The Greater Toronto Area is rich with some of the country’s most challenging and enjoyable golf courses. Most, thankfully, do not require membership.

In pursuit of the 10 best public-access courses in the region, Toronto Golf assembled a panel of 17, ranging from key golf media and architects to Canadian PGA members and industry experts. (Panel members were not permitted to vote for a course with which they are affiliated.)

What our panel arrived at could well be called the Doug Carrick Trail, as six of the top eight selections were designed by the award-winning Don Mills-based architect, including all three courses at Osprey Valley Resorts near Orangeville.

When it came to first-place votes, more than half the panel (nine) gave Eagles Nest GC in Maple their No. 1 choice. No other layout received more than three first-place nods. Other clubs that earned at least one top billing included Copper Creek, the South Course at Angus Glen, Glen Abbey and Royal Woodbine, although the latter failed to garner enough additional votes to crack the top 10.

One thing that is clear is that it’s not cheap to play golf at the top public facilities in the GTA. Among the Top 10, green fees range from $75 to $235, but when you throw in a cart and taxes, the least expensive prime-time rate is $99.80 at Silver Lakes G&CC.

One thing that is less clear to most are the boundaries of the Great Toronto Area. Although its borders are often considered nebulous, the GTA’s official website (www.greatertoronto.org) defines the area as including the City of Toronto as well as the regional municipalities of Halton, Peel, York and Durham—roughly bordered by Highway 9 and Highway 48 in the north, Lake Ontario to the south, the corner of Highway 401 and Highway 6 in the west and Highway 35 to the east. Those official boundaries left one sure top-10 selection, The South Course at The Club at Bond Head in the region of Simcoe, on the outside looking in. The remainder, however, are all well-deserving of their place among the elite.
Relaxing in Jim & Garry’s Pub (named after the two owners) within the confines of the luxurious clubhouse at Eagles Nest GC, it is difficult to imagine that the No. 1 golf course in the GTA was once a sand and gravel pit. Golf course architect Doug Carrick performed a remarkable transformation of the rugged landscape into a linksland experience on a much larger and more dramatic scale than he did a decade earlier at Osprey Valley. At an rumoured construction fee of $20 million, including course and clubhouse, it’s also the most expensive golf course that Carrick has ever built, which may explain why prime-time green fees are $185 including cart, plus taxes. Check out the on-site helicopter pad and you’ll know you’re somewhere special. Overlooking the GTA and the Toronto city skyline since opening in the spring of 2004, Eagles Nest’s flight to the top has taken the GTA by storm. While it plays an overwhelming 7,476 yards, par-72 from the tips, mere mortals can tee it up from four other tee decks measuring 5,183 to 7,085 yards.

What you’re most likely to remember about your day on the links at Eagles Nest are its dramatic elevation changes, undulating fairways, uneven lies, nasty revetted pot bunkers, slick greens and its massive sand scars and wild fescue dunes. And when the wind blows you might wish you were back in Jim & Garry’s tipping back a cold one, sharing stories with friends about your round on the GTA’s No. 1 public golf club.

(905) 653-4653, www.eaglesnestgolf.com

On May 15, 1995, Angus Glen GC opened its doors and its fairways with the hopes of becoming one of Canada’s premier public golf facilities. That year, Golf Digest ranked the Doug Carrick design as the Best New Course in Canada. Since that time, Angus Glen has set a benchmark for service in the Greater Toronto Area that all newcomers are measured against and that very few, if any, have surpassed.

The roller-coaster-designed South Course hosted the 2001 Telus Skins Game and the 2002 Bell Canadian Open. The traditional parkland layout is dotted with 108 bunkers as it winds through a river valley on the front
nine and tabletop lands on the back. Although it's no longer the new kid on the block, Angus Glen remains a hugely popular public and corporate tournament facility along with its sister 18, the North Course, which will host the 2007 Canadian Open. Prime-time green fees are $175 including cart, plus taxes.
(905) 887-5157, www.angusglen.com

There are days when you drive into a golf course for the first time and know you're someplace special. That's what it's been like at Copper Creek since it opened in the fall of 2002. You're surrounded by immaculate fairways on the way in and greeted by friendly staff at the stately 40,000-square-foot clubhouse. It gets even better from there with a challenging Doug Carrick design that plays from a reasonable 7,097 yards at the tips to 5,271 yards at the forward tees. The course's true beauty lies in the Humber River Valley as it drops into a forest setting for holes Nos. 4-11. The views from the clubhouse of Nos. 9 and 10, the intimidating downhill par-4 signature hole with a small lake to the left, are some of the best in golf. Prime-time green fees are $155 including cart, plus taxes.
(905) 893-3370, www.copercreek.ca

The only course to receive a vote from all 17 panelists, Osprey's Heathlands Course opened in 1990 and is one of three Doug Carrick courses that cover the property. Carrick's first go at a Scottish-style course is still one the best "inland links" courses in the country. The fairways heave and roll with uneven lies as though you are out to sea, while pot bunkers stand guard around greens. Meanwhile, knee-high fescue toymakes even the strongest swing, if you're lucky enough to find your ball. To keep the big numbers off the scorecard, you must control ball trajectory (typically low off the tees and high into the rounded greens) and shape your shots to hold the ball against the stiff prevailing winds. Tight lies around the putting surfaces demand a creative short game.

After years of going without a clubhouse, Osprey finally has one in place. Prime-time green fees are $80 Monday to Thursday and $95 on weekends, plus optional cart and taxes.
(800) 833-1561, www.ospreyvalley.com
Glen Abbey GC
Oakville

Glen Abbey is the most recognized course in Canada, whether it is remembered as being the home of the Canadian Open for 25 years, Jack Nicklaus’ first solo design effort or for one of Tiger Woods’ most heroic shots on No. 18 at the 2000 Canadian Open.

The valley hole stretch from Nos. 11 through 15 is without doubt one of the most spectacular in the country, but the holes up top are underappreciated for their strategic genius. Generally speaking, you can freewheel with the driver on its receptive fairways, but the greens are devilishly undulating and protected by steep bunkers.

Glen Abbey is also home to The ClubLink Academy, one of the nation’s finest teaching facilities. Prime-time green fees are the highest in the GTA at $235, including cart, plus taxes.

(905) 844-1811, www.clublink.ca

Wooden Sticks GC
Uxbridge

American architect Ron Garl created Wooden Sticks as a tribute to the rich history of the game by incorporating 12 holes that are inspired by world-famous holes at legendary courses such as Royal Troon, Carnoustie, the Old Course at St. Andrews, Pine Valley, Augusta National and the TPC at Sawgrass. The latter provides one of the most memorable—and challenging—at Wooden Sticks with the famed par-3 17th and its island green. Another classic short-iron hole, Royal Troon’s “Postage Stamp,” is recreated at No. 11. The course’s true value, though, likely lies in the strength and variety of Ron Garl’s six non-replica holes—all inspiring tests.

Wooden Sticks offers an all-inclusive member-for-a-day package that includes two meals as part of the experience for its $220 prime-time green fee, including cart, plus taxes. The club also introduced luxurious cottages last season and offers first-class stay-and-play packages.

(905) 852-4279, www.woodensticks.com

Osprey Valley Resorts
(“Wasteland Course” / “Hoot”)
Alton

Although the official course name does a huge disservice to the sophistication of the design, the five-year-old Hoot course is a visually stunning 7,091-yard, par-72 layout in the tradition of sand-splashed Pine Valley. Carrick wanted a very natural, rough-hewn look to it with ragged bunker edges and vast areas of sand. Although there’s plenty of elevation change, with raised tee decks offering great views of the surrounding farmland, Hoot’s grading largely features long flowing lines that enhance the course’s natural look. The huge waste bunkers—unlike anything else in Ontario, with some running almost
Osprey Valley Resorts
(Parkland Course / "Toot"),
Alton

Another great course with a regrettable name, Toot is a traditional parkland-styled design. Carrick created generous fairway landing areas on most holes, but toughened them up with visually intimidating approach shots to large undulating greens that feature steep bunkers cut close to the putting surfaces. Of the three Osprey courses, which are all very walkable, this is the most forgiving. The 18th is an exciting risk-reward par-5 where the tee shot must carry the vast bunkers framing the 9th and 18th fairways to an elevated landing area. The second shot is downhill to an angled green protected by water on the front left and bunkers behind. The diverse trio—the best 54-hole collection of golf in one location in Canada—is an equal treat and challenge if you can play them all in a single day. Prime-time green fees are $80 Monday to Thursday and $95 on other days, plus optional cart and taxes. (800) 833-1561, www.ospreyvalley.com

Lionhead G&CC
(Legends Course)
Brampton

Silver Lakes’ origin dates back to 1958 when club founder Chuck Penstone envisioned developing a golf course on a pristine piece of timberland. The dream was not realized until 1994, when the Bob Moote design finally opened. The easily walked, 7,025-yard layout weaves through well-treed terrain alongside the neighbouring Holland River. Water comes into play on 12 holes and great care has been taken to preserve and protect the property’s native wetlands. Home to one of the few aqua ranges in Canada—allowing players to warm up by firing floatable golf balls into a lake—the club is only 40 minutes from Toronto, but there’s not a hint of the city in the country setting. Prime-time green fees are $75 Monday through Thursday and $85 on other days, plus optional cart and taxes. (905) 836-8070, www.silverlakesgolf.com

The Legends Course at the recently refurbished Lionhead G&CC still has the toughest course rating from the back tees in the GTA at an eye-popping 76.3. Despite its high degree of difficulty, local architect Ted Baker designed the 7,230-yard layout with the public player in mind. Nestled in the beautiful Credit River Valley, the Legends offers a challenge to golfers of all abilities, with water hazards on 13 of 18 holes. Nowhere is it more demanding than the 438-yard first, perhaps the toughest opening hole in Ontario, requiring a well-threaded tee shot that has to carry initial trouble but not fly into a lake that fronts the hole. An uphill approach follows to a well-guarded green. Prime-time green fees are $175, including cart, plus taxes. (905) 455-8400, www.golflionhead.com

THE PANEL
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