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Goats as caddies? Believe it

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All kidding aside, the Retreat and Links at Silvies Valley Ranch offers top-shelf golf and a unique experience. Photos by Silvies Valley Ranch

A bad day for a caddie at many clubs might mean schlepping two bags for five hours for a pair of notoriously chintzy tippers.

At the **Retreat and Links at Silvies Valley Ranch** in east-central Oregon, a bad day for a caddie might mean getting fired and ending up on the menu in the restaurant.

Silvies Valley Ranch is a 140,000-acre working ranch in Seneca, Oregon that is home to about 4,500 head of cattle and more than 2,000 American range goats. Situated in a high mountain meadow, the ranch also includes the Retreat & Links that is billed as an eco-tourism destination comprising a hotel and spa, a host of western-themed activities and four golf courses designed by Dan Hixson, including the seven-hole McVeigh's Gauntlet course, where the steep terrain makes golf cars obsolete and **goats that serve as caddies** a necessity.



Goat caddies don't complain or give bad advice. The best part, they don't talk back or dole out bad advice.

"How did we come up with the program? We'd like to take credit for it, but the goats wanted a different career opportunity," joked Colby Marshall, vice president of livestock and guest services at Silvies Valley Ranch.

"For a goat, working as a caddie is a better career path than working in the restaurant."

A new Hixson design, McVeigh's Gauntlet will open this season, not just any goat will do for the caddie program.

Goats are handpicked, range in age from 2-8 years, undergo training with a livestock handler and get regular veterinary checkups to ensure their health and satisfy the animal-rights community.

When Marshall says the goats work for peanuts, he means it. A specially designed pack allows the goats, which can weigh in at a beefy 150 pounds, to carry a limited number of clubs, refreshments and goat treats.

There are four goats in the program, Mike, Bruce, Peanut and Roundabout, and three more will join them this spring as McVeigh's Gauntlet preps for its official grand opening.

"There is a lot of interest in it. They start thinking about it as kids," said Marshall, the resident Henry Youngman of eastern Oregon.

Each goat will work about six hours per day, and handlers make sure they don't stray from their golfers.

Although goat is a popular menu item at Silvie's Ranch, Peanut and Roundabout and their colleagues won't really be served up as the nightly special when it's time to put them out to pasture.

Instead, they'll be eligible for adoption.

"There are none ready at this point; they're all in the prime of their careers," Marshall said. "They'll be placed as pets.

"They're going to have the good life."

Silvies Valley Ranch has been a working cattle ranch since the Craddock family homesteaded the property in 1883. After a succession of owner spanning some 60 years since the 1950s, Scott and Sandy Campbell bought the ranch about a decade ago.

The property also includes the Hankins Course, the nine-hole Chief Egan layout and the Craddock Course that was built to be fully reversible with the routing reversed each day to create a unique golf experience, said superintendent Sean Hoolehan, who thought highly enough of Silvies Valley Ranch that he recently came aboard after 21 years at Wildhorse Resort in Pendleton, Oregon.

"There is nothing clumsy about the reversible layout. It feels like you're playing two distinctly different and unique golf courses," Hoolehan said. "Nothing makes you think on course you played the day before."

Hoolehan said he was attracted by the scope of Silvies Valley Ranch property and the unique experiences it affords guests.

"The top environmental practices we use here have helped turn the ranch into a thriving operation," Hoolehan said.

"I jumped at the chance to come on board. The ranch is not the whim of a wealthy family. This is a thriving business, and it's something I wanted to be part of."