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Cowboy Way: The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch debuts its reversible courses in eastern Oregon

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Aug 08, 2017



BURNS, Ore. – Every golf friend of Dr. Scott Campbell who has visited his Silvies Valley Ranch has told him the same thing.

This would be a great place for a golf course.

Bucolic meadows of prairie grasses and sagebrush and hillsides blanketed in ponderosa pines extend for miles in every direction on the working cattle and goat ranch in remote eastern Oregon. Campbell bought roughly 140,000 acres in 2007 after cashing in his stock of the Banfield Pet Hospital, where, as company CEO, he oversaw growth to more than 700 clinics in several countries.

Campbell, a large-animal veterinarian by trade, has delivered golf's newest resort in the most unlikely of places. The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch occupies one of golf's most remote and stark landscapes. It's a three-hour drive from airports in Redmond (near Bend) or Boise, Idaho. I felt lost driving there and almost ran out of gas trying to get back to civilization, but that's all part of a good golf road trip, if you ask me.

Those willing to take on this adventurous trek to the high desert will discover, arguably, the most unique outpost in golf, a place where golf shoes and cowboy boots are equally welcome. Name another golf

resort that considers goat herding, stargazing, Polaris Razor tours, bird watching, shooting “peacemaker” pistols and cattle drives as leisure pursuits. Adding to the intrigue is a reversible course, an imaginative routing of 27 greens and multiuse tees and fairways by Oregon architect Dan Hixson.

During a two-night stay at the resort's soft opening in mid-July, the infrastructure was up and running, although more accommodations were still being built, a fairway needed more grow-in time and the gift shop/activities center was still under construction. It was easy to envision its potential of this Old West escape, even at such an early stage of development.

A new spin on reversible golf

The opportunity to play a reversible course should draw curious golfers and architecture buffs.

Unlike the flat land used by Tom Doak’s [widely publicized reversible course that opened in 2016](#) in northern Michigan, [The Loop at Forest Dunes](#), the Craddock and Hankins courses at Silvies Valley Ranch climb up and fall off of more than 100 feet of elevation change, playing to nine shared greens and nine separate greens apiece. Both layouts are named after the original Pioneers who homesteaded the land in 1883.

The story goes that Hixson (pictured below) tossed out the idea of making a section of the course 'reversible' somewhere around 2010. Hearing how the [Old course at St. Andrews](#) can be played forward and backward, Campbell suggested making the whole thing reversible. The second routing, the 7,035-yard, par-72 [Craddock course](#), joined the original, the 7,075-yard, par-73 [Hankins course](#).



I slightly prefer the more playable and scenic Hankins course, but they're very comparable. Instead of trying to force certain downhill holes to climb back up impossible ridges, as a true reversible course would do, Hixson simply built new holes around these obstacles. There are seemingly greens and tees splashed everywhere, so signage is key to keep golfers going in the right direction.

To me, the Hankins had more character and felt more “fun”, although I also wonder if that’s because I played it first. Most of the surprises – the surrounding scenery and the hand-made bunker rakes decorated with whimsical words of wisdom – were already revealed by the time I played the Craddock the next day. Plus, much of my time and energy playing the Craddock was spent trying to figure out which greens, fairways and tees were shared, a distraction from playing the game. It was all a blur, in a good way.

With only one shared wetland hazard, you’ll likely never lose a ball on either course. The fescue turf and Hixson’s design elements call for a bump-and-run game to bentgrass greens. The highlights of both rounds are delivered by the elevated tee boxes. The altitude – roughly 4,600 feet – promotes long drives. In fact, a sign at No. 18 on the Hankins course, a downwind and downhill par 5, challenges players to hit the longest drives of their lives. Measuring markers line the fairway. A gimmick, yes, but fun nonetheless.

Tee times cost \$225 for resort guests and \$260 for non-guests, making them two of the 50 [most expensive public tee times in America](#) for those who don’t stay and play.

“The Hideout”, a hilltop clubhouse, features three all-glass garage doors that open to an outdoor patio overlooking the nine-hole par-3 Chief Egan course set in a beautiful meadow below near a pond. The clubhouse, which serves food and drinks, is run by solar power and completely off the grid. Another more extreme seven-hole short course, McVeigh’s Gauntlet, could open next year.

One of my favorite parts of the whole experience? There’s no need to wait for a shuttle to head back to the resort. Every guest gets their own golf cart to drive during their stay.

The Resort

The decade-long journey to create a destination resort hasn’t come without headaches. Campbell says the ranch had been on the market for five years without an offer before he rescued it.

“I didn’t know how run down it was,” he says. “It had gone back to desert. The irrigation was destroyed. The roads, and there weren’t many, were impassable. I had to tour it by helicopter. The forest had been harvested three times in 18 years. They only left the bad trees.”

Campbell and his ranch hands restored natural habitats throughout the ranch by installing 4,000 bird (and bat) houses, stocking ponds with fish and building 300 artificial beaver dams to improve creeks and streams, although critics believe he [skirted state laws](#) building the dams, hindering an endangered species, the redband trout. Campbell says the work recovered 17 miles of streams and revived the Silvies River to the point that river otters have returned. His staff built and repaired miles and miles of fences and now maintains 600 miles of them.

Campbell says he started the resort to help the local economy by bringing in much-needed tourism traffic and creating jobs for resident workers. It took a [new state law](#), passed in 2011, to get his dream of an eco-friendly resort moving forward. Oregon’s land use laws are some of the strictest in the country and its environmental groups among the most outspoken. Just ask the folks behind [Pacific Gales](#), another golf project that’s taken years to get anywhere close to a construction phase.



The main resort cozies up to Otter Lake, a small pond. The luxurious two-bedroom cabin I shared with another writer can be divided into two units, one with a living room, full kitchen and hot tub on the patio. They're plush with elaborate décor – bedroom skylights, copper bathroom sinks and rain showers. Other units geared toward golf foursomes should be ready by fall. In total, the ranch will eventually offer 34 guestrooms with a real estate phase planned as well. A spa, fitness center and pool is scheduled for completion in 2018. Much of the construction material has been recycled from the ranch, keeping the carbon footprint to a minimum.

The Main Lodge was gutted, renovated and moved after a previous owner failed to make a vacation dude ranch viable. It serves as the main gathering place. Drinks are served at its Saloon bar, followed by elaborate meals in the Dining Room, usually involving tasty chevon goat meat and grass-fed beef from the ranch. At breakfast, keep your eyes on the outdoors for wildlife playing in the meadow. Hanging out by the fire pit on the lake one night, a tapestry of stars shined brighter than I've ever seen in my life.

On our final afternoon, Campbell guided a Razor tour of the property, whizzing along trails cut high on ridges to view free-range cattle, antelope and other wildlife. We eventually came upon a dilapidated cabin of one of the original homesteaders. Campbell spent \$16,000 restoring the roof to save the tiny shack that once housed seven children, the last living now 93 years old.

I could only imagine what it was like to sleep on the floor and stay warm, a rugged existence compared to the comfy bed I would sleep in that night. It reminded me how far Silvies Valley Ranch has come – and how the world has changed - in a century. The question now is: Can golf find a permanent home on the range for the century to come?

