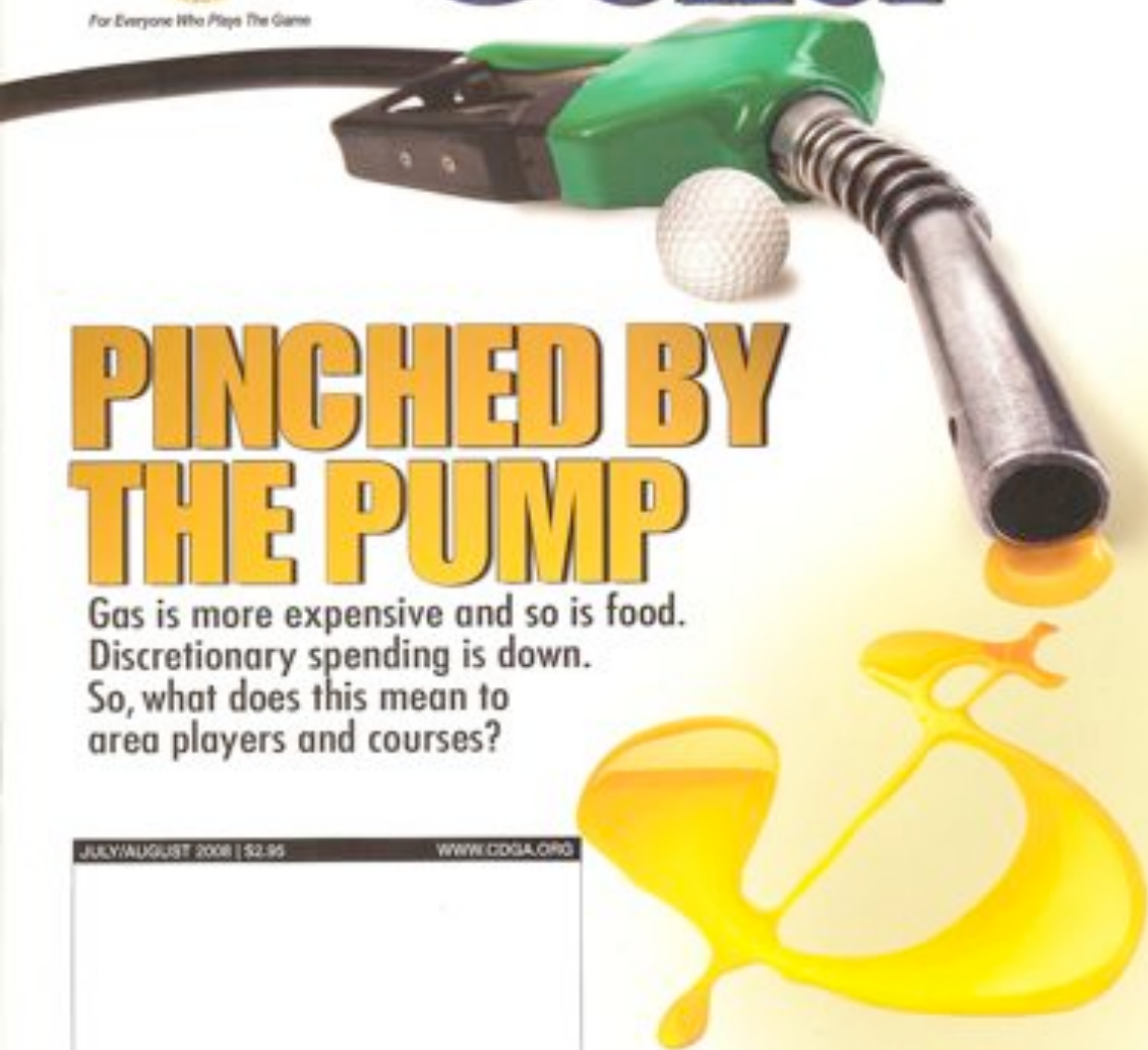


Chicago DISTRICT Golfer



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It's fine in French Lick

In his home state of Indiana, Pete Dye is re-establishing a resort's once-grand reputation.

By Len Ziehm

The restoration of a southern Indiana town into the resort destination it once was isn't over yet, but as far as most observers are concerned, it's already an unqualified success. Golfers are returning to French Lick Resort, but they haven't seen anything yet.

Fascinated by history in general or golf history in particular, Chicagoans are taking the 6-hour drive to French Lick, where there's plenty to check out. The Donald Ross Course had been reopened in May and the Tom Bendelow Course, reduced from 18 holes to nine, was reopened in September.

During the winter, *Golf Digest* named the Donald Ross Course as the second-best new public course remodel of 2007.

The Ross layout had formerly been known as the Hill Course and it was the site of the 1924 PGA Championship, won by Walter Hagen, back when French Lick was in its heyday. It also was the site of the LPGA Championship in 1959, when Betty Rawls won, and 1960, when Mickey Wright took the second of her four LPGA titles.

French Lick Resort Casino invested \$46 million with the Schmidt-Curley design firm and the Donald Ross Society to re-create the layout Ross designed in 1917. A state-of-the-art irrigation system and old photos were used to restore the shape of 35 original bunkers and 18 greens. To have that most worthy project recognized by *Golf Digest* delighted Dave Harner, French Lick's



The spas at French Lick Resort Casino offer a variety of mineral springs baths.

director of golf operations.

"A great honor for a wonderful course," Harner said. "It was a very special project, restoring this legendary course back to its original Ross design. We couldn't be more honored or proud."

The restoration of the Bendelow Course, a \$1 million project on what had been known as the Valley Links course, wasn't of the same magnitude, but French Lick's next course will be. Opening in the spring of 2009, French Lick will have a new course that might loom as the career highlight for renowned designer Pete Dye, an Indiana native.

Dye is 82 and he's given his French Lick layout extensive scrutinizing. Soon, Harner predicts, Dye will be making his feelings more public.

"Pete was last here in early December



West Baden Springs Hotel, reopened after closing in 1932.

and was very pleased, very positive and upbeat about the course," Harner said. "As of December, he'd made 73 trips here. That's a very personal interest."

There's been no rush to get the course into operation, and that policy will continue. There'll be some play this year, but not a grand opening. With the exception of two holes, all seeding was completed by last September. Harner feels nine holes are playable already, but there's no hurry to bring in public play.

The layout is built on one of the highest spots in Indiana. Marry



Above: The ninth green on the Tom Bendelow Course. Left: The lobby of the historic West Baden Springs Hotel.



industry observers strongly suspect it'll be recognized as Dye's finest work, high praise considering his many creations that have received worldwide acclaim, such as Whistling Straits, TPC/Sawgrass and Crooked Stick.

To fully appreciate what's been going on in French Lick now, a history lesson would be in store. The revival of its golf courses is just a part—a big part—in the revival of a community that survived decades of hard times.

In the early 20th century, the French Lick Springs Hotel and the West Baden Springs Hotel were the vacation choice of celebrities. They went for the health offerings, primary of which were the nearby golf courses.

Then, beginning with the stock market crash of 1929, things started going downhill. The huge, stately hotels stopped getting visitors. The West Baden Springs Hotel was closed, reopening some 75 years later after an

extensive restoration project. French Lick Springs Resort also had to be closed for a complete renovation.

During the down time, French Lick became best known as the home of basketball icon Larry Bird. Other than an auto dealership, Bird's influence on the community has waned as the resorts and golf courses have brought business back to French Lick. The French Lick Resort Casino was the result of a \$382 million historic restoration and casino development.

But the best is yet to come. Even before the Dye Course opens, French Lick returned to the national golf calendar in May as the site of a U.S. Open qualifier. Additionally, the PGA of America announced it will use the Ross and Dye layouts for the 2010 PGA Professional National Championship.

Lots of people, it seems, are finding their way back to French Lick. ●

Let Zickler cover golf for the Chicago Sun-Times.