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The Bulletin

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New Silvies Valley Ranch course one of just two of its kind

The remote reversible Eastern Oregon track opened this month

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Date: July 25, 2017



The view from the first tee box of the Hankins course at Silvies Valley Ranch. Or the view from the 18th fairway of the Craddock course. It depends on which day it is. (Grant Lucas/Bulletin photos)

SILVIES — Few golf courses boast such off-the-grid tranquility. Even fewer are so simple yet complex. And only one other course anywhere features a layout quite like Silvies Valley Ranch.

Nestled 40 miles north of Burns, in a remote oasis on the southern edge of Grant County, is one of the more distinct tracks a golfer will ever find. On a 140,000-acre ranching property whose ownership history dates back to the late 1800s, lies an inland links-style golf facility that combines the desert terrain of Redmond's Juniper Golf Course, the towering Ponderosa pines of Bend Golf and Country Club and the hilly terrain of River's Edge in Bend.

Yet Silvies Valley Ranch is unlike most every other course in the world. Because here, virtually in the middle of nowhere, sits what is believed by many to be just the second-ever reversible 18-hole course built anywhere in the world.

“It’s not just the novelty of a reversible course,” said the course’s designer, Dan Hixson. A Portlander, Hixson has helped remodel several courses around the state, including some recent bunker work at Bend Golf and Country Club. “I wanted to build something special, something that fit this land, this big, beautiful land. ... I don’t just want this to be a reversible course. I want it to be two really great courses that kind of uniquely lay over each other.”

After following a winding dirt road just off U.S. Highway 395, well out of cell service for most carriers, golfers arrive at Silvies Valley Ranch, which opened this month. It is Hixson’s fourth project built from scratch and includes the Hankins and Craddock courses, named after the pioneers who originally settled on the site. From the first tee box on the Hankins course, the uniqueness of Silvies is quite clear. A wide-open fairway stretches across the land. On this day, that fairway is only for the Hankins’ opening hole.

The following day, it would serve as the fairway for the 17th and 18th holes at Craddock. Throughout the track, the reversible nature of Silvies becomes more evident. While on the Hankins No. 1 green, for example, another green is noticeable off to the right: the 17th hole for Craddock. Just in front of the sixth tee at Hankins are two bunkers — which the next day would be greenside traps for the Craddock 13th.

Picture the Hankins course lying on a table like a blueprint. Then, flip over a copy of that same course and set it on top of that blueprint. That is Silvies Valley Ranch: two courses that play completely different ways using the same tract of land. (The courses, to be sure, do not play simultaneously. On a Monday, for example, Hankins will be the course of choice, then Tuesday’s track will be Craddock.)

“As much (work) as doing a golf course is, until people come out and play it, it’s sort of not real. It’s more in your head and in the ground,” Hixson says. “You try to explain it to people. Friends that I’ve had for years are just like, ‘I don’t understand reversible.’ Until you get here and see it, it sort of doesn’t quite click of what it means.

“It’s complicated, and I love that about the design. There’s so many courses that are, for lack of a better term, cookie-cutter.”

Scott Campbell and his family have roots in the area dating back to 1863. Growing up, he fell in love with the land north of Burns and in 2007, Campbell, a retired veterinarian who built Portland-based Banfield Pet Hospital into a multinational company, purchased the ranch. Two years later, in an effort to develop Silvies Valley Ranch into a tourist attraction in the heart of frontier country, Campbell contacted a fast-rising golf course designer.

In 2009, Hixson had just completed Wine Valley Golf Club in Walla Walla, Washington, and via third party he was contacted by Campbell. The ranch owner detailed the resort he was planning to build and explained to Hixson how a unique golf course would help solidify Campbell’s vision.

Hixson had always wanted to design a reversible course. As a kid, he would draw golf courses. During a delay in construction at Wine Valley, Hixson illustrated another possible reversible track. The course at Silvies, Hixson says, did not begin with a reversible approach. The designer and Campbell drove through the land in Eastern Oregon and took note of the vast landscape. Hixson already had a straightforward, more traditional style of facility mapped out. But as the two developers scoped the topography in Silvies, Hixson could envision areas where his long-standing dream of a reversible course could fit.

“I said, ‘I’d like to play with this idea of making some reversible holes out here,’” Hixson remembers telling Campbell. “He was like, ‘What?’ I went to explain how the Old Course at St. Andrews (the venerable course in Scotland) is reversible, though it wasn’t really designed to be. He said, ‘Well, why don’t we just do the whole thing?’”

Hixson's eyes lit up at the suggestion. And he began plotting.

"Because the site's so big and I didn't really have any boundaries," Hixson says, "it just allowed me to kind of go nuts and think about one course with another one laying on top of it."

Between 2009 and 2013, Hixson workers cleared and shaped the course. Irrigation pipes were laid in 2014. Word began spreading about the unconventional facility, and the reversible Silvies Valley Ranch was hyped up as the first of its kind. (The Old Course, Hixson notes, was not originally "designed" to be reversible, as Silvies was.) Unfortunately, Hixson says, the Silvies crew ran into some snags during construction. In late 2014, Tom Doak, the famous designer who built two courses at world-renowned Bandon Dunes Golf Resort on the southern Oregon Coast, announced he would be building The Loop at Forest Dunes Golf Club in Michigan — beating Silvies to the punch as what is believed to be the first reversible track to open.

"We wanted to be first," Hixson says. "We thought that was really important. ... It just took us a little longer than we wanted or expected. I would have loved to have been first. But I think the fact that one of the top guys (Doak) also did a golf course (like Silvies) gives it validity."

Regardless of which course first opened, Hixson says The Loop and Silvies Valley Ranch are "completely different animals." At Silvies — complete with two 18-hole tracks (7,075-yard Hankins and 7,035-yard Craddock), a nine-hole par-3 course and a seven-hole challenge course (which will open next summer) — are two different 18-hole experiences, Hixson emphasizes, that cost roughly the same as building one course and require only a "slightly bigger crew" than maintaining a single track.

The Silvies slogan is "simply amazing," and it is just that. Aside from the complexity (between the two courses, there are 16 fairways and 27 greens — nine of the greens are shared), Hankins and Craddock are fairly straightforward. The only reminders of the facility's reversible nature, for example, are Craddock greens and greenside bunkers adjacent to Hankins tee boxes.

Lee Harlow, the director of golf at Silvies, took note of that simplicity. Harlow was the general manager at Juniper Golf Course until early 2016. He was about to return to his previous home in Southern California, fed up with the frigid winters of Central Oregon. Yet on June 1, Harlow changed his tune. (He says he has an agreement to be at Silvies Valley Ranch during the golf season, then will head back to California during the off-seasons.)

Harlow had heard about the proposed reversible course at Silvies. He was still at Juniper when he received a phone call from Keith Hanley, the vice president of operations for Illinois-based KemperSports, which manages Silvies Valley Ranch. Harlow says he had helped KemperSports open two courses before. Hanley asked Harlow if he would like to do it again.

"I asked, 'Where at?' He's like, 'Eastern Oregon.' And I laughed," Harlow recounts. "I said I couldn't handle Bend because I can't handle the cold. I said, 'What course?' He's like, 'Silvies; it's reversible.' I said, 'I'll be there.' He said, 'You don't want to see it first?' I'm like, 'Is it as awesome as I think it is and as it sounds?' And he's like, 'Oh, yeah.' We're both golf junkies. Just him saying what he said and what I knew, that it was reversible, I was like, 'Oh, yeah.'"

Harlow's buy-in is an example of what Silvies Valley Ranch has to offer. Even for a guy who cannot stand the cold of winter, Harlow, a month and a half into his new gig, is certain he made the correct decision in joining the Silvies staff.

"Dan (Hixson), I think, is a creative genius," Harlow says. "Unbelievable. Now we just have some turf conditions; it was a tough growing season. But once we get through that, I think it will be just an unbelievable resort."

Though conditions at the Eastern Oregon course were a tad rough due to the harsh weather this past winter, the course, which has entertained several groups from out of the area as well as some locals, is

quickly rebounding with soft and smoother greens and fairways that are nearly completely recovered from snow-related damages. It also boasts a character to which few other courses can compare. In each bunker, for example, are rakes handmade by Campbell's son. Cut over the teeth of each rake are phrases unique to each tool, such as "Oops," "Need a drink?" and "Yeehaw."

At Silvies Valley Ranch, in the middle of an off-the-grid Western frontier ranch, lies a golf retreat you must see — and play — to believe.

"It's just unlike anything they're going to play anywhere else," Hixson says. "It's a completely unique golf experience."

About Silvies Valley Ranch

Directions: From Bend, take U.S. Highway 20 east towards Burns. In downtown Burns, turn left onto U.S. Highway 395 toward John Day. After 36 miles, turn left onto Forest Road 37. The entrance to Silvies Valley Ranch will be on the immediate left. Follow the dirt road until reaching the Gatehouse at Silvies Valley Ranch.

Tees: White (Hankins, 7,075 yards; Craddock, 7,035), Gray (Hankins, 6,280; Craddock, 6,340), Black (Hankins, 5,335; Craddock, 5,560)

Green fees: \$225 for resort guests for an 18-hole round, \$260 for non-resort guests. Package deals are available online at <http://www.silviessimplyamazing.com/packages/>.