Ontario’s Top 50 Courses

Determining the province’s best golf clubs requires some thorough number crunching and one carefully chosen panel of experts.

There is an immense responsibility that comes with publishing Ontario’s Top 50 golf courses. Future playing habits and careers can be affected. A facility’s entire marketing plan can hinge on the final tally. Determining the best of anything, however—particularly when dependent upon personal opinion—can never be reduced to empirical evidence. But while it can’t be an exact science, Ontario Golf continues to produce the most extensive and thorough golf course ranking that is conducted in this country.

Sheer geography and more than 3,200 courses make national rankings a demanding task. But province-wide, we’ve got the bases covered, thanks to our panel of 55 experts whose golf experiences have taken them to all parts of Ontario. To give you an idea of how extensively they’ve played, each panel member was supplied a list of what we believe to be the 291 best courses in Ontario. Panelists were permitted to select from off the list, but only one of the 2,200 votes cast identified a course we hadn’t anticipated, suggesting that we covered every key facility in the province on that master list. The typical panel member, it turns out, has played 129 of those 291 courses and more than 80 percent of the top 10. Nine of our panelists have played more than 160 of those courses; three of them in excess of 200.

Voters were required to identify which courses from that list that they had played. Points were assigned to each of the top 40 courses chosen by each panel member, with 50 points given for a first-place vote, 47 for second, 44 for third, 41 for fourth, 38 for fifth and then 35, 34, 33 and so forth for the remaining selections, down to one point for a 40th-place pick. Total points were calculated for each of the 186 courses that received at least one vote. That total was then divided by the number of panelists who had actually played that course (a minimum of 10 panel members has to play a course for it to be eligible, and a course had to have been opened prior to July 1, 2006 to be eligible). In other words, the golf course that finishes first has the highest ratio of points per panelist who has played the course. That, we feel, is the truest indication of what our 55 experts believe to be best.

We provided panelists with no criteria for determining their picks. As previously noted, there is no perfect equation for identifying greatness. For some it’s a Ferrari, for others it’s a Rolls-Royce. To some, a course’s memorability is the most important element, while others rank the club’s history or its conditioning as a more vital factor. We do not presume to know what constitutes greatness any more than any of the 55 well-traveled men and women who have participated in this biennial ranking.

The panel consists of many of the top golf writers in Ontario, a number of its finest players—both amateur and professional—key industry types and golf association executives, and even a few passionate recreational amateurs. We also have our largest female contingent to date. To prevent the opportunity for bias, panel members cannot select courses with which they are affiliated (in those situations, however, their course or courses are not identified as having been played by that panel member—otherwise, it would be tantamount to receiving a score of 0). To further avoid personal bias from affecting their judgment, panelists were informed that their top five votes would be published. To their credit, they have again selected objectively and honourably as a group. Were you to view all 40 selections from each panelist, you would be hard-pressed to determine any allegiances.

Tallying the final numbers is always a major undertaking. They are checked at two different junctures before being audited by Robert Kloet (B.S.C./C.M.A.) of Hamilton’s Kloet Management Services. What follows are the results of the most accurate and thorough ranking of Ontario golf courses ever conducted.
St. George's G&CC

"Without doubt the best example of Stanley Thompson's timeless genius, Ian Andrew's restoration renewed the lustre to this, the crown jewel of Ontario golf." - ROBERT THOMPSON

"The best par-4s in Canada, placing a premium on accuracy. With green speeds reaching 12 on the stimpmeter, you must be below the hole or have an exceptional short game." - DANNY KING

Gorgeous. Grand. Sophisticated. Strategic. St. George's is without doubt the masterwork of legendary Canadian golf architect Stanley Thompson and the course against which all others in the country are judged.

Its rolling natural parkland and Thompson's decidedly clever use of the existing terrain, coupled with shots that continue to confound and challenge golfers more than 75 years after it first opened to play as the Royal York Golf Club, give St. George's a timeless, classic appeal.

But even the most beautiful models in the world need the occasional facelift and a shot of Botox to stay young and vibrant-looking. So it was with St. George's, which placed itself under the knife of restoration expert Ian Andrew and superintendent John Gall starting in 2002. Their work faithfully reproduced Thompson's remarkable flashed bunkering, right down to emulating the detail work created in the 1920s by rebuilding the bunkers by hand, as opposed to the modern convenience of machinery.

Andrew, who did the restoration while working for Doug Carrick, thinks St. George's strength lies in both its beauty and its details. "It has the best set of long par-4s in Canada," says Andrew. "It is easy to make them long, but it is hard to make them interesting. In the case of St. George's it is the use of the valleys and the green sites, which force you to place your tee shot to have an easier approach, that set the course apart."

Perhaps most surprisingly—considering many hold it up as the best not only in Ontario but in all of Canada—is that St. George's has room to get better. Surely some of Robbie Robinson's changes for the 1968 Canadian Open have not weathered the decades well. The notorious third green, with its severely canted back-to-front slope that is only separated from a mini-putt by the lack of a clown mouth and overhang, should well be altered to conform to the rest of the course.

Regardless, that's a slight blemish on a masterpiece, a course that OGC's team of raters felt was the best in 2005, and continue to feel is unsurpassed today.
Hamilton G&CC

"Harry Colt's masterful design has withstood the test of time. It flows seamlessly over the rolling property, and the fairways are lined with countless varieties of trees, some so rare they're found almost nowhere else in Canada." — Garry McKay

"Canada's Winged Foot, with a world-class seal of approval from PGA Tour players." — Henry Brunton

Few courses in Canada have received as much time in the limelight as Ancaster's Hamilton Golf and Country Club has witnessed in the past five years.

The beneficiary of significant praise from PGA Tour pros for hosting both the 2003 and 2007 Canadian Open, and only one of three Canadian courses in Golf Magazine's Top 100 in the world, Hamilton is now well-established as one of the province's elite three layouts.

And what's not to love? Right from the first hole, a tricky mid-length par-4 that features a plunging fairway to a contoured green, through to the tough downhill-uphill closer, Hamilton proves to be a testament to a golf course's resiliency and longevity. One of only two courses in Canada designed by England's Harry Colt (on the same trip in which he consulted to the fabled Pine Valley Golf Club in New Jersey), Hamilton G&CC provided the architect with an exquisite piece of land with which to work. Fairways plunge and dip, forcing golfers to use strategy more than power. Its greens subtly break to reject all but the best-struck putts. In many ways it is Colt's North American masterpiece.

It wasn't always perceived this way. Long-time Hamilton head pro Rob McDannold says the accolades for Hamilton are relatively recent. "There were dark days in the 1980s," he explains. "And when I say dark, I mean real darkness. There were simply way too many trees during that time."

Maybe the darkness meant some couldn't see the greatness of Hamilton's fine rolling parkland layout. Whatever the reason, ScoreGolf magazine chose to leave the course out of one of its Top 50 list altogether in the decade, McDannold recalls.

By 1996, with many of the trees removed, Hamilton hosted the Canadian Senior Open. McDannold says the touring pros told Hamilton's members what they weren't able to see for themselves: That the course was one of the best they'd played.

"The course has a terrific routing and that's something you can't take away from it," he says. "It is a great Harry Colt design."
"It is as fulsome a test today as it was 30 years ago. Whether it's your second or 20th round, one cannot make their way up Pine Valley Drive without feeling equal parts excitement and fear for the examination that is to follow," MIKE SHAPIRA

"The course punishes mis-hit, misjudged or poorly thought-out shots more severely than any golf course in Canada. If you score even close to your handicap, you've played a great round." BOB BEAUCHEMIN

It is tough staying on top. Though it has reached the pinnacle of Ontario golf in the past (OG's panellists had it #1 in 2001), the National remains stationary in OG's 2007 ratings.

Created in a residential area north of Toronto over the bones of the old Pine Valley Golf Club, the National is a terrifying mix of visual intimidation and holes that require precision and power. In many instances at the National, par is an imaginary number. The course's difficulty is now the stuff of legend, largely stemming from Lee Trevino's 1979 win at Canadian PGA Championship. Trevino shot 67 from the lips—still the competitive course record.

Not satisfied with the status quo, the club's membership has recently undertaken a significant renovation designed to add length in the era of the Pro V1. Under the direction of Tom Fazio, the course added new tees, reconfigured fairways and altered bunkering to bring it more into the realm of today's long bombers. Most notably, the 10th, a drop-shot par-3, has been altered to bring surrounding water more into play, and the 18th has seen its fairway reworked to allow players to see the green from the approach.

Fazio says the alterations reflect the changes in the game in the three decades since The National first opened.

"The golf industry has changed and I've evolved," said Fazio about the need to alter The National. "The game has changed. I mean, if Donald Ross were alive today and saw the distance tour pros hit the ball, do you think he'd adjust Pinehurst No. 2? Of course he would."

Not all of the recent changes have been universally well-received, which may explain why OG's raters didn't see the need to move The National up in its rankings. While the lengthening and toughening of some holes has been lauded, and the move to streamline the course's finish, the renovation of the 16th hole, with its severally sloped fairway, has not been met as positively.
"Although often characterized as a mosaic of Pinehurst- and Shinneock Hills-style holes, the common theme at Beacon Hall is that all 18 tee shots need to be strategically placed in order to score well." GEORGE BEDARD

"It’s like dating two different beautiful women on the same night—it’s both challenging and keeps your attention every minute." BOB BREHL

"Beacon Hall has been described as schizophrenic. But juggling the best of the Carolinas with the best of the ‘old country’ is what makes it so memorable. The par-5 10th is one of my favourite holes in golf. And its conditioning has always been one of its greatest strengths." JOHN BLADON

Unusual, given the differing styles of its back and front nines, Beacon Hall remains one of the strongest courses in the province, having appeared in OG’s Top 10 every year the ranking panel has been held.

The design, by American Bob Cupp (also responsible for Mad River Golf Club), begins with holes that play through dense forest of vast pines, inching close to target golf. The best holes have plunging elevation changes and slippery greens.

The club leaves the parkland for the final nine, taking on more of a links look in the process. While the playing corridors appear wider on the back nine, it is an illusion. The concluding stretch at Beacon Hall, with its ever-present fescue lining the fairways, is every bit the equal of its opening holes.

Standouts abound, including the dramatic 16th, surely one of the best long one-shot holes in Canada. With a tee perched on the top of a small hill, players are forced to hit a long-iron or fairway wood across a valley to the crest of a hill. Not for the weak of heart, the 16th at Beacon Hall has likely ruined more rounds than any other hole in the province.

Though troubled by occasionally spotty conditioning in past years, the club has rebounded under superintendent Paul Scenna.

A usually quiet private club with only 241 members, Beacon Hall received a rare public showing this summer when it opened its doors to teams from 18 countries across North and South America for the 2007 Copa de las Americas amateur event.
"A great old tree-lined course with a mixture of holes and with superior shot values." - STEPHEN JOHNSTON

"An underestimated Stanley Thompson design perhaps lost in the shadows of its stately trees. One of those classic courses few go gaga over, but one that everyone knows is a rock-solid design well-deserving of its top 10 status." - TED MINTYRE

Considered designer Stanley Thompson’s second-best course in 2005, Westmount Golf and Country Club rounds out the top five for the second consecutive time.

More than 75 years since it was first opened, Westmount remains one of Thompson’s top creations. The club hosted a dozen major events during its first 50 years, including the 1957 Canadian Open where a teenaged Bob Panasik became the youngest player to make a cut in a PGA Tour event. More recently, the du Maurier Classic was held there in 1990.

Though majestic overhanging trees have defined the course in recent years, it is Thompson’s heaving fairways that are the real stars at Westmount. Leaving few with a level lie, the short grass at Westmount forces players to become proficient at hitting shots from above and below their feet, a skill that has all but disappeared in the modern era of evenly graded fairways.

Overall, the landscaping and maintenance are top-notch at this distinguished 6,943-yard, par-73 layout, one of the first to grace the Kitchener-Waterloo region. Many feel the Canadian Open could be returned to the site in coming years, given the success of the event at nearby Hamilton Golf and Country Club, one of Westmount’s few peers in the province.
"The traditional use of pot- and sod-walled bunkers, fescue and sand dunes encompasses everything I truly enjoy about a golf course." — DANNY FRITZ

"Dramatic elevation changes, terrifying bunkers, hip-deep fescue and a tricky but terrific Doug Carrick routing make this golf course an exercise in survival, but also an experience that's difficult to duplicate anywhere else in the province." — JAMES MCCARTEN

Heralded as one of the great public golf experiences in Ontario when it first opened four years ago, Eagles Nest remains near the top of its class according to OG's panel of raters, slipping only one spot from its inaugural showing in 2005.

Built on a former aggregate pit and next to a reclaimed landfill site, the course's topography would hardly sound like an appealing place for golf. But utilizing a creative style that created massive artificial dunes and punctuating the site with sod-wall bunkers, designer Doug Carrick crafted brilliance in an unlikely location.

"There were parts of the site—specifically the valley holes—that had natural drama, but much of the remainder was tougher," says Carrick.

On a tour of the site, the architect convinced owners Jim DeGasperis and Garry Zentil that their proposed course might best be brought to life by emulating one of the United Kingdom's fabled links. That freed Carrick up to try some unusual design features, like the semi-blind green on the 14th, or the split fairway on the par-5 17th.

"Jim and Garry gave us a lot of licence to try some things you wouldn't normally try on a North American course," Carrick says. "We had a lot of fun building it, that's for sure."
"Visually spectacular, with dizzying elevation changes, rock-walled canyons, expansive water hazards, great course conditioning and an unparalleled collection of par-3s." — Bill Rivers

"Near perfection! Apart from the great test of golf it provides, each ride from green to tee is filled with the anticipation of what awaits you when you step onto the next tee box." — Gerry Dobson

"Drop your jaw, snap a photo, take a shot... drop your jaw, snap a photo, take a shot. This is golf at Muskoka Bay." — Ted McIntyre

By redefining the look and playability of Muskoka golf, Doug Carrick once again has found acclaim with Muskoka Bay. But no one can claim he played it safe with the design, which includes jagged bunkering, judicious use of exposed rock and some difficult raised green sites. With majestic tee shots designed to highlight the rugged terrain of the site located just west of Gravenhurst, Muskoka Bay is part of an ambitious real estate development.

Carrick’s design matched the development’s moxy, by taking big risks in including quirky elements to the course like the blind approach over a rocky outcropping on the ninth hole, and a semi-blind tee shot on the par-5 12th.

“The site for the ninth green just presented itself,” says Carrick. “To be honest I was a little bit nervous about how it would be received.”

But like the course itself, golfers at Muskoka Bay seem to be embracing its unique nature, which pleases its creator.

“I knew people would either like it or hate it,” Carrick explains. “Thankfully, so far, the reaction has been genuinely positive.”

Redtail’s reputation as Ontario’s most exclusive club may have been usurped by Muskoka’s Ovinbyrd, but this minimalist design remains one of the province’s best courses.

Situated off a gravel road in a rural Southern Ontario, Redtail’s mystique was slightly broken when it opened its gates to spectators for the 2005 Ontario Amateur. The lure of the course is such that the event had a record number of entrants, and an equally unusual number of spectators.

Given the legend that has built up around the club since it opened almost two decades ago, many spectators and players likely initially found the course underwhelming. Built with minimal earth-moving by English architect Donald Steel, Redtail’s look—with its narrow fairways punctuated by very few bunkers—is decidedly understated. But for those who investigate it more closely, the course’s plunging and rolling greens are the great equalizer.

Known for its private nature, including a clubhouse with several bedrooms, Redtail’s fabled “Round Table” of members includes Research In Motion Ltd. co-CEO Jim Balsillie, CN chair David McLean, movie star Sean Connery and approximately 100 others who pay annual dues to belong to the club.
The Top 25 you can play

Bigwin Island still leads the list, but Eagles Nest and Muskoka Bay are close behind

Although 17 of Ontario’s new edition of Top 50 courses allow the public golfer to tee it up on their sacred grounds, three of them—ClubLink’s Delta Rocky Crest and Delta Grandview and the prestigious Inn and Manitou—restrict non-member play to resort guests only—meaning that Joe Golfer is left with extensive public access to only 14 layouts on the elite list. Topping the category for a second straight ranking is Bigwin Island, one of the truly unique golf experiences in Canada. Two more Doug Carrick designs are close on its heels, however, the spectacular, links-like Eagles Nest and a breathtaking newcomer, Muskoka Bay. Here are the lucky 14, as well as the next 11 highest ranked places you can play in the province (their overall 2007 ranking is in brackets).

1. Bigwin Island GC, Lake of Bays (6)
2. Eagles Nest GC, Maple (8)
3. Muskoka Bay GC, Gravenhurst (9)
4. Taboo, Gravenhurst (17)
5. Glen Abbey GC, Oakville (20)
6. Osprey Valley Resorts (Healthlands), Alton (21)
7. Copper Creek GC, Kleinburg (27)
8. Deerhurst Highlands, Huntsville (34)
9. Angus Glen GC (South), Markham (36)
10. Whitewater GC, Thunder Bay (37)
11. Seguin Valley GC, Parry Sound (38)
12. The Raven at Lora Bay, Thornbury (43)
14. Osprey Valley Resort (Wasteland), Alton (49)
15. Grand Niagara Resort, Niagara Falls (Rees Jones), (51)
16. Bond Head GC (South), Bond Head (52)
17. The Ambassador Club, Windsor (55)
18. The Marshes GC, Kanata (57)
19. Legends on the Niagara (Usshers Creek), Niagara Falls (60)
20. Timberwolf GC, Thunder Bay (63)
21. Wooden Sticks GC, Uxbridge (66)
22. Legends on the Niagara (Battlefield), Niagara Falls (68)
23. Lionhead G&CC (Legends), Brampton (71)
24. Kawartha G&CC, Peterborough (72)
25. Timber Ridge GC, Brighton (74)
## Ontario’s Top 50 Golf Courses

### 1. St. George’s G&CC, Etobicoke
- Renovations by Robbie Robinson
- Robert Trent Jones (1960)
- 2005 ranking: 1

### 2. Hamilton G&CC (West/South), Ancaster
- Harry Colt (1914)
- 2005 ranking: 2

### 3. The National Golf Club of Canada, Woodbridge
- George and Tom Fazio (1975)
- 2005 ranking: 3

### 4. Beacon Hall GC, Aurora
- Robert Cupp (1988)
- 2005 ranking: 4

### 5. Westmount G&CC, Kitchener
- Stanley Thompson (1931)
- 2005 ranking: 5

### 6. Bigwin Island GC, Lake of Bays
- Doug Carrick (2001)
- 2005 ranking: 6

### 7. Coppinwood GC, Uxbridge
- Tom Fazio (2006)
- 2005 ranking: NR

### 8. Eagles Nest GC, Maple
- Doug Carrick (2003)
- 2005 ranking: 7

### 9. Muskoka Bay Club, Gravenhurst
- Doug Carrick (2005)
- 2005 ranking: NR

### 10. Redtail GC, St. Thomas
- Donald Steel (1990)
- 2005 ranking: 8

### 11. Devil’s Paintbrush, Caledon
- Hurdzan/Fry (1992)
- 2005 ranking: 9

### 12. The Ridge at Manitou, McKellar
- 2005 ranking: NR

### 13. Devil’s Pulpit GA, Caledon
- Hurdzan/Fry (1990)
- 2005 ranking: 17

### 14. Toronto GC, Mississauga
- Harry Colt (1912)
- 2005 ranking: 14

### 15. London Hunt and CC, London
- Robert Trent Jones (1960)
- 2005 ranking: 11

### 16. Rocky Crest GC, MacTier
- Tom McBrann (2000)
- 2005 ranking: 10

### 17. Taboo, Gravenhurst
- Ron Carl (2002)
- 2005 ranking: 12

### 18. Brantford G&CC, Brantford
- George Cumming, Nicol Thompson, Stanley Thompson and Robbie Robinson (1906)
- 2005 ranking: 16

### 19. Magna GC, Aurora
- Doug Carrick (2000)
- 2005 ranking: 25

### 20. Glen Abbey GC, Oakville
- Jack Nicklaus (1976)
- 2005 ranking: 13

### 21. Osprey Valley Resorts (Heathlands course), Alton
- Percy Barrett, George Cumming and Stanley Thompson (1906)
- 2005 ranking: 21

### 22. Mississaugua G&CC, Mississauga
- 2005 ranking: 18

### 23. The Georgian Bay Club, Clarksburg
- Willie Park Jr. (1920)
- 2005 ranking: 38

### 24. Weston G&CC, Toronto
- Donald Ross (1929)
- 2005 ranking: 15

### 25. Essex G&CC, Windsor
- Tom McBrann (1991)
- 2005 ranking: 22

### 26. Heron Point Golf Links, Ancaster
- Doug Carrick (2002)
- 2005 ranking: 29

### 27. Copper Creek GC, Kleinburg
- A.W. Tillinghast (1924)**
- 2005 ranking: 26

### 28. Scarboro G&CC, Scarboro
- Doug Carrick (1990)
- 2005 ranking: 33

### 29. King Valley GC, King City
- Stanley Thompson (1924)
- 2005 ranking: 24
The Raven GC at Lora Bay, Thornbury

31. Deer Ridge GC, Kitchener .................................................. 13.91
  Tom McBroom (1991)
  2005 ranking: 19

32. Rosedale GC, Toronto .................................................. 13.71
  Tom Bendelow (1893), Renovations by Donald Ross (1919) and Robert
  Cupp (1988)
  2005 ranking: 28

33. Wildfire GC, Stoney Lake .................................................. 13.38
  2005 ranking: 23

34. Deerhurst Highlands, Huntsville ...................................... 13.15
  Robert Cupp and Tom McBroom (1990)
  2005 ranking: 32

35. Oakdale G&CC, Downsvlew ............................................ 13.05
  Stanley Thompson (1926)
  2005 ranking: 31

36. Angus Glen GC (South), Markham ................................... 12.59
  Doug Carrick (1995)
  2005 ranking: 27

37. Whitewater GC, Thunder Bay .......................................... 12.25
  2005 ranking: NR

38. Seguin Valley G&CC, Parry Sound ................................... 12.15
  David Moote (redesign Ted George/Bruce Evans Ltd.) (2004)
  2005 ranking: NR

39. Summit G&CC, Richmond Hill ......................................... 11.63
  Stanley Thompson (1912)
  2005 ranking: 42

40. Mad River GC, Creemore .............................................. 11.54
  Robert Cupp (1991)
  2005 ranking: 34

41. National Pines GC, Barrie ............................................ 11.14
  Tom McBroom (1992)
  2005 ranking: 40

42. Lookout Point CC, Fonthill ........................................... 10.97
  Walter J. Travis (1922)
  2005 ranking: 35

43. The Raven GC at Lora Bay, Thornbury ......................... 10.76
  Tom McBroom & Tom Lehman (2006)
  2005 ranking: NR

44. Crimson Ridge GC, Sault Ste. Marie ................................. 10.75
  Kevin Holmes (2002)
  2005 ranking: 43

45. Galt CC ................................................................. 9.80
  Percy Barrett, Stanley Thompson and Bob Moote (1906)
  2005 ranking: NR

46. Granite GC, Stouffville ............................................... 9.30
  Tom McBroom (2001)
  2005 ranking: 30

47. Greystone GC, Milton .................................................. 9.14
  Doug Carrick (1997)
  2005 ranking: NR

48. Cherry Hill Club, Ridgeway ........................................... 9.07
  Walter J. Travis (1922)
  2005 ranking: 36

49. Osprey Valley Resorts (Wasteland course), Alton ........ 9.03
  Doug Carrick (2001)
  2005 ranking: 36

50. Cataraqui G&CC, Kingston ............................................ 8.83
  Stanley Thompson (1930)*
  2005 ranking: 34

NR = Not ranked in the Top 50 in 2005
*Cataraqui was founded in 1917, but its present look is
attributable to extensive work by Stanley Thompson in 1930.
**Scarboro's original 18 holes were laid out in 1914. A.W.
Tillinghast remodelled 11 of them in 1924 and is credited
with being the course's chief architect.