

Must-do list

By Mark Craig
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Those darn "to-do" lists can drive a person nuts. You check them off, scratch them out and you still can't seem to get ahead.

Larry Berle of Minneapolis knows the feeling.

For nine years, he had a "to-do" list that seemed almost impossible to complete. It went something like this:

Mow the lawn. Play Augusta National. Clean the garage. Play Shinnecock Hills. Get the oil changed. Play Winged Foot.

Berle is a persistent fellow, though. On July 14, he reached the bottom of his "to-do" list when he putted out on the 18th green at Atlantic Golf Club in Bridgehampton, N.Y.

With that stroke, he officially conquered Golf Digest's America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses. Berle played 117 courses because 17 new ones climbed into the biennial top-100 ranking during his quest.

"Nine years ago, I was walking up the 18th fairway at Pebble Beach and I thought, 'Why not play all 100?'" said Berle, 55, president of SRO Productions and a board member on the Fairway Foundation.

Eventually, "Why not?" became "How?" Of the 117 courses Berle played, he said all but about 25 are private. Some are really private.

Speaking of Augusta National, Berle is only able to tell part of the story that led him to playing at the home of the Masters.

"There are some Augusta members in Minneapolis, but I can't give any names," Berle said. "I was out in Utah on a hiking vacation



Larry Berle played every course on Golf Digest's list of America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses. He and his wife, Annie, pose in front of the 16th hole of the Cascade Course at the Homestead in Hot Springs, VA.

about four years ago. I'm standing in the Salt Lake airport and I call to check my voice mail."

A top-secret Augusta National member had called and said his daughter had backed out of a round the following day. If Berle could make it on one day's notice, he was in.

"I fly home and fly to Augusta the next morning," Berle said. "At this point, I have no place to stay. I'm not sure where to go, and I haven't even talked to the person who left me the voice mail.

"So I called Augusta National and I started to tell them my story. They say, 'Oh, you must be Mr. Berle. We've sent a car to pick you up.' I hung up the phone and said, 'Yeah!'"

As Berle's quest continued, his national networking grew. He met new friends. He got to know their friends of friends of their friends. He started an e-mail newsletter that eventually reached 300 people.

"I couldn't have done this without e-mail," Berle said. "It was a very

complicated process that took a lot of work and planning to accomplish."

Berle had never met most of the people he played with. At Atlantic Golf Club, he played with Rusty Ripberger. Besides having a great golfing name, Ripberger is an assistant pro at the club. He shot a course-record 66 the day he played with Berle, who had an 11 handicap when he started the quest and is about a 16 now.

"Eventually, it became as much about meeting people as playing the golf courses," Berle said. "I met guys in Boston and Milwaukee that I'll be friends with for the rest of my life."

Berle said Augusta National definitely was the most difficult course to access. But there were all sorts of difficulties to work through. Only two courses – Interlachen Country Club in Edina (No. 38) and Hazeltine National in Chaska (No. 54) – are in Minnesota.

Berle's scores ranged from 85 at Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa. (No. 7) and the Country Club in Brookline, Mass. (No. 13) to 101 at Oakmont Country Club in Oakmont, Pa. (No. 5).

Berle guesses he spent more than \$20,000 during his quest. His wife, Annie, works as a flight attendant at Northwest, so that helped.

Annie is the one who got Berle hooked on the game 12 years ago. Three years after that, Berle hatched his idea at Pebble Beach, which is ranked No. 1.

"For nine years after that, I was on a journey," Berle said. "For nine years, I was the consummate guest at the greatest golf courses in the country."

Larry's adventure

Larry Berle, a Minneapolis resident and president of SRO Productions, conquered Golf Digest's America's 100 Greatest Golf Courses. Here are some of his thoughts on the nine-year quest:

BEST EXPERIENCE

Augusta National Golf Club, Augusta, GA

Golf Digest ranking: No. 3

Berle's comment:

"I got chills. It was the most difficult course to get on, but the whole experience, not just the golf, was unbelievable."

FAVORITE COURSE

Cypress Point Club, Pebble Beach, Calif.

GD ranking:

No. 4
Berle's comment:
It's one of the most beautiful places on Earth. It's so pristine, and the 15th through 17th holes along the ocean are as good as it gets."

MOST DIFFICULT

Oakmont Country Club, Oakmont, Pa.

GD ranking:

No. 5
Berle's comment:
"Brutal. Absolutely brutal. Traps everywhere and the thickest rough I experienced. It was my worst round, something like 101, and I was an 11-handicap then."

BEST ROUND

Merion Golf Club, Ardmore, PA

GD Ranking:

No. 7
Berle's comment:

It's where Bobby Jones closed out his Grand Slam in 1930. I played it at about 6,600 yards and had my best round, 85. I also had an 85 at the Country Club in Brookline, Mass. (ranked No. 13), and a 92 at Pine Valley in New Jersey (ranked No. 2), where single-digit handicappers have trouble breaking 100.

LONGEST DAY

Bethpage State Park
Black Course, Farmingdale, N.Y.
GD Ranking: No. 46
Berle's comment:
"I was there about a year before the (2002) U.S. Open was played there. I arrived at 5:15 a.m. on a weekday to get in line for a tee time. I was 41st in line and got a 10:30 tee time. The guys in front of me do this all the time."