

# Club+Resort.

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# MIDWESTERN CHARM

*Cragun's Resort in Brainerd, Minn. Offers  
Year-Round Outdoor Activities.*

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## MIDWESTERN CHARM

Cragun's Resort in Brainerd, Minn. Offers Year-Round Outdoor Activities.

*(Cover and above photo courtesy of Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference and Cragun's Legacy Courses in Brainerd, Minn.)*

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# A Rewarding Journey to the Land of 10,000 Lakes

**IN AUGUST, I TOOK** my first journey to the Land of 10,000 Lakes and it did not disappoint. The occasion was my first FAM trip with four golf writers to Cragun’s Resort, Golf & Conference in Brainerd, Minn., about 130 miles north of Minneapolis. My story about the resort starts on page 14.

Resort leaders showcased a \$17 million upgrade and expansion of the Cragun’s Legacy Golf Courses, the Lehman 18 and the Dutch 27. Cragun’s has worked with the Lehman Design Group — headed by PGA TOUR Champions golf professional and 1996 PGA Tour Player of the Year Tom Lehman — on enhancing the quality of both courses. The project began in spring of 2021 and work is now wrapping up on the third set of 9 holes on the Dutch 27 (the Red 9).

Our contingent played the Lehman 18 and the Dutch 27 (the Blue 9 and White 9) on successive days while being accompanied by General Manager Eric Peterson, Director of Golf Jack Wawro, and Head Golf Professional Tim Johnson. Unfortunately, I’ve been dealing with a case of golfer’s elbow and only played a few of the Par 3 holes, and did some putting on the well-maintained greens. On the bright side, being sidelined from playing gave me a better chance to observe and photograph each layout, and listen to Peterson discuss each course’s unique characteristics.

Whether you’re a golf course aficionado or not, these courses offer beautiful views and vistas, sometimes from elevated teeing areas. The Lehman 18 winds its way around Stephens Lake, wooded areas, and natural wetlands. Although a lot of trees have been removed from the course, trees are still a prominent feature of the Lehman 18. Wawro observed that

you nearly forget you’re playing golf as you soak in the scenic views on display. A resort leader confirmed that fall colors are spectacular on both courses.

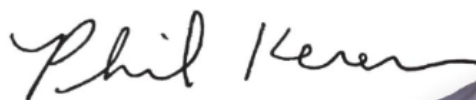
The most significant changes made to the courses were eliminating bunkers that were only in play for higher handicap players, removing trees, adding run-off areas to open the green complexes, and removing forced carries over water. These alterations, coupled with the multiple sets of tees on each layout, allows golfers of varying abilities to enjoy the course. Playability has become a buzzword in the golf course industry and Cragun’s courses are a reflection of that trend. There is no doubt that a golf course should provide a player with an engaging challenge, but shouldn’t be so difficult that the golfer never wants to return. A fellow writer made a great observation as we played the back 9 of the Lehman 18 course. Looking at one of the holes that featured an elevated tee location, the writer noted that a golfer’s shot angle improved with each successive teeing area that moved closer to the hole. Peterson emphasized that golfers will maximize their enjoyment of the Lehman 18 when they play from the tees that best align with their ability.

“The more you play the Lehman 18, the more you will appreciate the various shots required to allow for the best

chance to make par or better on each hole,” Peterson said.

I could write more about the golf courses, but Cragun’s offers many activities to non-golfers, too. With a shoreline that’s nearly a mile long on resort property, Gull Lake is a place where guests can fish, boat, jet ski, and kayak, among many other choices. There are indoor and outdoor pools, tennis and pickleball courts, beach volleyball, as well as biking and hiking opportunities. One afternoon, I rode a bike along the shoreline, checked out the marina and beach, and stopped to take a closer look at the statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox.

I enjoyed some excellent meals and interesting conversations with my fellow travelers and Cragun’s staff at the Canoe & Paddle Pub, the Legacy Grill and Irma’s Kitchen. On the final evening, our contingent went on a BBQ Cruise on Gull Lake. What a fantastic experience to have a barbecue rib dinner and watch the sun go down on an idyllic summer evening. I’d like to thank Peterson, Wawro, Johnson, Marketing Manager Carrie Scarfino, and the entire staff at Cragun’s for making our visit both enjoyable and rewarding.



**Phil Keren** • Senior Editor  
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# MIDWESTERN CHARM

*Cragun's Resort in  
Brainerd, Minn. Offers  
Year-Round Outdoor  
Activities.*

By Phil Keren, Senior Editor

**THE OLD AND THE NEW COLLIDE** with each other at Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference and Cragun's Legacy Golf Courses in Brainerd, Minn.

With statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox stationed near the entrance, Cragun's offers a certain Midwestern, nostalgic charm from a bygone era. Situated along scenic Gull Lake, Cragun's offers hotel rooms, villas, cabins and homes where guests can stay and enjoy a wide variety of activities. There are 45 holes of golf across two different championship level courses, as well as a Par 3 course, and countless other activities such as fishing, kayaking, beach volleyball, tennis, and pickleball.

"Cragun's Resort is a relaxing, fun-filled getaway for the young and the young at heart," notes Carrie Scarfino, Cragun's Marketing Manager. "Activities abound in every season. It's the perfect place to play, relax or connect with your group. Memories are made here. Traditions are established. At Cragun's, things are always changing. But the things that really matter stay the same. We are a Gull Lake tradition."

Though the resort offers a wide range of activities across a large piece of property, Cragun's leaders work to create repeat business by cultivating a meaningful connection with their guests.



Carrie Scarfino, Cragun's Marketing Manager

"Cragun's is devoted to creating enduring relationships with our guests by providing highly personalized service and gracious hospitality in an amazing atmosphere," says Scarfino. "Our greatest asset, and the key to our success, is our people. We believe that true success is

only achieved when a resort combines the traditions of its local community with exceptional personal service."

#### HISTORY OF CRAGUN'S

The history of Cragun's begins with folk hero Paul Bunyan. In 1934, Merrill K. Cragun Sr. and his wife, Louise, registered the name of Paul Bunyan Inc., with an eye toward boosting tourism in central Minnesota. The Craguns in 1940 constructed some cabins and then built a lodge in 1945. As 1947 drew to a close, the Craguns' venture yielded a site with 12 cabins and a lodge. Louise Cragun then became the operational leader of the resort and received support from her father-in-law, Virgil Cragun,



Statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox keep watch near an entrance to Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference in Brainerd, Minn. The Midwestern resort opened in 1940.



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Multiple forms of lodging are available to guests staying at Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference in Brainerd, Minn., including these Bayview Villas.

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while Merrill Sr. worked at a full-time job in the Twin Cities. A couple of milestones occurred at the end of the 1940s: Cragun's opened its first dining room in 1948 and then built the first six motel-style units the following year. The Cragun's son, Merrill K. Jr. (nicknamed "Dutch"), became the manager in 1957 and the property continued to grow on a yearly basis. During the ensuing decades, an outdoor swimming pool opened, the pool area was enclosed, a full-time staff was hired, more property was purchased, and more units were built.

According to Scarfino, since 2017, Cragun's has: renovated 200 lodge hotel rooms; remodeled the resort lobby and marina; remodeled five hospitality rooms, rebuilt tennis courts and converted three of those surfaces into pickleball courts; renovated and built a total of 11 cabins; constructed five new homes at Cragun's Legacy Courses; invested in new pontoon boats, jet skis, marina and snowmobile equipment; renovated the lobby restaurant, bar and lounge; and performed a 45-hole golf course renovation in partnership with PGA TOUR Champions golf professional and designer, Tom Lehman, a Minnesota native.

Custom-designed homes being constructed along the golf courses will be 2,800-plus sq. ft., including five or more bedrooms, and five baths with open living and dining areas, plus a chef's kitchen.

"We are enthusiastic about the renovations, expansion, and new branding for Cragun's," says Eric Peterson, General

The Lehman 18 is a Tom Lehman Signature championship golf course that marked its grand opening in July 2023. The course has six tees that allow the layout to play anywhere from 4,707 to 7,491 yards. (Photo: Peter Wong Photography)



Manager and Development Director of Cragun's. "Keeping with Dutch Cragun's legacy and the traditions founded by Dutch and his family, these investments in our resort will certainly appeal to both our longtime patrons as well as new visitors."

Today, the resort has a staff of more than 300 employees and offers more than 200 hotel rooms, suites, cabins and homes to rent, and 62,000 sq. ft. of multi-function conference and exhibit space.

On an annual basis, there are more than 100,000 guest nights at Cragun's, which equates to approximately 40,000 unique guests.

A similar number of guests are expected to visit the resort in 2024.

#### GOLF AT CRAGUN'S

During the past three years, Cragun's has worked with the

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Cragun's has worked with the Lehman Design Group on a project to upgrade and expand its two golf courses. "The Legacy Courses underwent a transformation...[that] opened amazing view corridors," says Eric Peterson, the resort's General Manager (right).

Lehman Design Group on a \$17 million project to upgrade and expand its golf courses, the Lehman 18 and the Dutch 27. With the popularity of golf on the rise, making two high-level courses even better will surely draw more visitors to this 84-year-old resort.

"The Legacy Courses underwent a transformation...[that] opened amazing view corridors, made the golf courses friendlier for the average golfer, while still creating a challenge for the low handicap player," says Peterson.

The most prominent changes on the Legacy Courses were eliminating bunkers that were only in play for higher handicap players, removing trees, adding run-off areas to open the green complexes, and removing forced carries over water. The existing bunkers were removed and strategic bunkering was installed along with new drainage, a liner product called "Sand Guard," and "Best Sand" from Ohio. Only 18 of the 36 original green surfaces remained the same, but all the greens received new surrounds "to give them a new modern feel," Peterson says.

The Lehman 18 is a Par 72 Tom Lehman Signature course with six tees ranging from 4,707 to 7,491 yards. It is an out and back course, with the cart path from holes 1 to 18 covering nearly 7 miles. The course flows through a 1,000-acre wooded sanctuary around Stephens Lake and winds through many natural wetlands, according to Peterson.

"Dramatic strategic and aesthetic changes occurred on every

hole, with lake and forest views in abundance throughout," Peterson says.

The Lehman 18 marked its grand opening in July 2023.

The "Dutch 27" will soon offer three 9-hole layouts (Red, White and Blue) with a variety of 18-hole combinations; the course that bears the nickname of the Craguns' son has five tees ranging from 4,287 to 7,001 yards (Blue and White courses).

Before the Lehman 18 was renovated, the Blue and White nine-hole layouts of the Dutch course were upgraded and those improvements were completed in late July 2023. White sand was added to the bunkers and cart paths were newly paved on these two 9-hole layouts. All holes on the Dutch 27 were adjusted with many holes receiving new routing.

The third 9-hole course, known as the Dutch Red, is in its final grow-in phase and will "be fully integrated into the Dutch 27 in May of 2025," Peterson says.

Some features of the Red Nine renovation are new tee boxes, grass fairway bunkers, greenside bunker placement and shaping, four new greens, and new green surrounds. Peterson adds there was "some significant shaping and clearing to create some amazing new holes and views."

Since golf can be played for about half the year in Minnesota, Cragun's leaders took steps to ensure the course continued to operate during the project.

The Dutch 27 will soon offer 27 holes of championship-level golf to guests at Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference in Brainerd, Minn. The Blue and White layouts are the site of the CRMC Championship, a PGA Tour Americas event. The Red 9 will open for play in May 2025. (Photo: Peter Wong Photography)



"It took some interesting routing and coordination, but we were able to keep 27 holes of championship golf open throughout construction," states Peterson. "I believe we reprinted new scorecards six times in three years."

There is also a Legacy Par 3 course that allows beginners to give the game a try and longtime players to practice short iron shots. This course offers greens that are similar in size to the ones found on the Lehman 18 and Dutch 27, but no bunkers. These factors make it a very playable course that families can enjoy playing together. Another family-friendly element: Foot-Golf can also be played on the Par 3 layout.

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Fishing and kayaking are among the many water-based pursuits that can be enjoyed on Gull Lake at Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference in Brainerd, Minn. Other activities include boating, cruises, waterskiing, tubing, and banana boat rides.

Jack Wawro, the resort's Director of Golf, believes the proximity of one course to the other is a big selling point.

"We have it all right here in one facility," Wawro says. "When you come [to Cragun's] on your golf package, you bring your clubs for your first day, you're going to play four different 18-hole combinations."

Near the golf courses are the 35,000-sq.-ft.-plus Legacy Clubhouse, which has a pro shop, Legacy Bar, Legacy Grille Restaurant, golf simulator, locker facilities for members, and pavilion seating for 250 people.

### AN ABUNDANCE OF ACTIVITIES

While golf is a prominent feature at Cragun's now, the resort existed for 58 years without the gentleman's game. As such, there is an abundance of activities that non-golfers can enjoy,

both on land and on the water. There are indoor and outdoor pools, tennis and pickleball courts, beach volleyball, as well as biking and hiking opportunities. One aspect of Cragun's that makes it stand out is its lakefront location.

"We have nearly a mile of sandy shoreline on the south side of Gull Lake on one of the quieter bays, Steamboat Bay," Scarfino says.

Boating, cruises, waterskiing, tubing, banana boat rides, canoes, kayaks, hydrobikes, jet skis, pontoon boats, paddle boats, and paddleboards are among the water-based adventures that guests can enjoy.

Visitors can step aboard the North Star Luxury Yacht for a pleasant cruise on Gull Lake. One highlight is a BBQ voyage where guests can enjoy a barbecue rib dinner while watching the sun go down over the water.



The 65-foot North Star Luxury Yacht offers cruises on Gull Lake at Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference. A glass-enclosed main deck provides seating for 62 riders, while the upper deck patio offers space for 36 passengers.

There are also indoor activities available: Cragun's offers a Fitness Room and a 22,000-sq.-ft. Sports Centre, with a basketball court, as well as tennis, pickleball and volleyball courts, along with a running track for jogging or walking.

Activity does not slow down in the winter: ice fishing, snowshoeing, ice skating, and cross country skiing are among the ventures available to guests.

Cragun's also offers 28 meeting rooms, 47,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, 62,000 sq. ft. of exhibit space, and banquet capacity for 800. The resort hosts about 200 corporate or association groups and anywhere from 25 to 40 weddings each year.

"With several different ceremony, reception and venue options to choose from, weddings at Cragun's fit many tastes and needs--modern, shabby chic, lakeside, golf,



A full slate of activities are available during the winter months at Cragun's Resort, Golf & Conference. Ice skating, ice fishing, cross country skiing, snowmobiling and more are offered to guests.



large or small," Scarfino says.

Guests can also sign up for a loon sighting tour on Gull Lake. Loons are aquatic birds that return to Steamboat Bay each year.

"We partnered with the National Loon Center to bring the joy of loons to our guests at Cragun's, to educate people on loon safety, and all the great things the [center] is doing for our beloved state bird," says Isaac Johnson, Activities Director.

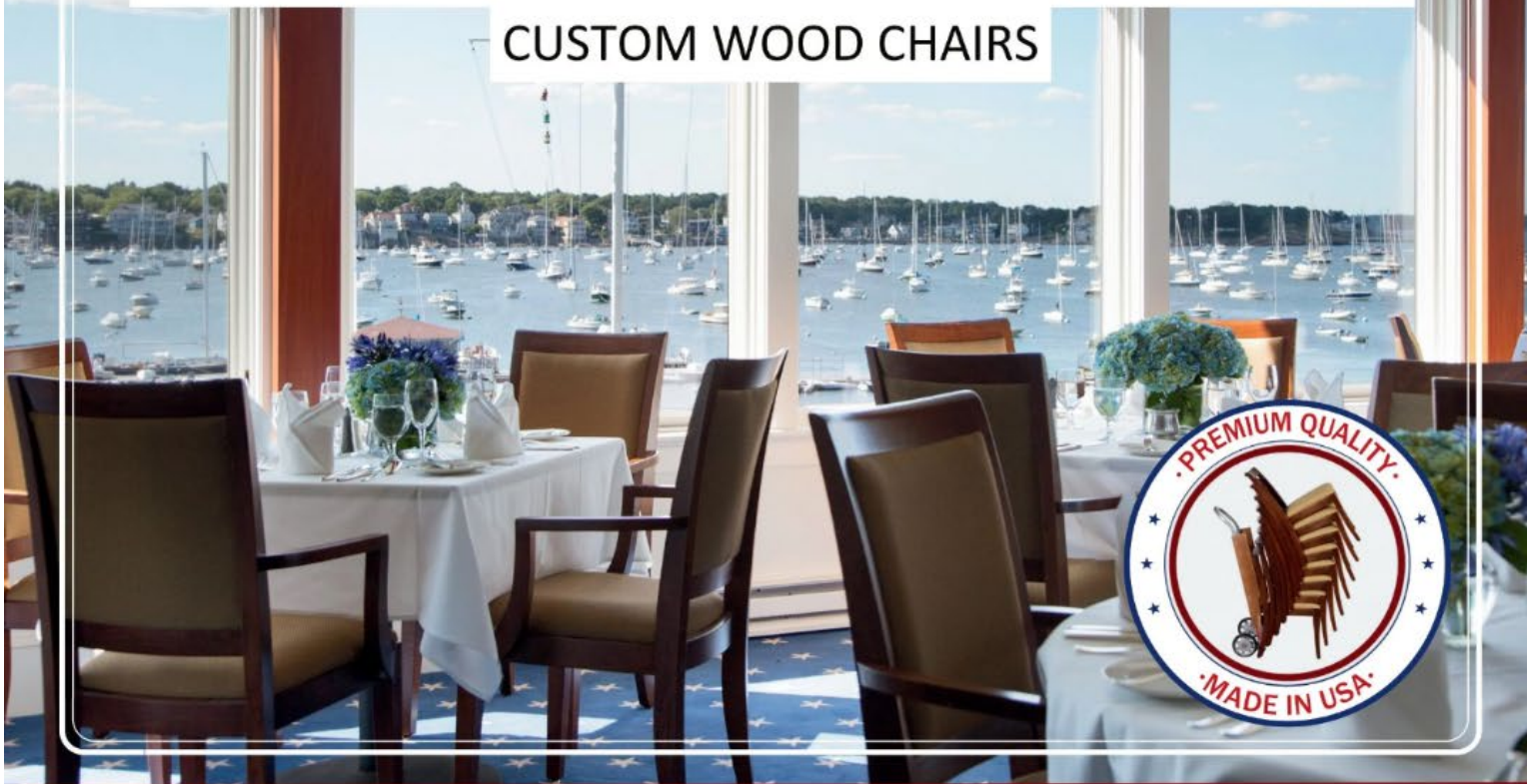
Scarfino notes the profile of Cragun's guests is as wide-ranging as the activities offered. There are generational guests who have made visits to Cragun's a family tradition.

"One group just celebrated their 61st year here this summer," Scarfino says. "There is a whole other world just at the resort."

And that world continues to grow. **C+RB**

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