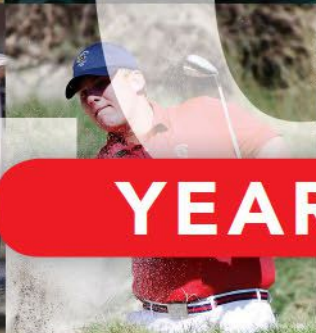


Golfweek

FOR SERIOUS GOLFERS



YEAR IN REVIEW



ALTERNATE REALITIES

Innovative concepts beyond the traditional 18-hole layout gain foothold at many destinations

By **Martin Kaufmann**

The first golf course Dan Hixson can remember visiting as a child was Eugene Country Club, which has a unique history. In 1968, Robert Trent Jones reversed the original H. Chandler Egan routing. Hixson recalls his father, a golf professional, explaining how the greens sat where the tees used to be.

The experience had a profound impact on young Hixson. He remembers the wonder he felt learning that people were paid to build courses. He told his father that's what he wanted to do and immediately began drawing golf holes.

As Hixson grew up to become a golf pro and self-taught architect, that early experience at Eugene CC continued to influence him.

"I've always looked at holes and thought, 'This hole might be as good backward as it forward,'" Hixson said.

He envisioned building his highly regarded Wine Valley Golf Club in Walla Walla, Wash., as a reversible course, but when he pitched the idea to prospective financial backers, "They kind of thought I was crazy."

Hixson initially got a similar response from Scott Campbell, owner of Silvies Valley Ranch in Seneca, Ore., when he proposed making six of that resort's 18 holes reversible. On some level, an architect has to be a salesman who convinces his client to buy into his vision. So Hixson appealed to Campbell's Scottish heritage, noting that The Old Course at St. Andrews is reversible.

"Within 30 seconds, he said, 'Why wouldn't we just do the whole thing that way?'" Hixson recalled. "There were no rules. Scott said, 'Just go for it.'"

Finally, Hixson had found a kindred spirit who embraced his vision.

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Silvies Valley Ranch has become a living lab for architectural experimentation – sort of the Haight Ashbury of the alternative-design movement. Aside from his reversible design, Hixson designed a nine-hole par-3 course and a mind-bending seven-hole short course on land so severe it can't accommodate motorized carts.

But Silvies Valley is just one of the more radical examples of a mini-trend percolating across the industry. Course operators are displaying more of an appetite for alternative facilities, including short courses, practice areas that can be converted to short-game courses and massive Himalayan-style putting courses.

These alternatives won't displace the traditional 18-hole layouts. In many instances, architect Tom Doak

**Pinehurst's
nine-hole, par-3
Cradle course**





Silvie's Valley Ranch

noted, they're supplementing existing resorts and private clubs, providing a cost-efficient amenity for guests and members. For resorts, that often equates to a reason for guests to stay an extra day and spend more on food and drinks.

A Doak creation is the most noteworthy example of that principle. In 2014 the industry got a jolt when Lew Thompson, owner of Forest Dunes Golf Club in Roscommon, Mich., announced Doak would build a reversible course. It would complement Tom Weiskopf's original Forest Dunes design, No. 3 in golf-rich Michigan according to the Golfweek's Best Courses You Can Play state rankings.

Even by Northern Michigan standards, Forest Dunes is remote – about 70 miles east of Traverse City. A second course would give golfers a reason to stay an extra day.

As it turned out, Doak, not unlike Hixson, had been contemplating a reversible course since first reading

about the concept as a teenager. He had pitched the idea once before to a client, who expressed concerns about the aesthetics.

"One of the things about the reversible golf course is you can't control the look of it from two directions," Doak said. "Everything you do to make bunkers more visible and cart paths less visible from the one direction backfires on you when you go the other way."

Thompson told people he was looking for an idea that would "wow" him and Forest Dunes guests. But he didn't have "wow" land; it's lovely woodlands, but there's no dominant water feature or dramatic land forms.

Doak recalled walking it and thinking, "The concept needs to wow people if that's what he's after."

The gentle roll of Forest Dunes' terrain was ideally suited for Doak's vision of a reversible course. In Thompson, Doak found an enthusiastic client who effectively received two courses for the price of one. The Loop, Doak's reversible design, opened to widespread »



COURTESY OF MOUNTAIN TOP

Gary Player's par-3 Mountain Top course near Branson, Mo.

leading candidate for those assignments.

Streamsong Resort recently made news opening Gil Hanse's Black Course. There was less mention of two related Hanse projects: a two-acre putting course called The Gauntlet and a short course dubbed Roundabout.

"One of the things we talked about was if people get to Streamsong at, say, 4:30 in the afternoon, and they don't have time to play a full 18, where could they go?" Hanse said.

The Roundabout is all about providing flexibility for guests. It can be played as a six-hole par-3 course or what Hanse describes as a "call-your-shot horse

course." (Hanse also designed the Horse Course that opened in 2010 at The Prairie Club in Valentine, Neb.) At Pinehurst, Hanse recently opened the nine-hole Cradle course, and quadrupled the size of the Thistle Dhu putting course.

In addition, Hanse just finished work on Ohoopsee Match Club in Cobbtown, Ga., which has 22 holes, which form a conventional 18-hole layout and a roughly 6,000-yard 18-hole alternative for members looking for a quicker round.

"You see (Golden Age architects) writing about a sense of humor in course design," Hanse said. "I think these alternate courses allow us and other architects to show off a sense of humor. . . . We've always liked that these (alternative designs) are just for fun rather than being out there grinding over a 5-footer to make a par."

One of the most enthusiastic proponents of short courses has been Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris, who is on the precipice of turning Branson, Mo., into a full-fledged, if unlikely, golf destination. Golf fans know his Top of the Rock par-3 course as host site of a PGA Tour Champions event. In August he opened Gary Player's par-3 Mountain Top, a 13-hole, walking-only course cut through limestone-rock formations. Outside the Mountain Top clubhouse, Tom Watson is completing work on a Himalayas-style putting course.

Most of the attention properly is directed at Morris' regulation-length courses: Buffalo Ridge Springs; a new Coore-Crenshaw course that will open in 2018; and a Tiger Woods design, Payne's Valley, set to open in 2019. But those par-3 and putting courses will round out the experience for Branson visitors.

Steve Friedlander, who oversees Morris' fast-growing golf operations, said there's a lesson for resort operators: "They have to create unique possibilities and opportunities for people, just like we're doing here. A golfer needs to go to an area to have an experience that »

praise last year and is No. 4 on Golfweek's state list, right behind its sister course.



Reversible courses are just the most extreme example of alternative designs. Most of the work involves smaller projects – nine-holers, pitch-and-putts and putting courses.

This in part reflects a time-tested tenet of business – namely, copying successful competitors. Bandon Dunes Golf Resort has four 18-hole courses, but you can't go there without playing the 13-hole Preserve short course and The Punchbowl, a 100,000-square-foot putting course designed by Doak and Jim Urbina. The Punchbowl is free; guests pay for the beer.

Architect David McLay Kidd, who designed the first course at Bandon Dunes, said he used to groan when course operators suggested he build a pitch-and-putt course. "I would think, 'Oh my God, that sounds horrible,'" he said. He changed his mind after seeing what architects Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw did at Bandon's Preserve.

"When you benchmark pitch-and-putts against The Preserve, which I think is finest pitch-and-putt of all time – if that's the bar, I would be happy to build anyone a pitch-and-putt," Kidd said.

He might get his chance. Kidd's hugely popular 2014 design, Gamble Sands in Brewster, Wash., led the owners at Gebbers Farms to build lodging and bring Kidd back to create an adjacent two-acre putting course that is free to overnight guests.

"What it's really added is that leisure activity in the evening or something to do while waiting for your golf in the morning," said Tory Wulf, Gamble Sands' project manager.

Wulf said Gebbers Farms is considering adding a second 18-hole course and a short course, with Kidd the

he'll be able to pass along to his buddies and say, 'You have to come to this place.'"



We haven't seen the last of these innovations. Kidd noted that he, like other architects, has been contemplating the idea of a par-2 course – "more than a putting course and less than The Preserve," he said. A key factor is finding innovative ways to monetize land that's going unused. "What do you do if you have more than two acres for a putting course, but don't have 10 to 20 acres that a short course would take?" Kidd said.

While the par-2 idea remains theoretical, the pitch-and-putt par-3 course has been re-imagined.

Last year Ballyneal Golf Club in Holyoke, Colo., enlisted Doak to build a short course. Ballyneal's original 18-hole course, opened in 2006, is one of Doak's greatest triumphs; it ranks No. 4 on Golfweek's Best Modern Courses list. Ballyneal had enough water from its original allotment to care for an additional seven acres of turf, and club officials asked Doak what they could do with that parcel. He initially contemplated creating an expanded practice area, then settled on a par-3 course, which opened this fall on land bounded by the front nine's opening and closing holes.

The land was so severe that Doak decided he couldn't use it on the original 18 holes. But given the members' appreciation for the rugged Ballyneal design, he figured he could crank up the volume with some good raucous fun across untamed land.

"We took the approach, let's make this really fun and really wild," Doak said. "There's three or four par-3 holes that I would never have built on a regulation 18-hole course because people would say they're too wild."

Those include a blind par 3 through a saddle and a 20,000-square-foot boomerang-shaped green – with moguls just for kicks.

"It just adds to the vibe and fun of the club," said Dave Hensley, Ballyneal's general manager.

At Silvies Valley, Hixson is doing something similar with McVeigh's Gauntlet, which opens next summer. Hixson said Campbell wanted the big course to run across the McVeigh's land, but it is set on a razorback ridge that's too extreme for regular play – or even power carts. So Hixson built a seven-hole short course with two par 4s and five par 3s. The result, Hixson said, is "fantasy golf" holes – target golf played to island greens. He's even considering inserting a par-2 hole – basically, a long putt – at Campbell's suggestion.

"It's certainly not for everyone," Hixson said.

But it sounds too cool not to try. **Gwk**



The 2-acre putting course at Gamble Sands

5 to REMEMBER

GOLF LIFE

- 1 **NON-CONVENTIONAL FACILITIES** grab attention: reversible courses; par-3 layouts, nine-hole tracts, putting courses.
- 2 **BUNKERS** undergo major shift in maintenance, as clubs remove fabric liners in exchange for permeable, hard-surface membranes.
- 3 Restoration of the year is **INVERNESS CLUB** in Ohio, which gave up modernist Tom Fazio holes and returned to Ross-Tillinghast themes.
- 4 Major lesson from **ERIN HILLS** is that par-5s don't test Tour players, and having four of them gives away a lot of birdies.
- 5 **WHAT'S OLD IS NEW.** After flirtation with modern designs, U.S. Open returns to Shinnecock Hills (2018); Pebble Beach (2019) and Winged Foot (2020).