

# Getaway to Onaway

The well-bunkered 515 yard par-5  
15th at Black Lake GC.



## Rees Jones' Black Lake GC a Perennial Top 100 Public Course

By *Glen Turk*

All photos courtesy Brian Weis, GolfTrips.com

Golf course designer Rees Jones may be known in national circles as the “Open Doctor,” for his skillful restorations of U.S. Open venues such as Torrey Pines and Congressional, but in the Midwest Jones deserves major accolades for the creation of **Black Lake GC** in Onaway, Michigan. If you’d like to put a glint in the eye of the 72 year-old New Jersey native, simply remind him that Black Lake has been included within *Golf Digest’s* Top 100 Public Course List *every year* since the property opened in 2000.

Black Lake’s 14 year run of unparalleled success is not only a credit to Jones, the son of legendary designer Robert Trent Jones Sr., but to the quality of the land he had to work with. “The holes were here, we just had to find them,” Jones said. “We strive for holes blending with the natural terrain. There is nothing artificial or contrived at Black Lake. We were trying to build an old-style course. You’ll notice we don’t have mounds

or moguls, we just have sweeps and natural grades,” explained Jones.

The 7,000 yard plus public gem was constructed as an amenity of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America. The founders also created an excellent addition, the **Walter and May Reuther UAW Family Education Center**, which offers two- and three-bedroom condos adjacent to the course for those looking to stay the night.

The incomparable layout, framed by mature hardwoods and evergreens, incorporates natural wetlands, native sand pits and several ponds over 300 acres of pristine forest. Black Lake’s practice facility features a 350 yard double-sided range, four practice bunkers, four chipping and multiple putting greens. It is here that the **Black Lake Golf Academy** thrives,

offering instruction for juniors, men, women and couples. The women-only golf schools are a Black Lake tradition and sell out every summer.

Complementing the championship course is **The Little Course**, a nine-hole par-3 that plays roughly 700 yards and is designed to introduce young people to the game as well as sharpen veteran players' short games. In addition, Black Lake also features a gorgeous rustic clubhouse complete with the **Black Lake Grill** dining room and lounge, and men's and women's locker rooms.

Since Midwest Golfing Magazine has had the honor of featuring this Midwestern marvel in past issues, we thought it was time to get the opinion of the one man who knows Black Lake better than anyone, course architect Rees Jones. We had the privilege of interviewing Jones earlier this year and are thrilled to present his answers below.

**WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU SAW THE LAND THAT WOULD BECOME BLACK LAKE?**

It was just such a naturally beautiful place that I could immediately see why the UAW made it a recreation center that they did. The land was ample – I believe the reason the course is so highly rated is because the land is perfectly suited for a golf course.

**WHAT WAS YOUR DESIGN STRATEGY GOING INTO LAYING OUT THE HOLES AT BLACK LAKE?**

We basically used the terrain to guide us as there were wetlands on the site between holes No. 6 and No. 8 plus we built a lake bordering the 10th hole. We tried to build an old classic golf course that has natural features with no artificial mounds and just let the land dictate the shots for golfers.

**WAS THE OVERALL ROUTING OF COURSE EASY TO DECIDE OR DID YOU HAVE A FEW OPTIONS TO WORK WITH?**

We always have multiple routings to choose from but in this case the land was so ample we had a lot of possibilities. If you look at the back nine it kind of loops around a lot of land but I really think it turned out extremely well.

*Legendary designer  
Rees Jones*



**THE PAR-5 6TH HOLE IN OUR OPINION IS ONE OF THE FINEST ON THE PROPERTY. DO YOU AGREE?**

It really is one of my favorite par-5s because it was just there for us to find. It's a short par-5 so it's very similar to Augusta National where you can go for both par-5s on the back nine if you hit a good drive. But there is trouble looming on all par-5s at Black Lake if you mishit your shots.

**WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE HOLE AT BLACK LAKE AND WHY?**

I really try to stay away from having favorite holes, but I will say in a perfect world I'd like a foursome of golfers to have four different favorite holes when they finish their round. I do really like the par-3 14th hole at Black Lake because it is so dramatic. It is built on a natural sand pit and once we found it we knew we had to incorporate it into a huge bunker.

**WHAT ELSE DO YOU REALLY LOVE ABOUT BLACK LAKE?**

I love the fact that both nines end with par-5s which means if you have a match going on anything can happen on a par-5 and quite often the higher handicap players gets a stroke which really can make the holes interesting.

**WHOSE IDEA WAS IT TO INCORPORATE A LITTLE COURSE AT BLACK LAKE AND IS IT ONE OF THE BEST YOU'VE EVER DESIGNED?**

The former president of the UAW Stephen Yokich really wanted a place where children and families could learn the game on a playable golf course. That's what we need more of – short golf courses like that so we can get more people into this great game. Everybody we worked with at the UAW wanted the Short Course to be just as special as the long course so no one held us back on what we wanted to do.

**DO YOU HAVE ANY BEHIND-THE-SCENES STORIES FROM THE MAKING OF BLACK LAKE YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE?**

I had to go up to Black Lake because Mr. Yokich was going to be there and it happened to be my birthday (September 16th). Unbeknownst to me, they threw a big birthday party complete with a cake and my favorite meal. I remember that very fondly.

Finally, I'd just like to say that when you look at the redesign I did at Oakland Hills plus how well Black Lake turned out, I have a tremendous amount of pride of what our design team has been able to do for golf in Michigan. I think it's well worth the drive and trip since it's such a very special place. For more information on Black Lake GC, visit [www.blacklakegolf.com](http://www.blacklakegolf.com) or call (989) 733-GOLF(4653).

A view from behind the short 353 yard par-4 11th.



**You Could Rename Black Lake "The Accolade"**

Recent Awards and Recognitions:

- *Golf Digest* – 2013 - #69 on "America's 100 Greatest Public Courses".
- *Golfweek* - 2013 - #6 "Best Courses to play in Michigan"
- *Golf Digest* - 2013 - #39 "America's Top 50 Courses for Women"
- Certified by Audubon International, Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary System and the Michigan State Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program



**Value-Driven: Black Lakes' 2014 Rates**

	SUMMER 5/17 Thru 9/22		SPRING 4/1 Thru 5/16 FALL 9/23-Until Close	
	Weekdays Mon.-Thu.	Weekend Fri.-Sun.	Weekdays Mon.-Thu.	Weekend Fri.-Sun.
18 holes with cart	\$60.00	\$75.00	\$50.00	\$60.00
9 holes with cart	\$35.00	\$45.00	\$30.00	\$35.00
Twilight with cart	\$40.00	\$50.00	\$35.00	\$40.00

Twilight is after 3:00 PM