

PGA Championship, Whistling Straits, Wis.



The awesome 18th Hole at Whistling Straits

By Mike Beckman

Watching Vijay Singh being presented the PGA Wannamaker Trophy after the thrilling three-hole playoff with Justin Leonard

Photo above by Art McCafferty

and Chris DiMarco in the 86th PGA Championship, August 15, I had a flashback to seven years ago at exactly the same site. Standing on an 80-foot bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, nine miles north of Kohler, Wis., I was trying to listen to Steve Friedlander, Director of Golf for the Kohler Company,

and conjure up an image of the grand undertaking of creating a championship course to replicate and rival the great links courses in Scotland and Ireland. How could a former U.S. Army anti-aircraft firing range 10 miles north of Kohler be America's answer to Ballybunyan? Teeing off the fol-

lowing year at the grand opening with Art McCafferty of the Michigan Golfer, our questions were answered with an awesome, 'Wow!' Each hole was a new treat and adventure. No carts. Irish cad-dies. No trees. Irish black sheep with bells on, and 1,400 bunkers. It was, and still is one of the most challenging and beautiful courses I have ever played. And that list includes Treetops, The Bear, Oakland Hills, Pebble Beach, and many of the resort facilities in Arizona.

Pete Dye and Herbert V. Kohler, Jr. President, CEO, and Chairman of the Board of the

Blackwolf Run in 1998, won by Se Ri Pak in a playoff. The tournament set LPGA records in attendance that still stand.

Upon completion of Whistling Straits, Kohler set out to get a men's major. The course landed the 1999 U.S. Club Pro Championship and the word was rapidly spreading as to the magnificence and toughness of this gem. Just this year the USGA announced the U.S. Men's Senior Open will be held at Whistling Straits in 2007. Initial talk is already under way for another PGA, a U.S. Open and possibly a Ryder Cup.

For the two weeks prior to the championship players were complaining about the length of 7,600 yards and the fact that they had to play the 1,400 bunkers as hazards got the attention of Dye. "This course is played every day by 200 golfers like you and I. The course is popcorn," he said with a smile. "Some people choke on popcorn." The PGA did give in to the players and shortened the run by about 150 yards. The conditions were perfect, no wind and the scores were low. Saturday and Sunday however, the officials went back on the tees and Sunday the wind finally blew off the lake. The

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Kohler Company have teamed up to develop one of the finest golf destinations in the world. Right next to the Straits course is the Irish Course, inland and west of the PGA venue and a very nice hunk of land in its own right. And of course the two Blackwolf Run Courses, the River Course and the Meadow Valleys Course located in Kohler. One of the big reasons the PGA was played on such a young course was the great success of the Women's U.S. Open held at

With so many years without a men's major (1933 PGA Championship won by Gene Sarazen at Bluemound Country Club in Milwaukee), the many golf fans in Wisconsin were ready. Although the PGA hasn't released exact figures the seven-day event averaged 40,000-45,000 each day with Saturday and Sunday getting closer to 50,000. The flow of this many people in an area quite rural was a phenomenal success.

course finally had its revenge. A final-round 76 got Singh into the playoff. What a great finish to a great week. This wrapped up the 2004 Grand Slam. As Terry Moore of Michigan Golfer said, "The Masters and three British Opens," with an exclamation point. Herb Kohler, Pete Dye, the PGA, the players, the thousands of staff and volunteers, and the fans made this a memorable event that will be talked about in Wisconsin for years to come. *MG*