

TexasGolfer

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Nebraska's Dismal River Adds a Tom Doak Gem

By WAYNE MILLS

Golf is seemingly full of contradictions such as lowest score wins, hit down on the ball to make it go up and a one inch putt counts the same as a 300 yard drive. Another is the area that most closely resembles the ancient golfing grounds of the British Isles is located 1,800 miles from the Atlantic Ocean in the heartland of Western Nebraska.

With millions of acres of wild rolling high prairie land on top up a sea of fine sand which sits on top of the world's largest underground water supply, the Ogallala Aquifer, the area is a unique environment fully suited for golf courses.

Golf came to the area in the early 1990's when Dick Youngscap, who was involved in the development of Firethorne Golf Club in eastern Nebraska in 1980's, decided to fully test the "If You Build it They Will Come" theory by optioning 8,000 acres in Mullen (pop. 471) to build the private Sand Hills Golf Club. To say this property was in the middle of nowhere would grossly underestimate just how massive nowhere is in Western Nebraska.

Over the next two years, Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw made numerous site visits and by the spring of 1993, discovered over 130 holes, from which 18 were selected and a routing plan finalized.

Sand Hills GC has gone on to become recognized as one of the world's greatest golf courses with accolades including being the Golfweek's #1 ranked Modern Course several years running and was recently awarded the best modern course and #16 overall worldwide in Britain's Golf Course Architecture's Top 100 in the World.

Sand Hills opened the world's eyes to how extraordinary the area is for golf. Other developments have followed giving more and more opportunities for golfers to enjoy this truly amazing landscape.

Just as they were finishing up building Sand Hills for Coore and Crenshaw, a couple of good old Texas dirt dogs, Dave Axland and Dan Proctor, got wind of a possible new course being built down in Gothenburg. Once they saw the rolling prairie site they told the local boys they would be building it, thanks very much.

Axland and Proctor, working on foot and by eye without any plans or topographical maps, built Wild Horse Golf Club with the help of local farmers who would come by in the morning with their tractors to bust sod, for under \$900,000. The result is a stunning layout that features forced carries over native fescue, huge blowout bunkers and an ever present wind that constantly adds to the challenge. Ranked as the 27th best Modern Course by Golfweek soon after it opened it can be played for around \$50.

Jack Nicklaus, a man that knows a thing or two about great courses in the British Isles said during his first site visit in 2004 to the Dismal River Club near Mullen "It was like stepping back in time and seeing what the dunes of Northeast Scotland must have looked like a hundred years ago." His challenging signature course, designed with associate Chris Cochran opened for play in 2006.

Soon after buying out the original developers at Dismal River in 2010 CEO Chris Johnston decided he needed to add another course to his property to draw new members and guests to the remote location which is 20 miles down a single lane road from the state highway. After interviewing a number of architects including a guy named Woods, Johnston decided on Tom Doak or as he puts it "Mr. Doak doesn't just take any course. You call him, talk to him about your ideas and invite him to the property. You don't 'pick' him. He 'picks' you."

While much of the original 3,000 acre property was available Doak had to not only make routing decisions but build in the shadow of the Nicklaus design. "Chris gave me a lot of freedom to come up with a cool design," said Doak, "I knew once Chris sent the map that I would want to gravitate down toward the river. It's a unique feature that none of the other courses in the region have to use, both the river and then the giant bluff on the opposite bank. It helps orient the golfer, whereas on other courses in the area, you sometimes just feel lost among all the dunes."

And the Nicklaus shadow? "We've worked next to several of the best courses in the world before --Pacific Dunes was next to Bandon Dunes, Sebonack was next to Shinnecock Hills and The National, and The Renaissance Club is next to Muirfield in Scotland. You're unlikely to "beat" those neighbors in the rankings, so you're better off just trying to build a course that's different and has a character of its own, and see what people think."

The Doak course, which opened in July 2013, is a worthy counterpoint to Nicklaus's challenging Dismal River layout. Playing between and over the dunes and down to the river it offers wide fairways, directional bunkering and bailout areas around the greens. It appears to flow with the site rather than being imposed on it.

Considering the relative remoteness of the Sand Hills one doesn't so much visit as make a pilgrimage to play there. That remoteness creates an experience amongst the rolling dunes and waving prairie grasses that has a purity that won't be found anyplace else in the United States. You should go. You will never forget it.



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