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Thinking Big in Branson

A native son is creating one of the country's best golf destinations in the heart of the Ozarks.

JOHNNY MORRIS grew up exploring the forests and fishing the rivers of the Ozark Mountains outside of Branson, Mo. Over the past three decades, the 68-year-old founder of Bass Pro Shops has dedicated himself to creating a reason for outsiders to discover the land he holds so dear. **Big Cedar Lodge** (bigcedar.com), which he opened about 10 miles south of Branson in 1988, is an outdoor playground of a resort, with a roster of recreational activities that includes fishing, clay shooting, and horseback riding. First and foremost, however, Big Cedar is a golf resort—and one of the most underrated ones in the country.

"This area is still, in many respects, undiscovered by many people," says Morris, who started hosting a PGA Champions Tour

event at Big Cedar in 2014. "The tournament is a way to showcase the area and create excitement."

The Legends of Golf tournament, which includes a 2-day pro-am event, is held each spring (April 17–23 this year) on Big Cedar's Buffalo Ridge Springs Course—an 18-hole championship layout redesigned by Morris and Tom Fazio in 2014—and one-of-a-kind Top of the Rock. Renovated by Jack Nicklaus (also in collaboration with Morris) in 2014, Top of the Rock comprises nine par-3s that could each be a signature hole at other courses. If there is a standout, it is the second: a 114-yarder with a stunning vista, punctuated by Table Rock Lake in the distance, that requires only a flip of a wedge to a kidney-shaped green about 100 feet below.

To have such a dramatic setting and high-profile designer for a par-3 course is almost unprecedented. But Morris says he built Top of the Rock for children and families to enjoy, so they could connect with nature the way he did decades ago. "Golf is another way to utilize that land," he says, "to get people to walk over it and to appreciate it."

Morris is currently working with Gary Player on the design of another short course, this one 13 holes, that is scheduled to open at Big Cedar later this year. He has also enlisted Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw to design a second championship course, set to debut in 2018. "Those are our next big stepping stones," he says. "If we just make those the best they can be, we'll see what happens from there. Time will tell." —SHAUN TOLSON 