Augusta National's Par 3 course

Short Has Long Been Part Of Elite Clubs' Lingo

As two of the most esteemed private clubs in America, Augusta National and Pine Valley share many of the same attributes. Brilliant course designs. Superbly conditioned turf. Enviable auras. Food, drink and dining service worthy of at least one Michelin star. And well-appointed cabins (as they are called at Augusta) or cottages (in the case of Pine Valley), where members and their guests may stay overnight in comfort and style.

Each club also boasts a first-rate short course, and they are the gold standard for layouts of that ilk – and models in many ways for those that have come after them.

Augusta National's Par 3 course, designed by co-founder Clifford Roberts and architect George Cobb, opened in 1958. Some members were skeptical of the creation initially, derisively referring to it as a "Tom Thumb" track (but surely not to the face of the famously solemn Roberts). But the layout proved to be very popular among club members, as a warm-up for games on the big course and a place for late arrivals to play a few holes before night fell (and night falls early in the winter months that make up the peak of Augusta's season). In time, the Par 3 course also came to be used for club competitions. As for visitors to Augusta National, it was something each and every guest wanted to experience. With the establishment of the Par 3 Contest in 1960, Roberts gave Masters contestants the chance to play the course in a casual yet competitive way. Its stature grew substantially after that, and even more so after CBS began televising the Par 3 Contest in 2008.

Pine Valley opened its short course in 1992. Its design also was the result of a collaboration between the man running the club (in this case, longtime club president Ernie Ransome) and an architect of note (Tom Fazio). Routed on 90 acres on the westernmost part of the club property, it was a 10-hole track. Ransome said he liked that number because it allowed people to play a five-hole Nassau. The course could be set up to play more than 2,000 yards, or as little as 1,200 yards, and eight of the holes were designed to evoke shots into greens on the big course. The first was modeled after the par-3 10th, the third like the approach to the green at No. 16 and the 10th like the second shot on No. 2.

As was the case with the Par 3 course at Augusta National, the Short Course at Pine Valley worked well for late arrivals hoping to get in a few holes before dark – and for first-timers looking for a sense of what the big course would be all about when they finally got to play it. It also presented a pleasing alternative for golfers who were too fatigued to play a second 18 holes in the same day, and gave the professional staff a way to spread out play when things became busy.

Though Augusta and Pine Valley have the best-known of the short courses in the club world, they are but two of what has become a much broader collection. The Olympic Club in San Francisco, for example, features the nine-hole Cliffs Course to go along with its two 18-hole tracks, the Ocean and the Lake. The Cliffs is a par-3 gem routed in 1994 on bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean by Tom Weiskopf and Jay Morrish.

"It's a great place for beginners, and I know a lot of good players who will hit balls for a bit and then go play the Cliffs when they don't have time to get in a full 18 holes," says Andrew Biggadike, a member at Olympic and a top amateur golfer who won the 2018 Walter Travis Invitational. "If I have guests coming for an afternoon game and they get to the club a bit early, we'll go over and play the Cliffs first. Olympic also has a Cliffs Course club championship. It's a one-day event in which you play the course two times, and it is a lot of fun."

Eagle Point Golf Club in Wilmington, N.C., has a charming par-3 track of its own, also designed by Fazio, and the six-hole Short Course at Saucon Valley Country Club in Bethlehem, Pa., has been a favorite of golfers there for more than 60 years. The concept has long been a popular one