

The Golden Horseshoe-Gold Course Williamsburg, Virginia

Designer: Robert Trent Jones, Sr (1963)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
Blue	71	6522	72.4	135
White	71	6248	70.7	129

Overview:

Of the Jones Sr courses that I have played the Golden Horseshoe remains one of the finest courses he ever designed. It was built in the 1960's in a hilly wooded area that surrounds a natural canal basin-the finished course is a product of it's surroundings. It bears similarity to Spyglass Hill which was built in the same time frame, a course that the pros consider one of the most difficult courses they play all year. Much like Spyglass this course was carved out of a densely wooded area-tall trees ensconce every hole and give the course that distinctive cathedral-like feeling. Much like Spyglass the holes meander up and down seriously hilly terrain presenting the player with the challenge of evaluating elevation change on almost every shot. Throw in a little wind and the tunnel effect caused by the tall trees and you have a difficult mental challenge in club selection on every shot.

Esthetically this is one beautiful golf course. There are more maintenance people per player than you will see anywhere. Every flower and blade of grass is manicured to perfection-it is presented to please the eye and it will not disappoint. This is a mother of a piece of terrain to walk so you will actually be glad to be riding in a cart most of the way.

As is characteristic of most of the Jones Sr. courses you see long tees to allow multiple tee lengths, oddly shaped-segmented greens that never give you much target to shoot at, and well placed fairway bunkers that force you to play dexterously for the best line into each green. The greens are very undulating and segmented which puts a premium on getting your ball to the correct tier and further pressures you to get the correct driving position for an advantage angle at the flag position of the day. The only characteristic missing from most of the Jones Sr. courses I have played are the large sprawling amoeba-like bunkers with which he loves to intimidate players-but the green side bunkers are deep and well positioned to swallow a shot without conviction so you will end up with sand between your toes before the day is over.

In spite of the fact that the overall yardage does not seem intimidating it is a driving course-long drives on the right line are requisite to scoring well here. The trees and bunkers clearly define the driving lines-you must hit them if you are to have a bats chance of hitting these segmented greens. Concentration and correct club selection on the tee box is very important. Mindlessly blasting your driver on every hole will lead to lots of troubles and doubles on your scorecard. Which brings to mind one of the cardinal rules of The Shoe-if you hit it in the trees take the most direct and shortest route out. Anything bold or macho will be punished by Trent's ghost-there is very little air in these trees.

As is the case with most great courses you have to be intelligently aggressive to score well here. When you have the right angle to a flag or the putt from the correct side of the hole you have to go for it. On a course

like this you have to put some cash in the account when you have a chance because there will be debits coming due on some of the harder holes during the day. The middle holes require you to score well because the beginning and the end will not offer you much opportunity other than survival. The par three holes are easily the most difficult scoring holes on the course. All four are nested around the basin in the middle of the property with serious elevation change and always a smattering of wind. To murk your decision making further three of these holes have at least three tee positions they can use so the club selection can change two clubs from one day to the next. These are four of the most challenging and breathtaking par threes you will ever play on one course. The last five holes are the hardest run of the day-one of the toughest finishes if you are clinging to a good score. Only the last four at Avenel or the last five at TPC Sawgrass come close. It is especially difficult to face this challenge late in the round when you are tired.

I have played this course a dozen times and I still find every round I play here full of intrigue and delight. It is the type of course I think you could play every day and never get sick of it-the facets of the architecture-the beauty of the surroundings make it a real treat time after time. There is no course I have played in the states-except Pebble, Pinehurst 2, Merion, and Oakmont-that has left a more indelible mark on my golf psyche. Touche Mr. Jones!

Hole-By-Hole Analysis:

#1 Par 4 383/369 Yards

A typical Jones starting hole-he challenges you right from the beginning. Slight dogear right hit a slider to left center to get a good look at the green. The green is rather narrow in the front and opens up and falls away to the back. The front pin position with a 160 yard shot in your hand seems tight but it is actually a good opportunity so fire at that flag. The back positions are blind and the fill falls away so you are better to aim for the center and don't go flag hunting.

#2 Par 5 476/470

Well the Rebel Yell comes early here south of Kings Dominion so buckle your seat belt. The drive on this par five is a simple blow over the hill. Depending on how far you hit it you either lay up with a wedge to about 140 or play one of the most risky fairway metals of your life. Unless you are in a comfortable carry length all the way to the green surface don't consider the latter. The downhill lie across the cavernous water hole into the shallowest sliver of a green hanging perilously off the hill will make your knees wobble. Truth be told, if you can carry the distance and keep it straight your worst case is it slams into the hill behind the green and you pitch back. If you choose to layup do it down the left, from there you have a short iron into a slightly elevated green. Warning, it is not as long as it appears to the eye so trust the yardage. As you drive across the water take the 360 look around you-this is the basin where three of the par threes will play.

#3 Par 3 174/145

The only par three on the course with one tee position-but in my estimation easily the hardest of the lot. You have a downhill middleish iron to a sliver of a green that sits diagonal to the approach line and it is protected in front by water and a deep ravine and behind by a steep hill and a nasty bunker. The difficulty here is that the wind is ever present, the elevation change can be an enigma, the shade of the trees makes focusing on the target extremely difficult, and the damn green is only 40 feet deep for two-thirds of it's length. Even though

I have played this hole over and over the club selection still bedevils me-I am convinced that reading the wind is the key-much like we hear of 12 at Augusta there is some serious mystery in figuring out the wind effect through the trees. At 185 I hit a 170 club to the front and a 180 club to the middle. Forget the back pin position entirely there is no way you hit it back there on purpose. In the pockets of insanity that lurk somewhere in my brain this hole maintains a permanent post office box. Boy this is one great par three.

#4 Par 4 403/394

Remember the advice in the intro about this being a driving course-you are about to find out why. The trees frame this dogear right and demand you keep the driver left of center if you want any look at the putting surface. The long carry from the tee to the landing area will tempt you to try to bust one but swing within yourself because the premium here is line not length. Your second shot will be a long club into a large rolling green protected by two bunkers you would prefer not to visit and a large swoop short and left of the green. Play safe-play smart-a bogey is not an embarrassment.

#5 Par 4 337/328

Seems short on the scorecard but it plays a bit longer. This is the first of a number of finesse four pars you will play. You have to carry it to the crown of the hill at 150 so hit a driver or three wood to left center-try to stay out of the bunkers on the right. This will leave you a short iron into the skinniest target you have every aimed at. The bunker and ravine left and short are a no-no. This green is really tiered so you must find the segment that is home for the pin of the day. Actually long is the safest miss here-the green is deeper than it appears. This is a classic case of great design-the green is set on an angle to the fairway so that if you miss the place you are aiming at off the tee the second shot is more survival than opportunity.

#6 Par 5 471/463

If you like the Rebel Yell on number two the Shock Wave here will intrigue you as well. This drive is a simple carry to left center of the hill across the way. Don't try to cream one because going for this green in two shows a clear lack of intelligence. The second will be a mid iron to the bottom of the hill at about 110 yards. Note that the landing area gets narrower as you get further down the hill and actually has a piece of the lake from #3 nipping from the left. The accuracy of the pitch up the hill to this green is crucial. This is one steep mother of a green-any putts from behind the flag are three putt city. I really think this is one of the real scoring opportunities of the day just stay below the flag.

#7 Par 3 186/165

One bear of a three par-#5 handicap hole tells all. An uphill shot-across the water into another diagonally set green very sharply banked back to front and protected in front by a bunker with part of the board in it. Abyss on the right-second fairway on the left The intelligent shot no matter where the pin is located is to the center of the green of the left edge of the front bunker. The correct miss is deep left centerfield. Anything short and right is in never-never land. The back right pin is a pure sucker punch since there is not enough green surface back there to hold a lawn dart dropped from the Metlife blimp. If you manage to hit the green this is one of the toughest putting surfaces to manage on the course. If I forgot to mention it lately the wind is a factor on every par 3 whether you feel it or not-this basin has it's own version of the jet stream and it affects club selection big time.

#8 Par 4 323/313

Another finesse par four-hit a 210 club to left center off the center bunker. No hooks please. Short iron is left to a narrow but deep green that banks right at you. This is another opportunity hole so hit the iron aggressively below the hole. But beware there is a bit of a steep front to this green and short shots will spin back off the green.

#9 Par 4 360/355

Similar to the last but a bit longer. Hit the drive to right center and turn it over to feed it up the hole. Shortish iron into a similar green arrangement to the last. Again be aggressive to the flag since this is the third in the last four holes that offer a good scoring chance. Green is raised-balls that don't clear the front will spin back off and leave you an elevation pitch.

#10 Par 4 450/392

Well if you are not having fun yet you will be shortly. This seems like a simple hole to the eye but it is one of the hardest holes to par on the course. The driving area is canted sharply to the right so you must hit a long draw up the left rough line to have it remain in the fairway. You have a long club into a slightly raised green that is kind of wedged into the left side hill-missing to the right is a disaster. This green is really long so your approach needs to be aggressive or you will have a very long putt. If you feel that reaching the green is problematic from your drive position then just pitch one just short of the cart path and leave yourself a short iron up the green for your third.

#11 Par 4 386/362

If this is the #14 handicap hole then I am Lee Harvey Oswald. Drive is over another abyss to a slightly raised landing area that leans hard to the right. There is really no safe miss off this tee-drive it to center and don't let it leak. A hook will put you in the second fairway. The second shot will be a short iron into another green set on the diagonal to your approach-a lone bunker in the crotch of the shallow putting green is particularly deep. If you have a good look be aggressive here because this is one of only two real birdie opportunities on the inward nine.

#12 Par 3 169/149

This is the simplest looking par 3 on the course but it requires deft control because this green is downright elusive. The front left side of the green is only 30 feet deep so there is little depth to shoot at with a pin on the left. The right pins bring the water into play more but there is more green to work with. It can be anything from an 8 iron to a long club depending on the tee block positioning that morning. The wind will be a factor-especially after the first third of the flight when the ball clears the tree line on the left and is totally exposed to the valley of dead Titleists. This is an elegant ball flight to behold against the backdrop of the woods and floating over the water. Take a second to enjoy it before the imminent splash. By the way do not hit it over the green-that pitch will rival the grandstand right loft shot adjacent to 18 at TPC Sawgrass.

#13 Par 4 350/340

Catch some refreshment if the halfway house is manned before going to this tee. This is easily the easiest hole of the day but you have to focus to take advantage. Hit a 210 shot to center and it will funnel to left center as it works its way down the hill where it will come to rest about 120 from the green. This green sits well above you and has strong segmentation-the trick is to hit a short iron without too much spin or it will likely draw back onto the lower shelf.

#14 Par 4 429/420

The heralded finish begins here. This is the evil sister of #4-similar look and slightly longer. Drive to right center this time as the hole folds back slightly to the left. Green sits diagonal to you again and is very large and undulating. With a long club in your hand for this approach you cannot be that particular about the pin location-center of the green is playable to all. Front bunker is deep-not any sand saves from there unless the pin is in the back. Again a bogey will do unless you hit a great chip and a putt.

#15 Par 5 613/600

And it plays every yard of it. This tee box is almost 100 yards long-you can hit a full wedge from one end to the other. Drive it to center of a landing area that is pinched by bunkers on the right and the tree line on the left. Hit the longest club you can on the second and see what you have left. You should have a middle to long club at a green that is perched on a ledge with a steep fall off to the left. The bunker in front of you is a good fifty yards short of the green-it was put there to nab Incredible Hulk types trying to hit the green in two. The other bunkers tightly surround this crowned green. Another pretty large putting surface with lots of undulation-you need the approach to be accurate or you are looking at a three putt opportunity. You will be a little fatigued after playing these last two but stress is only beginning-there is no rest for the weary on the way in.

#16 Par 3 159/150

From the top tee position it is a smooth 145 club to the front and a 150 to the center. From the side tee it is considerably more difficult but pretty much the same clubs. The island green is very generous if you can ignore the moat surround it. The difficulty in this hole is the green itself. Serious roller coaster undulations with some nasty pitches required from just off the putting surface.

#17 Par 4 422/412

This is one unforgiving uphill par 4. The drive is visually constrained by the tree lines on either side but the landing area is much more generous than appears from the tee. The hill on the right will hold a power fade to center so that is the shot shape I like. You then have a huge carry up a very steep incline to a green set diagonal to your approach. For some reason there is a tendency to hook this second shot and the stuff on the left is not a bailout area at all. Try to hit a hot rolling one up the center of the incline and hope it has enough steam to reach the green. A pitch from in front is not a bad play at all. The green is seriously steep not many one putts to be found here.

#18 Par 4 431/421

What a finishing hole! This is the number 6 handicap hole but if the wind is in your face it can be the hardest hole on this side. Sharp dogleg left that wraps around the tree line late swooping down to the green that is well protected by water short and left and sand and hills on the right. Drive must end up in the right rough to have a clear look at this green-do not try to cut the corner off the tee. You do not want to bend your second right to left to get to this green because the water short and left is a ball magnet. Better shot is a club short to right center and let it tumble down in front of the green for a short pitch at the flag. As you come down the hill toward this green you will notice people on the grill room terrace smirking at you-that is because they are munching on their club sandwiches and you are still trying to get off the course to stop the bleeding. This is one tough par to make if the Nassau is still on the line.

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