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# Capitalizing on the OPPORTUNITIES

Golfers have long known there's much more to Springfield than state politics

By Michael Murphy

**B**arack Obama and Willie Nelson do not have much in common, let alone with the likes of teen amateur sensation Danny Lee and the finest women golfers in the world. Yet all, at one time or another, have teed it up on tree-lined fairways of the diverse, hospitable and highly affordable golf courses within the vicinity of the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield.

**Above: The 16th hole at The Rail Golf Course; Inset: The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.**

Fact of the matter is, Springfield is something of a golf crossroads for the state, and the area is definitely hooked on the game. No fewer than 180 holes are strung out across 10 public and two private golf venues in Sangamon County alone, ranging from kid- and senior-sized nine-holers to championship layouts with top-notch design pedigrees. Springfield is the stage for the long-running LPGA State Farm Classic, and it has served as host for the Illinois State Amateur, countless USGA qualifiers and traveling golfers by the van, RV and bus load.

Government may be top dog in Springfield, but tourism runs a close second. Record visitor numbers are expected in 2009 as the 200th birthday

approaches for the namesake of the 3-year-old and immensely popular Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

If a day on the links can be part of the trip, a \$50 bill will take care of things, often with enough left over for appetizers and a cold beverage.

"When I tell people it's \$27, I've had them say, 'No, I want to play 18 (holes), and I want a cart', says Springfield Park District head professional Paul Loutzenhiser. "I tell them it's still \$27."

## THE RAIL GOLF COURSE Springfield

Robert Trent Jones, Sr. designed it. LPGA greats from Nancy Lopez to Annika Sorenstam hoisted trophies here. A little-known state senator from the South Side of Chicago, a lanky lefty named Obama, even teed it up at The Rail for a few

twilight rounds when he served in the Illinois Legislature.

“He was quoted as saying this was his favorite course,” recalls Mary Johnson, who helps her husband, Jim, The Rail general manager and superintendent, operate the 18-hole golf getaway located 15 minutes north of the State Capitol and a short dogleg off Interstate 55.

The gently rolling, 6,630-yard classic, built on a 240-acre dairy farm perched above the Sangamon River, served for 30 years as a Labor Day fixture for the LPGA State Farm Classic before the event moved across town two years ago, to Panther Creek Country Club. Now owned by Chicago attorney William Smith, The Rail features artful bunkering and heavily contoured greens—once the largest on any professional tour at an average of 10,000 square feet. The layout remains a favorite of legislators, lobbyists, and Illinois State Fair entertainers. Golfers from Chicago and southern Wisconsin head to the Rail in the early spring and late fall. Road-trippers from the St. Louis area roll up in bus caravans for annual weekend getaways; one group, the No Namers, this year brought 290 players.

“Some have been coming here for 20 years,” Mary Johnson says. “They like the golf course, and they must like us because they keep coming back.”

**Phone:** (217) 525-0365

**Online:** [www.railgolf.com](http://www.railgolf.com)



The No. 5 green at Lincoln Greens Golf Course.

### LINCOLN GREENS GOLF COURSE Springfield

On the shores of Lake Springfield, Lincoln Greens has embarked on its own version of a Mulligan Tour.

Opened in 1957, the 6,583-yard course was perhaps the region’s premier public golf facility during its first quarter century, and Lincoln Greens has entered its second 50 years as fit and feisty as a Senior Tour rookie.

The mid-life comeback is credited to sustained investment by the Springfield Park District, which inherited the course five years ago from the city. “I’ve been around for 20 years, and this may well be the best shape Lincoln Greens has ever been in,” said head professional Jim Sutzer.

Lincoln Greens is less than a five-minute drive from the Crowne Plaza Springfield, the convention center and more than half a dozen other hotels along the I-55/I-72 loop on the city’s southeast side.

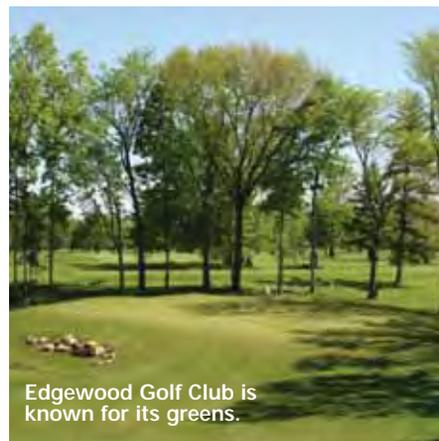
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### EDGEWOOD GOLF CLUB Auburn

As golf courses go, Edgewood is known to be as friendly as a corner coffee shop and as comfortable as a pair of broken-in FootJoys.

It is an easy 20-minute trip from Springfield, boasts arguably the best



Edgewood Golf Club is known for its greens.

19th-hole facilities in the area and is known as one the best values.

Edgewood is recognized for some of the smoothest, fastest greens around. It leads off with a challenging and fair outgoing nine, on which designer Charles Maddox took full advantage of the slightly rolling topography leading down to the banks of Spring Creek. There’s nothing quirky about the Edgewood of old until crossing over to a back nine that course owner Doug Kindlon only half-jokingly says “was designed by the members sitting around the bar.”

But Kindlon has systematically set about turning lemons into a tasty pitcher of lemonade. The makeover started in 2003 with a new alignment and green for No. 13, plus some extra yardage and new pond at the 18th. Next, Kindlon turned over 21 acres of adjacent woodland to Chicago architect Tim Nugent, who carved out a pair of dramatic par 4s that were seeded more than year ago and opened this spring.

“Feedback has been fantastic,” says Kindlon. “We have speeded up play, added a practice facility and replaced our two weakest holes with two of our best holes, certainly our most scenic.”

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### PIPER GLEN GOLF CLUB Chatham

Todd Mitchell won the 2004 Illinois State Amateur at Piper Glen at a reasonably challenging 6,850 yards. The setup is shorter still for events like

the Springfield Men's City Tournament. But the legend that Piper is unplayable "from the tips" evaporated on a sweaty day last summer when New Zealand teen sensation Danny Lee dropped in for a one-day, 36-hole U.S. Amateur qualifier. "The tees were all the way back (6,985), and it was scorching hot," recalls Piper Glen owner David Impastato. "He tore this place up, shot 66-67, and went on the win the U.S. Amateur."

Impastato, who bought Piper Glen in 2007, likes the idea that Piper is a desired competition venue. The former head professional at St. Charles Country Club, he also likes hearing Piper Glen counted along with Weaver Ridge (Peoria), Stone Creek (Urbana) and The Den (Bloomington) as a top public-access layout in central Illinois. And the fact is that the Bob Lohmann design, with its darting slopes, bent-grass fairways and quick greens, is long on amenities, especially its top-

flight practice facilities. "You have to focus on the average player," Impastato says. "You can't make money on just the scratch golfer."

A short hop off Interstate 72, just southwest of Springfield, Piper Glen can be paired in a stay-and-play package with the rolling, scenic Lakeshore Golf Course, a William Spear-designed layout in nearby Taylorville. Non-peak season cost for a round at each course starts at \$50, plus lodging. "The courses are very different," says Impastato, "and that's a lot of a bang for the buck"

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#### BUNN PARK GOLF COURSE Springfield

A sleeper on the Capital City golf scene is Bunn Park, one of the oldest 18-hole layouts in downstate Illinois (opened in 1905), a green space nestled into the working-class neighbor-

hoods of southeast Springfield.

Gutted and rebuilt in 1968, Bunn is a hidden treasure. Fairways made tight by towering oaks and elms put a premium on accuracy, and expect to use every club in your bag.

Worth noting, too: Bunn and Springfield's park district courses are open March 1 through Dec. 15 and any day the temperature hits 40 degrees. "You get 40 degrees and sunny, and people are flying out to play," says head professional Paul Loutzenhiser.

The park district also has four "solorider" golf carts available to golfers with disabilities through an adaptive golf program conducted in partnership with St. John's Hospital.

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