

THE MYSTERY Where's Rickie? | THE LEGENDS Revitalized | THE HOPEFUL No Easy Road

THE PLAYERS

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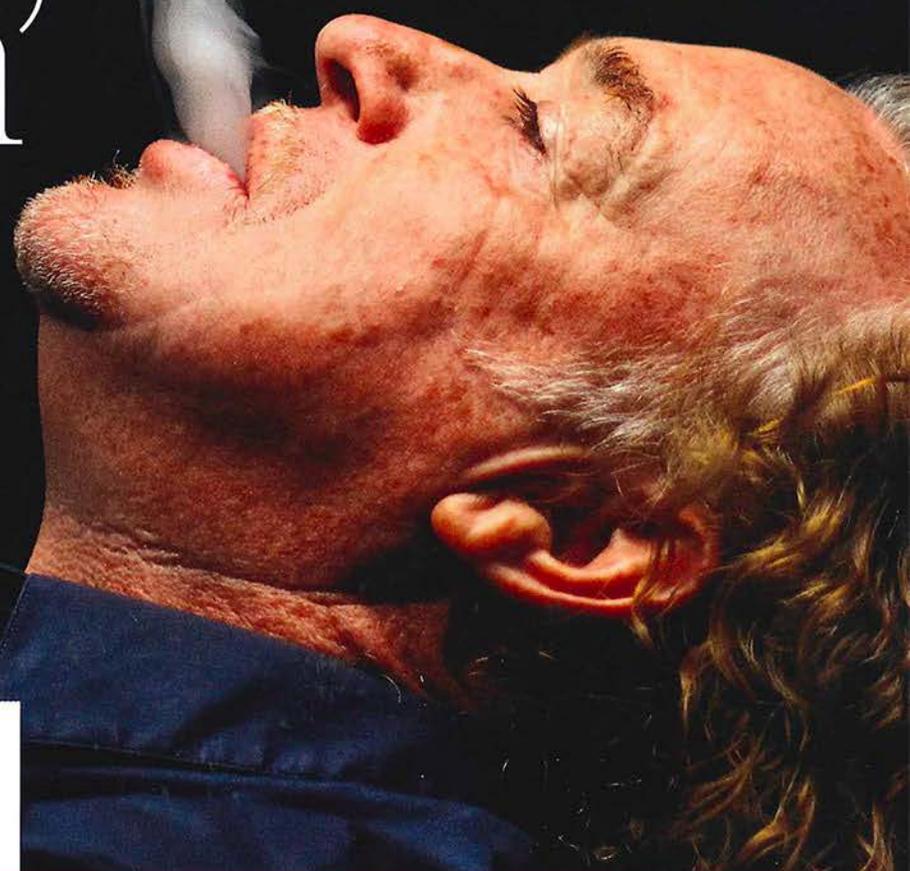
THREE-TOUR SURVEY
Bubba overrated?
Jack or Tom?
Lexi or Lydia?

THE ECCENTRIC

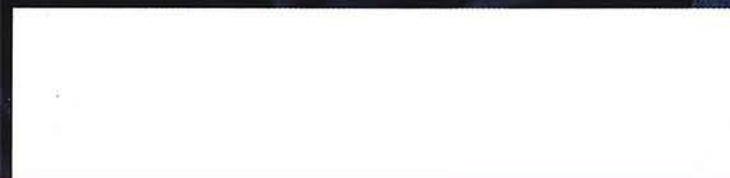
Smokin'

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JIMÉNEZ
LOVING GOLF
LOVING LIFE**

by Alan Shipnuck



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THE LEGENDS

Lights Out

The event that spawned the Champions tour has finally found a home, thanks to a money-is-no-object entrepreneur who bought a scenic piece of property in the Ozark Mountains for \$5 an acre and turned it into a spectacular playground

By John Garrity

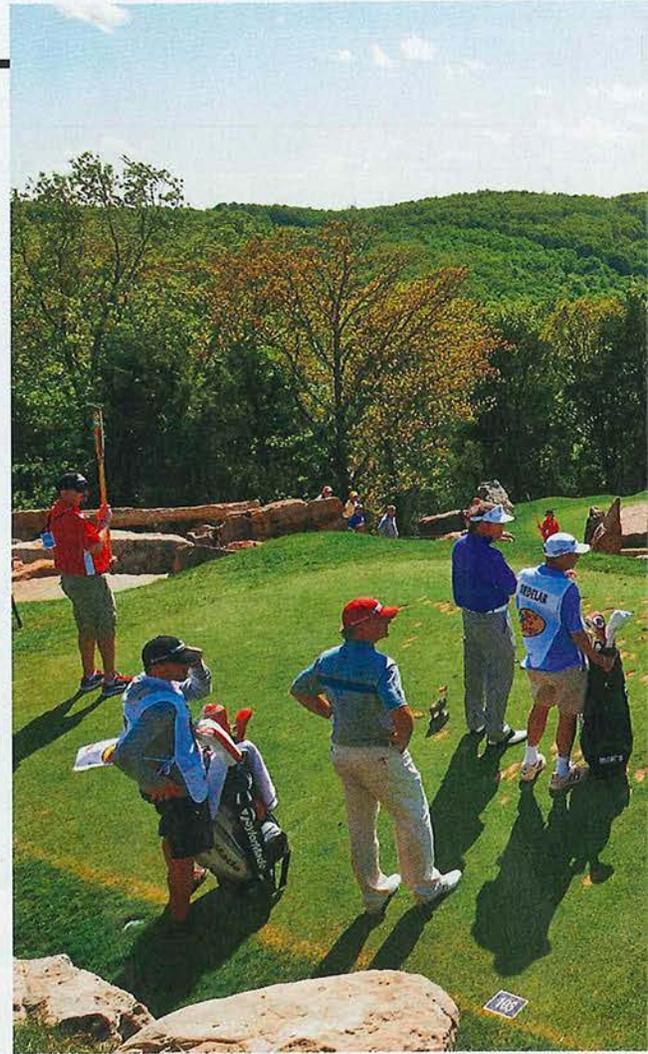
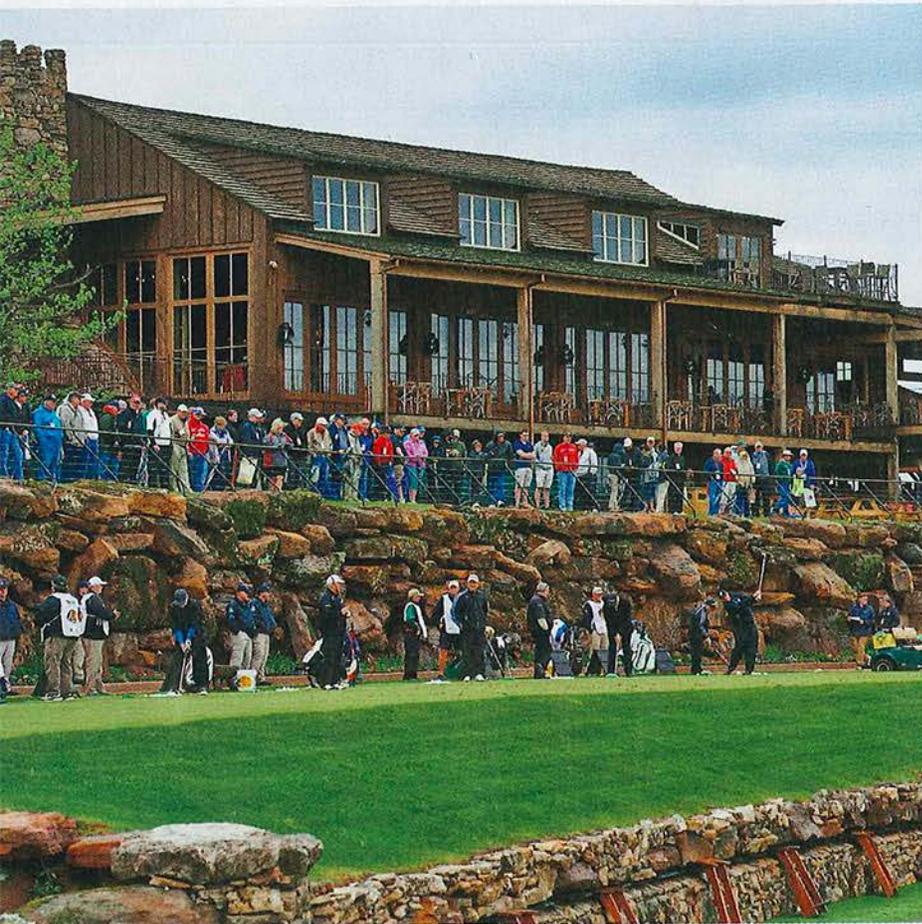
Photographs by
Kohjiro Kinno
For Sports Illustrated

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ANYTIME IS TEE TIME

Designed by Palmer, the practice range has 16 target greens and is illuminated at night. It "looks like it's from another planet," said Rodríguez.





“I ENJOY monkeying around with things,” Johnny Morris said last week, surveying his beloved Ozark hills. And by *things* he meant buffalo herds, half-ton boulders, Pennsylvania barns, meandering streams, woolly mammoth skeletons, table-rock caves and—as of late—the landscape of professional golf.

Morris, a fixture on the *Forbes* billionaire charts, is the founder and majority owner of Bass Pro Shops, America’s largest outdoor-recreation retailer. As well, he is the relaxed host and genial sponsor of the Bass Pro Shops Legends of Golf outside Branson, Mo., the Champions tour’s annual homage to its most-seasoned stars.

“I’m not that much of a golfer, but I’m a golf fan,” Morris said, watching spectators file down the plunging 1st fairway of his Tom Fazio-designed Buffalo Ridge course. It was warm and sunny for the second round of the Legends, giving Morris plenty of opportunities to mingle with his fellow fans and deliver encomiums to the native flora and fauna. “I grew up here in the Ozarks,” he said. “I fished here with my dad and my uncle, and Table Rock Lake is the birthplace

“I’ve traveled more than any other human in history,” says Player. “I’ve never seen anything like this!”

of my company. I’ve always been about getting people connected to nature and the outdoors.”

Morris has been connecting people to wall sockets, judging from their pop-eyed reactions to his Top of the Rock Ozark Heritage Preserve. A nine-hole par-3 course, conceived by Jack Nicklaus and subsequently enhanced by an army of arborists, horticulturists, hydrologists, sculptors and stonemasons, is pretty much the Augusta National par-3—only twice as challenging and draped over a mountaintop. An Arnold Palmer–designed driving range, cascading down from the summit, boasts 16 artfully bunkered target greens (including one atop a waterfall on a distant ledge) and enough standing stones and stacked rocks to inspire a Druid revival. The clubhouse, if that’s the term, encompasses an open-to-tourists natural-history museum and Arnie’s Barn, which is in fact Palmer’s 150-year-old barn from Latrobe, Pa., dismantled and painstakingly reassembled by Morris’s crack team of, uh . . . Amish barn reassemblers. A cliffside wedding chapel, which sits next to the 1st fairway of the par-3 course, offers spectacular views, and three lower floors serve as the media center.



characteristic zest, “23 million kilometers over 63 years. But I’ve never seen anything like this! When Johnny’s vision is finished—if it ever is finished—there will be nothing to compare it to in golf.”

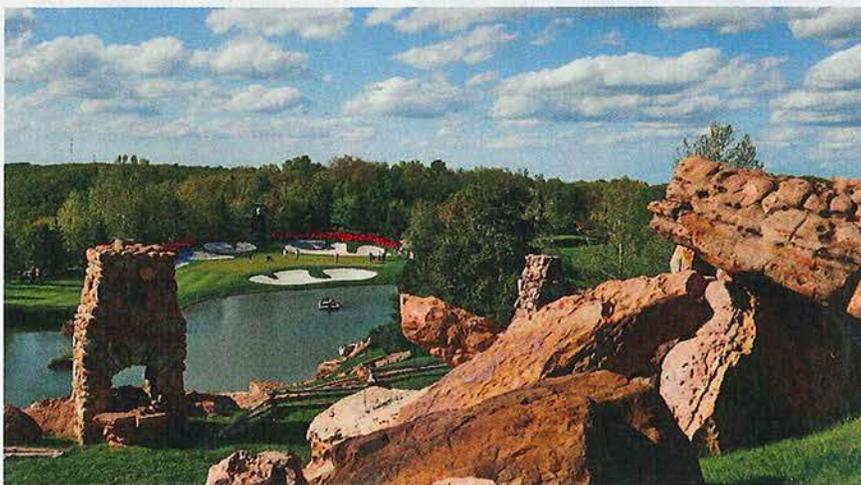
ONE COULD argue that Top of the Rock is over the top. But Morris’s nine-hole is the world’s best par-3 course—don’t argue—and his driving range, when illuminated at night by buried spotlights, is the most enchanting piece of landscape art since Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the German Reichstag in fabric. Spectators last week certainly weren’t complaining—until you asked them what the hell was going on.

The Legends, in the second year of its Ozarks residency, served up 84 senior professionals playing as two-man teams in two divisions—a

Champions division for active tour players and a Legends division for players over the age of 65—at Buffalo Ridge and Top of the Rock, two radically different courses, miles apart, with constantly changing formats that may or may not have included alternate shot, Scotch foursomes, better ball and/or scramble with mixed-martial-arts elements. Some players picked up when they were out of a hole. Others chipped or putted out, further confusing the live audience. The red numbers bobbing above the standard-bearers’ heads could have been placed there by, uh . . . Druids.

“I don’t think the par-3 element has matured yet,” said an otherwise satisfied pro, who asked for anonymity. “Playing in the pro-am didn’t give me near enough time to learn those tricky greens.” His criticism rang true on Saturday, when winds gusting to 38 mph pummeled those unlucky enough to draw Top of the Rock. “These are the hardest par-3s I’ve ever seen,” said Brian Sullivan, who caddied for Joe Durant. Asked to name specific holes, Sullivan opened his mouth, only to have a laughing Durant blurt, “Holes 1 through 9 and 10 through 18!”

That quibble aside, the pros seemed more awed



“This place is one of the wonders of the world,” 79-year-old Chi Chi Rodriguez said before his Thursday pro-am round. “That driving range looks like it’s from another planet.” Hall of Famer Gary Player, who has agreed to design a beginner-friendly “family course” for Morris, was not to be outdone. “I’ve traveled more than any other human in history,” Player said with

EYE-POPPING

Moved from Latrobe, Pa., Arnie’s Barn was incorporated into the clubhouse; the course views are spectacular.



by the ambiance than fussy about the format. "I'm originally from Oklahoma, so I knew about the Ozarks," said Dale Douglass, a three-time Legends champ alongside partner Charles Coody. "But I don't think I fully appreciated it until last year. The rivers, the hills, the lakes—it's very, very special."

Making the new venues work is important to the tour, if only for sentimental reasons. Launched in Austin in 1978, the original Legends of Golf at Onion Creek was a quirky one-off that gave a bunch of mostly retired pros a week in the sun—or, to be more accurate, a weekend on national TV. But it worked. Sam Snead, Julius Boros and Tommy Bolt, however long they might have been in the tooth, were still relatively long off the tee, and they possessed oodles more personality than the more button-down pros on the "regular" tour. The old fellows hugged one another like long-separated cousins, raised their caps to show off bald spots and ribbed one another from tee to green. ("Hey, Porky! The Hilton know you're wearing their drapes?") They made golf look like—gasp!—fun.

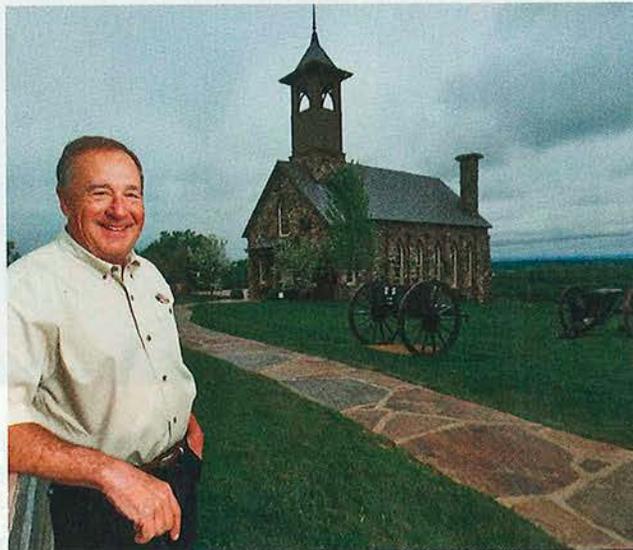
Seeing an opportunity to compete again and make some bucks, the old pros staged a few more senior tournaments. That caught the eye of the PGA Tour, and by 1980 there was an actual big-dollar circuit called the PGA Senior tour, since rebranded as the Champions tour. This year the seniors will play for \$8 million in prize money in mostly no-cut events. The Legends tournament, absorbed by the new tour and sponsored by Liberty Mutual Insurance, lasted 17 years in Austin before bouncing around with stops in St. Augustine, Fla. (1999–2002), and Savannah ('03–13). The promised land turned out to be a densely timbered summit just south of Branson, the so-called Live Entertainment Capital of the World.

"The Top of the Rock was a special piece of land," Morris says, recalling how he bought the property years ago from College of the Ozarks president M. Graham Clark for \$5 an acre. "It's like a beautiful garden on a hilltop, and the golf course gives you a way to walk around it." If you'd rather not walk, no worries. A cart path of palace-courtyard quality snakes around the white-sand bunkers. A water taxi carries golfers to the 7th hole's island green.

Nicklaus jokes that he spent half a million dollars designing the par-3 "and then Johnny spent

ONE MAN'S VISION

Morris, outside the chapel, says Top of the Rock is "like a beautiful garden on a hilltop, and the golf course gives you a way to walk around it."



Nicklaus jokes that he spent \$500,000 designing the par-3, "and then Johnny spent \$20 million landscaping it."

\$20 million landscaping it." It's an affectionate jab, but it makes the billionaire squirm. For one thing, the numbers are wildly inflated. For another, it casts Morris as some sort of backwoods Donald Trump—which the bombast-free Missourian most certainly is not. "We didn't just throw a bunch of money at it," Morris says of his spectacular nine-holer. "These local craftsmen and artists had a real passion for excellence. They had a genuine desire to share this beautiful place with the rest of the world."

CORNY? PERHAPS. But coming from a guy who has spent a good part of his life in a bass boat, it's, uh . . . convincing.

"This place has grown on me, too,"

Morris said last week, making the rounds at Buffalo Ridge. Before he bought it, the public course was known as Branson Creek and ranked among Missouri's best. Now, with tons of turf and clay removed to expose colorful stone outcroppings, the Fazio holes have genuine eye appeal—as well as, uh . . . bison appeal. Says Morris, "They had buffalo down at the Dogwood Canyon Nature Park, and a friend said, 'Why don't you move some buffalo around?'"

He smiled and shrugged. *That's how you wind up with an enormous feed bill and several tons of bronze buffalo sculptures.*

The bass-boat king has yet another championship course in development: a Ben Crenshaw–Bill Coore layout at Murder Rock, a stretch of highlands that was home to Civil War–era rogues and bandits. Morris said he hired Crenshaw-Coore because he admires the firm's "minimalist" design philosophy. He expects them to build a moderately priced, walkable course on the site's rolling terrain. Honest. No monkeying around.

Odds are, though, that Johnny Morris will see possibilities in that land that no one has seen before. He'll tweak a few things. A tee box here, a sea of wildflowers there. Before you know it, a milelong train will rumble through Branson with a hundred locked boxcars and a team of paleontologists in the caboose.

"A man like that," Chi Chi said, "will always be a success."

You had to listen, because a Legend said it. □