lake just south of Branson, the Midwest's family-entertainment capital. It's less than an hour from Springfield, where Morris grew up and built Bass Pro Shops from just a fishing-tackle counter inside his father's liquor store in the early 1970s. Since purchasing Big Cedar Lodge in 1987, Morris has matched the resort's mission to that of Bass Pro Shops: provide an opportunity for everyone to experience the outdoors in whatever way they prefer.

The rapidly-evolving golf product at Big Cedar "is just an extension of that philosophy, another offering for getting people into nature," says Eric Smith, head golf pro at Top of the Rock. "Right now we offer a little bit for everyone." There are boat rentals and fishing guides at the resort's marina; the Bass Pro Shops Outdoor Academy with seasonal hunting plus clay/target shooting and archery; an extensive trail system for hikes into the wooded hills around the lake; and the Dogwood Canyon Challenge, a survival-skills academy for people of all levels of physical ability. Of course, downtown Branson has a variety of matinee and evening entertainment and dining options as well.

Since the early 2014 opening of Top of the Rock and Buffalo Ridge, Smith and Greg Thomas, the head pro at Buffalo Ridge, have coordinated with the resort's marketing team to create packages that pair golf with other activities. "The boat rentals are popular among buddy groups, and Dogwood Canyon is a fun experience for them, too," Smith says. "We have things many other resorts don't offer. But if somebody wants a straight golf package, the two layouts we have open right now are a great experience," with a double loop at Top of the Rock most often bookended by traditional rounds at Buffalo Ridge.

After a fire in 2005 destroyed the clubhouse at what was then a quaint, straightforward par-3 course, Morris took more than eight years to plan and execute Top of the Rock as a next-level golf experience on a small but unique piece of land. "There wasn't enough real estate for a full course, but the views of the lake and the hills are unparalleled, and you get them for the whole round," Smith says.

Both casual and dedicated golfers won't want to feel rushed amidst the panoramic scenery. As a result, Smith sets only four tee times per hour. "Even the pros take photos when they play here," Smith notes. "And not just on the



course—the practice range was designed by Arnold Palmer in a way so that people would be connected to the surrounding landscape.”

Even with all the progress made over a short time, Johnny Morris’ golf blueprint is less than halfway done. “In two years, we’re going to be a complete golf destination,” Smith says. “Both the Player short course and the Coore/Crenshaw course will be walkable, which is unusual for an area that’s so hilly. But Mr. Morris wants people to be as close to nature as they choose to be.” And given that the Buffalo Ridge course was redesigned by Fazio with wide fairways, no blind shots and five tee boxes, the resort will be able to design longer golf-package itineraries with whichever degree of difficulty a player prefers.

From the big-picture view, it appears that Morris’ plan has a significant chance of long-term success even if rounds nationwide remain flat going forward. “There’s no golf destination smack in the middle of the country like we are,” Smith says. “You have to get to the coasts or into Michigan or Wisconsin or Texas to find something comparable to what we will offer. And we have a huge population that’s within one day’s drive of here.”

Besides Morris’ hometown of Springfield, the markets where Big Cedar Lodge focuses most heavily are Kansas City, St. Louis, Little Rock, Fayetteville, Tulsa and Oklahoma City. But the resort also has a growing marketing presence in Chicago and Indianapolis to the north; Dallas and Houston to the south; and Memphis and Nashville to the east.

What’s more, the ability to promote the resort through displays at Bass Pro Shops around the country increases the possibility that Big Cedar Lodge will become nationally known as a serious golf destination over the next few years. Says Morris: “I’m not much of a golfer, but to be able to host the golfers and the fishermen and the others who are going to be here, I’m proud that people all over the country will be able to see what the Ozarks has to offer.”

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