

**Laurel Valley Golf Club
Ligonier, Pennsylvania**

Architect: Dick Wilson (1959)

	Par	Rating	Slope	Yardage
Blue	72	75.7	148	7327
Black	72	74.1	138	6982
White	72	72.8	135	6606
Green	72	70.1	130	5899
Red	72	73.5	127	5548

Overview:

A golf course with a long and rich tradition that belies it's mere 50 years of existence. Most of us remember this as the place Dave Marr won the PGA and associate it with Arnold Palmer as his adopted summer home course when back in Pennsylvania. The members will tell you that it is Palmer's aura that is most responsible for the reputation of this place-after it was built in 1959 under the watchful eye of Dick Wilson it was Arnold who went to the PGA and told them this would be an appropriate place to host their championship. It has built on that reputation hosting the National Four Ball championship in the 1970, the National Team Championship in 1971 and 1972, the Ryder Cup in 1975, significant events from the Pennsylvania-Ohio-West Virginia region, the U.S. Senior Open in 1989, and the Senior PGA in 2005.

When you walk the hallways of this demure clubhouse, the pictures and memorabilia make you fully aware how seriously the members take the rich history and tradition of this place. There are paintings and photos everywhere full of bouquets of pink sport jackets-an unusual touch for a macho corporate hangout. Don't miss the photo library on the walls around the informal bar-there is a classic shot of an intense Arnie and Jack as playing partners in the National Four Ball back around 1970. The locker room is very classy-old wood lockers bearing name plates of PGA and Champion's Tour players. This place just has a very traditional good old boy feel to it.

The club was originally built as a business man's club for corporate parties and events during a face-lifting renaissance in Pittsburgh in the late 1950's. The club is only open from May through October-it completely shuts the doors for the late fall and winter-a business model that seems hard to sustain without considerable annual member backing. It is a golf facility only-food service to support the golf and events and some cottages to house out of town guests. The lay of the buildings to the rest of the property was very well thought out-there are sitting areas providing views of the property and surroundings that are truly spectacular.

The course is built on a 260 acre tract of land in the foothills of the Laurel Ridge and Chestnut Ridge mountains. It does not have much topographical feature in it's tactical play, though the visual back drops can be dramatic. The design has a Florida feel to it with abundant sand and water, Dick Wilson wended the course through the low grounds deploying massive fairway bunkering and adjacent water hazards to keep the player's attention. Fifty years of tree growth have cloistered the holes considerably, but recent renovation has brought back the more open playability as it was originally intended.

One thing that can certainly be said about this is that the course can play very long from the two back tee markers. At the 6600 yardage of the white tees it is an ample test for most mortals-the additional yardage can make for some excruciatingly long par fours. Like most courses of this style driving accuracy is key to decent scoring opportunities. Playing from the fairway bunkers or tough angles in the rough is a sure prescription for bogies and worse. For the most part the water is manageable but there will be times during the day when your judgment for carry will be called into play and more often than not bravery is not the sensible route.

There are many interesting individual holes on the course-the par threes in particular have lots of nuance and subtlety to them. Not too many “wow” holes but some of the scenic backdrops will catch your attention. What really elevates this to championship caliber are the greens-they are very swift with ample undulation that seems to shrink the accessible opening on most of the cups. Very few putts go directly up the walkway and into the front door-you will be using diversionary tactics all day to find the bottom of these cups. The caddies are excellent here and you need one if only to tell you where you can leave the approaches into these greens. The pitching and chipping are particularly difficult because some of the swiftest approaches are not obvious to an inexperienced eye.

Hole-by-hole (White):

#1 Par 4 380 Yards

The opening hole is a straight forward-slightly downhill par 4-but in many ways it manifests the subtle challenge this course will present all day. Drive it to center-should leave about 150 or less into the green that is still below you. Bunkers surround the putting surface so you have to elevate the short club in and the green falls away as well so controlling the final resting place of your approach is a challenge. Large dent pervades the green from 7 to 1-any pin outside of this trough will be tough to get near. The pace of the green is deceptively fast-especially putts moving toward the back of the green.

#2 Par 4 377 Yards

The challenge ratchets up on the next hole which has a similar downhill topography to the first-drive is to right center of a driving area totally flanked by sand. The second shot is a shallow green set back and left behind a menacing looking pond. This green has a distinct two-tier feature you better get used to-shots into the low front area will hold nicely-the back section might throw it off the back if you don't have spin on your approach. These first two holes are not long but being in the fairway on the drive is key to having an aggressive opportunity on your second.

#3 Par 5 517 Yards

Easy holes are running out quickly-this will be the last of them for a while. This is a serpentine double dog leg-a three shot hole for anyone but Godzilla. Drive to center between sandwiching bunkers in the elbow of the first dogear to the right. The hole narrows continuously from here on-the second shot is played to a pinched area between bunkers at 150 on the left and 125 on the right-the best shot here is a turning draw to follow the shape of the hole back to the left. If you are on the short stuff you have a 125 shot to the green back to the right

set behind two bunkers with another containment bunker back right. The water on the right of the green has a magnetic quality to it, any wandering fades here will need goggles and a snorkel. The green is long and tiered again-this time right and left so you will have to work the ball onto the level where the flag resides to get a birdie chance.

#4 Par 4 404 Yards

This hole plays a good 20 yards longer than it's measure-slightly uphill all the way from tee to green. Dogear is right but you cannot cut the corner there is a series of layered bunkers up that side. The drive needs to be shaped left to right because you can drive straight through the fairway on the left and from that rough your approach can be obscured by trees up the left. The green is raised slightly so your longish shot in is longer than it appears. Again the green is pinched by bunkers on both sides-another tierish type of green- back left is raised from the front.

#5 Par 3 186 Yards

All the three pars here are very interesting and this one is the most interesting of the lot. It appears harmless enough from the tee-no major danger between you and the green-but this very narrow green sits in a hollow surrounded by mounding with one bunker short right and pinching bunkers on both sides. You just need to hit a very tight line shot that lands in the front third and feeds up the heart of the green that falls away from you. Flag shopping here is stupid-green shopping is all you can do. Pitches from around this green-grass or sand variety-will be extremely difficult to manage because the green is so narrow all shots have to be very precise. You make a three here, you deserve a scout merit badge.

#6 Par 5 490 Yards

One more chance to improve the scorecard coming up-slight bending dogear left-drive it left center to get the best look up the hole. At this yardage you are likely to be within range to go for it but he put a bevy of bunkers between you and the target and it will take a full carry to reach. Lay-up to 100-just inside the first bunker on the right leaves a slightly uphill pitch into a bi-level green with only 26 yards of depth-set on a 4 to 10 angle to the fairway- it is never very deep at any approach angle. One unique feature is the front left bunker has a clean top edge, no transition from the bunker to the tightly cut fringe. This is why it is not apparent from the layup area where the green begins on the left side-cute trick.

#7 Par 4 367 Yards

This is the most visually interesting hole you have seen so far-a truncated short par four with an appealing topographical character. From the tee you see the first of two layered ponds-it is just over 250 to the water's edge but it behooves you to hit it as far up as you can to have the best chance to attack the green. Bunkers flank the left of the driving area-being in them is a sure invitation for a double. If you have found the fairway the 37 yard deep green sits well above you behind the second pond and this one has a major false front on it so pay attention to whether the flag is on the top level and carry your shot all the way to back center if it is. Dick provided you with a secondary piece of fairway to use-across the water and to the right-if you cannot go for the green on your second because of precarious lie. From there it is a practice area 50 yard pitch straight up the angle of the green.

#8 Par 3 182 Yards

Similar yardage to the first par three you played but an entirely different approach required. This green is a good 40 yards deep and it has three different elevation pods that set on a 5 to 11 angle from the tee. The shot is a draw starting on the front third and stopping in the section that holds the flag. This is no simple task-you are likely to see your ball fall into the low area of the green to the right and move away from the flag. Try not to get depressed if a good shot ends up without a birdie putt.

#9 Par 4 395 Yards

Much like the seventh this one has real visual appeal. Drive is straight away to a fairway that ends about 260 yards out where it is bisected by the remnants of a creek. The green sits well above you-a good club and a half elevation increment-behind two bunkers with a tantalizing opening up the front right. The green is steeply tiered across the midpoint-a back flag will be very difficult to get at. Missing into the front right bunker is not a disaster since the pitch from there is right up the angle of the green. Halfway house is the next stop for a handful of pretzels and a Powerade-don't pass them up-you are going to need your batteries recharged for what is coming up.

#10 Par 4 398 Yards

The first three holes on the back climb up into the hills and for the first time all day you have to be careful of the roll outs-balls can end up in places you did not intend. This stunning visual is not an original hole-it resulted from one of the preparations for a major-but it fits in wonderfully and starts the back nine off with a sensory bang. The dogear right turns and runs up into the hill-it is flanked the entire right side by a creek that flows down from a greenside pond. The high score is lurking if you lose control to the right anywhere along this hole. Drive from the elevated tee across to a landing area on level to your teeing ground-left center is the best spot for a good look up the hole. The second is complicated by the fact that the long green has a bunker front left and the waiting pond right so the best shape is the dangerous one a draw off the water working up the line of the green. This green is tipped from back to front so anything trundling past the hole will be super swift putting coming back.

#11 Par 5 544 Yards

The walk from 10 green to 11 tee is the most vigorous exercise you will have all day-make sure to "set a spell" once you get to the tee to regain your bearings. This is another topographic wonder-the hole wanders along a ridge of the high ground and eventually falls dramatically to a green setting below-this one has a real tendency to accentuate your mistakes. This is a late dogear left-the first two shots are straight away-drive it to center between the bunkers that saddle the sides of the landing area. No real value in cutting the corner-turn a draw off the bunkers on the right and you will be just inside 300 to the green. Now you pick a tree on the right horizon to aim at and hit a 200ish shot that will clear the top of the hill before the precipitous fall to the green constellation below. It is over this hill that the dogear turns left but let the ground do the work-you do not need to shape your layup shot. From there you have a short pitch that has to be one and a half less to a 36 yard green that runs at you the first half and away from you the second half. Clearly getting your ball to end up in the area of the flag will be a challenge. Bunker in front of the green is a head fake-it is set 25 yards off the front

of the green-the best shot is a landing it on the front right edge and let the ground work it up toward the flag location. The hardest thing about this hole is reading the green-you need to lean on your hired help on this hole or you can be rudely surprised that your putting result comes out drastically different than you expected.

#12 Par 4 416 Yards

These next few holes will test your mettle and probably determine whether your score goes to hell in a hand basket or not. Your tee shot comes out of a chute at the base of the hills to a wide landing area below set between flanking bunkers. You need to pump this one or your second shot is going to be a very long indeed. This green is slightly below you now and sits on a 4 to 10 angle to the fairway-bunker you see short right of the green is short right of the green about 25 yards from the front edge. A draw coming over that bunker and landing just short will feed up the putting surface. The back right of this green slopes sharply away from you so don't be too feisty on this approach. Either of the flanking bunkers to the green is not a terrible place to pitch from so visualize the draw and trust it.

#13 Par 4 410 Yards

You thought that one was full measure-this one is even fuller. Similar drive down the hill arrangement as the last to a wide driving area with one monster no-no bunker down the right. The difficulty on the second is that the green is set on an 8 to 2 angle to the fairway behind a wall of bunkers and it only provides 22 yards of depth to shoot at. There is a small access opening front left of the green but the tall trees on the left the last 65 yards in take any fade approach to that opening out of your hands. A pitch and a putt are the more likely way to make a par here.

#14 Par 3 158 Yards

The next two are extremely technical holes-neither has much length-but they can ruin your scorecard in a heartbeat. The three par is just over 150 to center of a green with a serious tier straight across the middle. It is all carry so you must loft a shot the full length to the flag position or fear backing it into the water-the front flags are much more precarious than those on the back tier. If you want to hedge your bet aim middle to back in the center of the green-it is much deeper there and the back center section can collect something a little long. You will have an authentic Kennywood rollercoaster putt back down to the front. Any of the back bunkers is disaster because you will have to pitch out of the sand back at the water. A par here is a very good score.

#15 Par 4 330 Yards

This hole will drive big hitters bananas because they turned this short dogleg around a huge pond and any drive longer than 220 has to contain itself in a very narrow landing area the last 100 yards in. The good tee shot is 210 up the right center with a slight draw. Now the green is tucked well back to the left across the edge of the pond and behind a flurry of bunkers. This green is 35 yards deep and set on a 5 to 11 angle to the approach area-the only shot that gets close is a right to left curve working up the length of the green. Bit of a hump in the center of the green but the low back section collects balls moving slowly so there is an opportunity to get close to a back left pin if you are crafty.

#16 Par 4 419 Yards

Forget the printed yardage-this plays a good 10 percent longer for the ramping of the fairway in the second part of the dogleg. Hit a hard one at the right edge of the fairway bunker on the left in the elbow of the dogleg. No wanderos to the right off this tee or you are dropping next to the pond on the right of the driving area. Straight away second up the ramp to a green that is slightly raised from the fairway-this adds a bit of insult to injury because anything that bounces short stays short. The green has two large mounds in it-the front right mound deflects meager attempts into the front right bunker-the back left mound will feed balls into the back center of the green. No low scores are likely here-be defensive and accept your score.

#17 Par 3 183 Yards

Similar in length to the two three pars on the front. The two bunkers on the right of the green create a real visual hurdle to the player on the tee. Ignore that and aim at the front with a high fade working between the front bunkers and up the angle of the green. Another generous green so you can have a GIR and a good chance to make a three putt. One of the few greens out here with little undulation so don't over read what is in front of you when you are putting.

#18 Par 5 450 Yards

Real risk reward finishing hole-spectacular to the eye and very satisfying if you get on the reward side of the equation. Semi-blind landing area off the tee-aim left center just off the bunker on the right. Depending on how much roll-out you get on the drive you can end up with under 200 yards to a green set back to the right across an enormous pond-the hole has the visual of the 18th at Bay Hill. If you cannot stomach the carry hit a middle iron to about 110 straight down the fairway. Now you have a short pitch back across the water to the green set into the hill below the clubhouse-this green has serious undulation so you have to play a pitch that will use the green to feed to the flag du jour. The walk down the hill from the driving spot to the layup area is just a piece of scenic beauty. Wonderfully thrilling finish to a fine parkland course.

11/2/09