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Silvies Valley Ranch

One-of-a-kind in the wilds of Eastern Oregon BY JEFF SHELLEY

I'VE BEEN LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE TOURED DOZENS of under-construction golf courses with their architects before a divot was ever dug.

Each architect led me on enthusiastic hours-long jaunts that often ended up with damaged, and certainly very dirty, vehicles (including my own) as we drove over and alongside dusty future golf holes in various stages of development.

Dan Hixson evinced such palpable zest while I chatted with him and a mutual friend, PNGA Hall of Famer Kent Myers, last September at Oswego Lake Country Club. Dan brought out an iPad and excitedly scrolled through photos of his as-yet-unopened "reversible" course at the off-the-beaten-path Silvies Valley Ranch near Burns, Ore.

Dan reaffirmed his passion for the project during a conversation 10 months later.

"First was the uniqueness of this part of the state," he said. "Not many people have ever been to Eastern Oregon except passing through, including me. Second, the size, scope and scale of the whole ranch and eventually the site where we built the course were special. It has amazing ecological variety."

Eight years before the course debuted, Hixson began the state-spanning sojourn from his Portland home to Silvies Valley Ranch. In all, he made a whopping 110 trips to the 140,000-acre property.

Such dedication to his craft is not surprising, as Hixson's other from-scratch courses have all received plaudits: Bandon Crossings in southwest Oregon (opened in 2007), Wine Valley in Walla Walla (2009) and Crestview Golf Club (2009) in Waldport, Ore.

He's also overseen dozens of remodels to existing courses, including Oswego Lake, and has several projects on the drawing board.

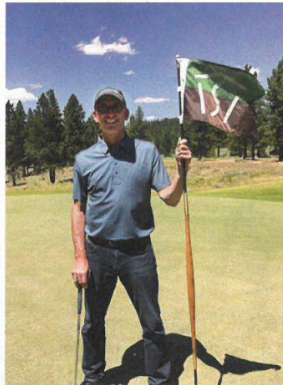
Hixson explained how he settled on crafting the Northwest's first "reversible" course (meaning it can be played in opposite directions).

"My first trip to the ranch was in the late spring of 2009," he said. "I made several visits over the next couple months working on the routing and design. Sometime that summer I proposed the idea of making the course reversible to the owner, Dr. Scott Campbell.

"He liked it and gave me the go-ahead to stake and, later that fall, mow the basic corridors.

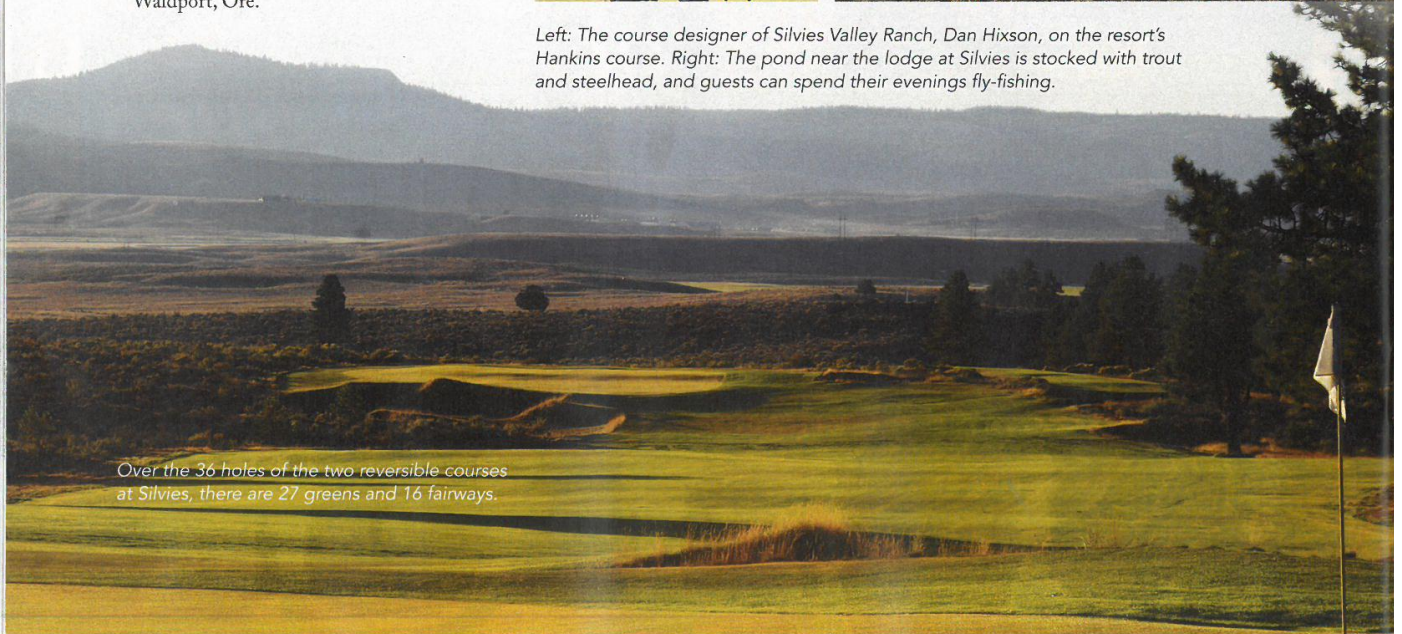
"We actually started building golf holes in September 2010 after we acquired approval from Grant County. The construction season is pretty short at 4,800 feet above sea level, and the seeding and grow-in period is much shorter still."

The course was irrigated in 2014 and the greens and tees were seeded, and in 2015 the remaining fairways were seeded. The



Left: The course designer of Silvies Valley Ranch, Dan Hixson, on the resort's Hankins course. Right: The pond near the lodge at Silvies is stocked with trout and steelhead, and guests can spend their evenings fly-fishing.

Over the 36 holes of the two reversible courses at Silvies, there are 27 greens and 16 fairways.





course officially opened for preview play on July 5, 2017.

Hixson constructed the course with Norbert Painter, Jay Kenyon, Darryl Moulder and Torin Foster, and as with any golf development, the small team faced barriers at Silvies.

“The biggest challenge was the remote nature of the project, especially in the early years,” Hixson said. “Mobile phone and internet services were only available in certain parts of the ranch, so this made it a challenge to purchase equipment and parts, and stay connected to our families and friends. The communications aspects are great now, but early on, if a piece of equipment broke down, it could really slow things up.”

“The other big challenge was getting employees to work on the course. The rural setting of Silvies has only a limited pool of workers nearby. The biggest crew we had was six, including myself.”

The course’s two configurations are named Craddock in one direction and Hankins in the other, after the property’s early homesteaders.

Hixson had dreamt of creating a reversible course for decades.

“I actually played around with the idea in my head for many years when I first saw Eugene Country Club being reversed as a young child,” said the former head professional at Columbia-Edgewater Country Club, whose father Harvey and brother Dave held similar job titles at

various Oregon clubs. “I also proposed the reversible course idea to an early investment group for Wine Valley.

“While it might seem novel, it has many great benefits, both ecologically and economically. But most importantly was an owner who could see quickly that having two full courses on the acreage of one made a lot of sense. But mostly, it’s a cool idea that should appeal to anyone who truly loves golf.”

In addition to the championship-length Craddock and Hankins venues, the ranch has the Chief Egan par-3 track, and later this summer Hixson will unveil a seven-hole challenge course called McVeigh’s Gauntlet.

“It is being built on a small, wildly undulating section of land just to the south of the main course,” he said. “It’s mostly small islands-in-the-sage-type greens with holes ranging from 85 to 275 yards long. It will be very challenging, but also great fun for those who take it on.”

In addition to 52 holes of golf, the vast expanse, purchased by Dr. Campbell in 2007, offers guests access to fishing, shooting, wagon rides, cattle roundups, goat herding, hiking and biking trails, a conference center, private airstrip and various dining options.

Upcoming plans at this “Authentic Western Retreat” include a spa and fitness center in 2018, and private homes.

Jeff Shelley is a longtime Seattle writer who has written and published nine books (five about golf). Over the past five years, Jeff has been president of the nonprofit First Green program.



Dr. Scott Campbell, his wife Sandy and their Rottweiler Ella standing on the deck of the Hideout, the clubhouse at Silvies Valley Ranch, the dream they brought into reality. Campbell was the owner and CEO of Banfield Pet Hospital, with clinics in over 800 PetSmart stores, and in 2007 he sold the company and purchased the ranch, with the idea of eventually creating jobs and opportunity for the local economy.