

True blue Vermont

Lake Morey Resort exudes a
homespun, local feeling

BY PETER OLIVER

It was mid-October when I made my way to Lake Morey. Leaves of many colors were scudding across the greens in a kind of dance of fire, and the grass was a shimmery, almost translucent green in the low-angled sun of fall. If I were to imagine what a Vermont golf course ought to look like—strips of green fairway embellished by autumnal colors and cupped in



the hold of the surrounding Green Mountains—this certainly filled the bill.

It was a fitting introduction. Whatever label you might attach to Lake Morey Resort—destination golf resort, conference center, lakeside hotel, whatever—you must start from the essential fact that it is a Vermont place. A Vermont resort that looks like a Vermont resort ought to look, run as it has always been by Vermonters, and with the homespun character that is the cultural bedrock of rural Vermont—that's Lake Morey Resort.

The resort's general manager, Mark Avery, fits right into the scheme. He belongs to the third generation of Averys to own and run Lake Morey. The Averys bought the resort in 1972 from another local family, the Wards. Like his father and brother, Mark lives on the periphery of the resort, which only makes sense. The resort is their life, the object of their undivided affection.

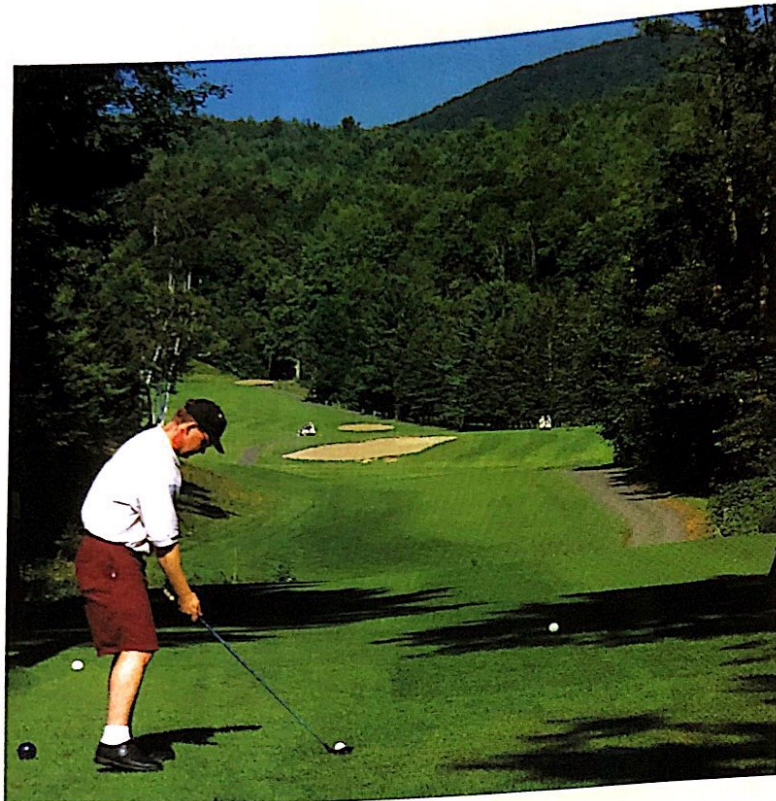
Mark Avery is spindly thin and, as Vermonters tend to be, is not one to let words pass his lips without cautious and careful measurement. A true Vermonter will never use three words when a single word will do, and the one that comes out will invariably be dead honest.

Avery grew up in nearby Fairlee and went to Middlebury College. He tried Colorado for a couple of years after college, but he couldn't escape the obvious: You can take a Vermonter out of Vermont, but you can't take Vermont out of a Vermonter.

"Colorado was gorgeous, but it wasn't where I grew up," he says. "It didn't have the personality the East does." He returned to Vermont, married, now has two children, and can't imagine being elsewhere. "It's home," he says. "It's rural. Everyone knows everyone else."

So that's what you get, first and foremost, when you come to Lake Morey. You get real Vermont and real Vermonters, not some tourism-manufactured artifice. If you happen to walk into the golf-course restaurant at midday on a crisp October day, as I did, you won't find yourself amidst the pleated-pants country-club crowd. Instead, there will be three young kids lunching with their grandmother. Two elderly ladies in their pink pullovers and topsiders will be sipping warm soup. A couple of kids from the local junior-high golf program will be tugging at the sleeves of the grounds crew. And it

Accuracy is important at Lake Morey, with its tree-lined fairways and small greens providing the challenge.



will seem, indeed, that everyone does know everyone else.

Of course it's not always that way. While a day like that says a lot about where Lake Morey's soul resides, it doesn't say much about what makes the business tick. During the summer, Lake Morey is one of the most popular golf courses in the state, logging roughly 34,000 rounds annually. A lot of those rounds are played by locals, but most are the result of tourist visits, outings, and tournaments. When Lake Morey hosts the Vermont Open in June, pros from around the country come to visit and tee it up with Vermont's finest. The 2004 winner was Sean O'Hair, who made the top 20 on the PGA Tour money list in his rookie year of 2005.

Still, lots of players and lots of out-of-staters haven't trampled the Vermont character out of the course and the people who run it. Lake Morey is not a famous architect's monument to himself; it is, for the most part, straightforward, simple, and fair—all classic Vermont attributes. The golf director is Bill Ross, another Fairlee local who went to the University of Vermont and prides

himself in being "a true blue Vermonter. There aren't many of us left."

When I arrived on that October morning, I asked Ross to give me a quick briefing on the course before I headed out to play. Small greens, he told me, would demand unerringly accurate approach shots. Forty-foot-high pine trees lining the fairways would come into play. "They planted these little trees in 1955, and now, holy Moses," Ross said.

Finally, he said, I shouldn't get too optimistic if I was scoring well on the front nine. "The back nine is much more challenging. Holes 11 through 17 are where the golf course really requires a lot of shotmaking." With that, I walked out into the cool October sun, looked at the yardage on the card of just 6,024 from the tips, and envisioned, despite Ross's warnings, a gloriously low-scoring round.

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By New England standards, Lake Morey Resort is relatively young. The hotel first opened in 1905, and the

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first nine holes of golf were completed in 1915, designed by Vermonter George Salling. (The second nine was added in 1929.) But the history of the area stretches back long before that, with its principal character being Samuel Morey, whose name the lake—and, of course, the resort—now bears.

Morey was by trade an inventor, and as inventors tend to do, he would accidentally blow things up from time to time while fiddling around in his lakeside workshop. But accident led to invention in 1792, when Morey produced the world's first steamboat. Of course Robert Fulton, borrowing heavily from Morey, eventually got credit in 1807 as being father of the steamboat. Morey committed the inventor's great sin by failing to protect every aspect of his invention by patent, and Fulton stepped in to snatch the glory. Later, in 1826, Morey concocted an early version of the internal combustion engine, 65 years before the first gas-powered car.

I wished, as I marched around the golf course, that I could have borrowed from Samuel Morey's imaginative-ness. The course, I quickly discovered, requires above all a kind of creativity. The fairways are tight and the greens are indeed tiny. Options are many when it comes to chipping and the inevitable recovery shots, so you must choose wisely. You don't have to be a big banger, but you do have to be a clever recovery artist.

On the front nine, the trees kept getting in my way and the small greens kept eluding me. Bogeys began adding up on par fours no longer than 360 yards. The most useful club in my bag quickly became my five-iron; while the course-maintenance crew had generously trimmed low-hanging branches from all those fairway-lining pines, a five-iron was about all the loft I could afford in simply punching back to the fairway.

Most of the greens are under 4,000 square feet, or not much larger than a dinosaur's toenail. Chipping could be slippery business, with the greens tending to slope away to the sides. On the par-four eighth, I morosely watched a short birdie chip from in front of the green trickle off the back. Bogey. Again.

By parring the three par threes—a nice variety, ranging from the 232-yard first to the 119-yard seventh—I came in respectably with a 41 for the front nine, but watch out. The crucible of the back nine awaited.

My start was promising, particularly on the 11th, perhaps the best hole on the course. Hitting a drive 240 yards down the middle of the dogleg-right hole, I was set

up perfectly for an eight-iron approach over a deep ravine. The shot sailed straight and true, and even if the six-foot birdie putt strayed, I was happy with par.

I was feeling it now, ready to go low. A scrambling bogey on the 12th, a monstrous, 542-yard uphill par five was acceptable, even pleasant after being treated from the green to an expansive, classically Vermont view of the mountains to the east. I also figured that the par-five 13th, a relatively straightforward hole, would be the easier of the back-to-back par fives. That's why the sloppy 7 on my card looked absolutely nonsensical. Double bogeys on the par-four 14th and the par-three 15th looked comparably silly. They were hard holes, especially the 198-yard 15th over water, but not brutal. What happened?

The sad, final chapter of my story came with another double bogey on the 321-yard par-four 18th. That produced a final misery index of 41-48—89. Examining the scorecard, I found some solace in noting that the back nine was almost 500 yards longer than the front. Ross knew what he was talking about.

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One of the oddities of playing golf at Lake Morey is that, were it not for the name, you'd never know a lake was in the neighborhood. The lake, so close, is never even visible from the course.

After finishing my round, though, I walked through the lobby of the hotel, and there it was, a glittery mirror in the sun, cradled in hills turning crimson and orange in fall's last gasp. If I had come to Lake Morey in the high season of July and August, it would have been like going to summer camp. In addition to swimming and boating, the resort lists among its activities tennis, racquetball, basketball, horseshoes, ping pong, hiking, and who knows what else—anyone for a game of Capture the Flag? Heck, I could even have gotten married there; hosting weddings is a big business.

But if golf was my reason for coming to Lake Morey, it might be only the second-best reason for going back. The number-one reason to return: a chance to connect again with the soul of true, blue Vermont. As Bill Ross suggested, there's not much of it out there any more. ■

Peter Oliver writes about golf and skiing from his home in Warren.