

Strategy & Tactics: Links Pro - Firestone

by Douglas Hempel

This is the third in a series of Links Pro Strategy Guides focusing on individual golf courses and the strategies to use to be successful on each one. As evidenced by the first five courses released by Access (Pebble Beach, the fifth, was released around Christmas), course location, terrain, and general design can play an important part in your overall strategy. This article presents a hole-by-hole description (including yardage from all tees, men's and women's handicaps, an overhead view of the hole, and a small screen shot of green showing the tournament or "save game" pin placement) of the golf course and offer suggestions for ways to improve your scores.

Course Overview: The Firestone Country Club is located in Akron, Ohio. The South Course, totally redesigned in 1959 by famed designer Robert Trent Jones, is normally the home of the PGA Tour's NEC World Series of Golf. (This year, however, they played the WSoG at Firestone's North Course.) A par-70, Firestone features only two par-5's and is still a long golf course by most standards -- over 7,000 yards from the championship tees. If scores in many of the tournaments featured on AOL and other services are any indication, Firestone may be the toughest Links course released to date. Almost all of the par-4's are over 400 yards, and the par-3's feature length and difficult bunker placement. Firestone's major strategic element would probably be its tight fairways and use of bunkers -- these bunkers are featured on almost every hole and can come into play quite often, especially on drives. The course also features quite a few changes in elevation (although not as dramatic as Bighorn or Bountiful) which can make second shot clubbing a difficult decision. Only two holes, numbers three and sixteen, feature water hazards that regularly come into play.

Hole #1 - Par 4

403 yards - 377 yards - 343 yards

9th handicap

umber one at Firestone is a straightforward par-4. The fairway is tight, like almost all fairways on the South Course. Two bunkers protect the right side of the fairway, and one guards the left. The second shot is to a slightly elevated green (about 20' up with an average drive), so you might need to go up a club to get it there. The green is large and flat with bunkers left-front and right-front.

Strategy: Hit the drive down the middle. This'll leave a fairly simple second shot to the elevated green. The "tournament" pin placement is right in the center of the green and this keeps the bunkers out of play for the most part. With the flat green, most putts within 30' or so should be makeable.

Hole #2 - Par 5

491 yards - 478 yards - 363 yards

13th handicap

umber two is one of only two par-5 on the course. It's also the only one that's consistently reachable in two. The hole doglegs fairly sharply left and demands good placement of the drive. Fairway bunkers are far to the right. This green is also large, and slopes from back to front. With an average drive, the second shot should be a 3-wood or long iron, and the green will be about 40' feet above the ball. Bunkers also guard the front-left, front-center, and right sides of the green.

Strategy: From the blues, the golf cart is a good aiming point. You really don't want to hit the drive too far. You might also want to try to draw the ball around the corner, but it's really not necessary. Make sure you hit enough club to clear the front bunker on the second shot. The "tournament" pin is right in the center of the green, and the green is fairly flat making for another scoring opportunity if you get the ball close.

Hole #3 - Par 4

434 yards - 333 yards - 324 yards

15th handicap

Don't ask me how this got to be the 15th handicap hole! In my opinion and based on on-line tournaments, this may be the toughest hole at Firestone because it requires a lot of accuracy. The tee shot is blind to a depressed landing area that doglegs hard to the right. If you don't hit a good drive (or you hit one "too" good) your second shot may be blocked by trees that have a nasty tendency to jump out and knock balls into the pond in front of the green. The green is two-tiered and bunkers protect the left and right side.

Strategy: The most critical shot on this hole is the drive. Although it doesn't look quite right, the aiming point that the game gives you off the tee isn't bad. In general, you want to aim between the closest tree on the right and the evergreen that you can see about 100 yards down the left side. Once you've got the aim, hit a normal drive (12 o'clock/6 o'clock). You don't want to hit it too far here because the landing area is about 40' below the tee box and you can go right through the fairway with too long a drive. If possible try to keep the second shot below the hole because the tournament pin is situated right on the ridge that separates the upper and lower tiers of the green.

Hole #4 - Par 4

461 yards - 371 yards - 278 yards

7th handicap

umber four is about as straightforward as they get at Firestone. The hole doglegs slightly to the left, and a bunker protects the right side of the fairway. The green is huge but is protected front-left and front-right by sand traps. There is some water in front of the tee, but this shouldn't come into play. The pin is about 30' above the tee and is in just about the dead center of the green.

Strategy: As long as you avoid the fairway bunker off the tee, the drive is fairly simple. Because of the hole's length, the second shot is usually a medium to long iron. If possible, keep the second shot below the pin. The green is very flat in front and makes for easy putting. The back half of the green slopes gently from back to front.

Hole #5 - Par 3

197 yards - 177 yards - 163 yards

11th handicap

umber five is the first of Firestone's par-3's. Bunkers protect the front-center, left, and back-right of the green. The trap in front causes the most problems, however, because it requires you to carry the ball all the way to the green. The green is average in size and two-tiered. The front half is a flat plateau, but the back half slopes away from the pin towards the back of the green. The tournament pin is located right on the slope between the two tiers. This makes stopping the ball near the hole a difficult proposition.

Strategy: Basically, you want to go right at the pin here. The pin is about 10' below the tee, so pick enough club to carry the front bunker and fire away. Don't get discouraged if the ball gets close and then rolls all the way to the back of the green. This shot will leave you a makeable uphill putt, and, as I mentioned, it's very difficult to keep the ball close.

Hole #6 - Par 4

460 yards - 407 yards - 397 yards

1st handicap

he sixth hole is the number one rated hole on the course. Although it is long and tight, I'm not sure it deserves this ranking. The green is very flat and the tournament pin, in the front-center of the green, is probably the easiest placement on the hole. There are no fairway bunkers, but traps do protect the front-right and left side of the green.

Strategy: Keep the drive a little bit to the right of the game-suggested spot to make sure you don't have any problems with the trees along the left hand side. You can go for a big drive to cut down on the second shot distance, but because the fairway is so narrow, accuracy is more important than distance. Putts inside of 25-30' should break very little.

Hole #7 - Par 3

209 yards - 140 yards - 125 yards

17th handicap

he seventh looks fairly innocent, but there is one problem (especially with the tournament pin placement), namely that large tree about two-thirds of the way to the green on the left. Other than that, the hole is flat and the green is huge. The only other trouble are the four bunkers surrounding the green.

Strategy: Aim about 10 or so pixels to the right of the pin and hit the ball very straight. The combination of your stance and aiming point will cause the ball to draw back towards the hole. If you don't hit it this way (or do something else to avoid them), the tree branches are likely to knock the ball down, and force you to get up-and-down for your par. The green slopes slightly from back to front which helps the ball bite on the green.

Hole #8 - Par 4

447 yards - 406 yards - 289 yards

5th handicap

nother long par-4 (there aren't really any "short" ones at Firestone), number eight features a blind tee shot. The tee shot has to come out of a "chute" of trees and needs to be accurate. Once out of the "chute", the fairway opens up and then doglegs slightly right. The pin is about 40' below the tee and is in the front-center of the green which slopes from back to front.

Strategy: Make sure your tee shot is straight. You may want to aim a little bit towards the left side of the "chute" to give you better placement for the second shot, but it's most important to not hook or slice the drive. The second shot can be tricky with all the bunkers around the green, but, once there, the putting is pretty easy and the green is flattest right around the tournament pin.

Hole #9 - Par 4

469 yards - 438 yards - 396 yards

3rd handicap

he final hole on the front side is the longest par-4 on the golf course. Although a 35' drop in tee-to-green elevation makes the hole shorter, it still requires a good drive and second shot. There are two fairway bunkers on the right side and one on the left. The green is small and slightly elevated (with an average drive) and the pin is in the center. Bunkers protect the front-right, right, and left of the green.

Strategy: Hit the drive straight and long. The second shot will be to a slightly elevated green and you need to carry the ball all the way to the green. There's some sort of mound in front that won't allow balls hit short to bounce up onto the green. The green is relatively flat and makes for good putting.

See next chapter for Back Nine.