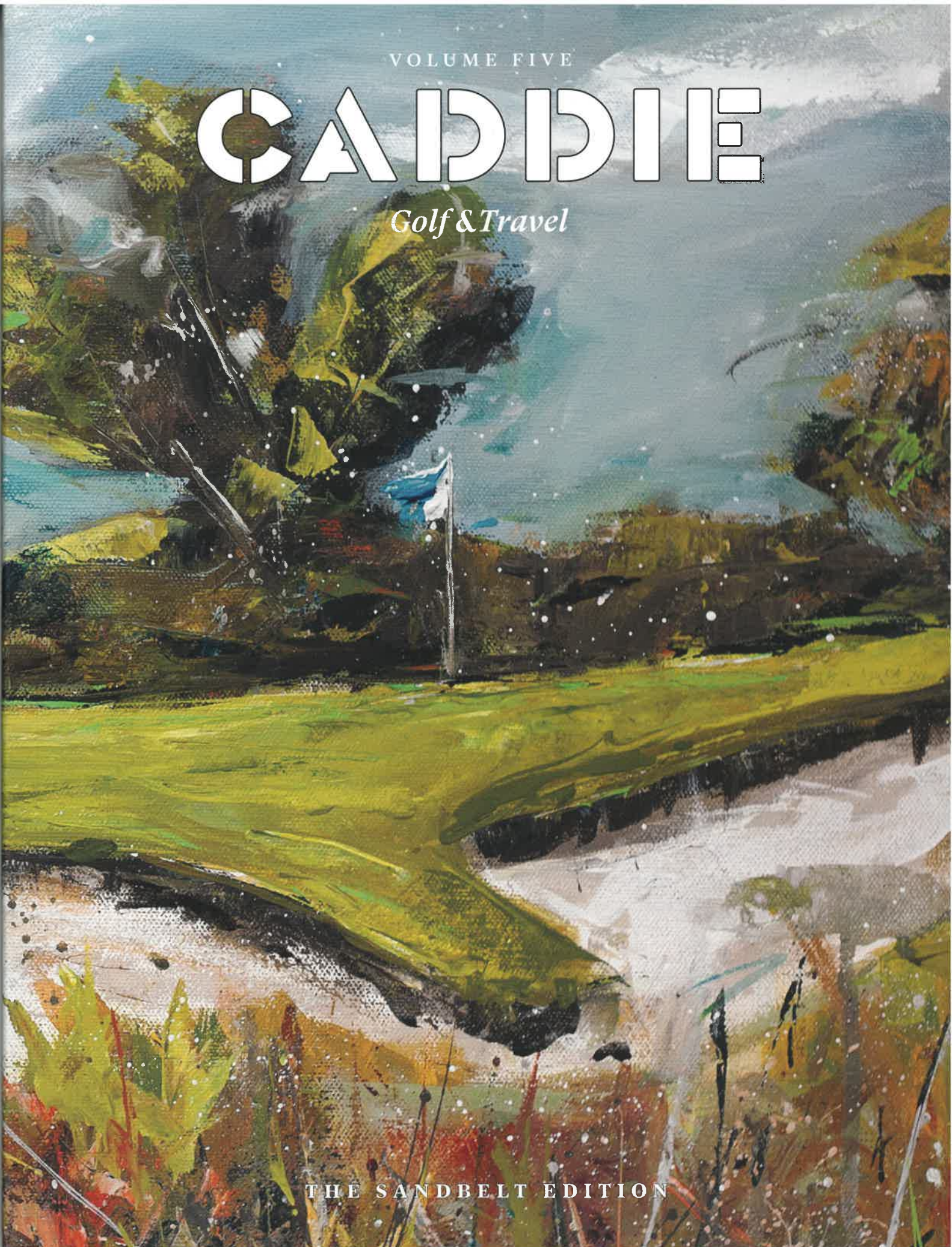


VOLUME FIVE

# CADDIE

*Golf & Travel*

THE SANDBELT EDITION



OREGON, USA

# Silvies Valley Ranch

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY WILLIAM WATT

*Our Editor-in-chief  
traverses fuel panic,  
ranch links, and  
beaver fever in Grant  
County, Oregon, USA.*

Generally speaking, one week is not typically enough time to plan a trip across the planet. But hey, things were pretty quiet at the office, and how often do you get invited to a launch event that involved goat caddies? So here I find myself at Vancouver airport, having missed my ambitious connection to Portland, cashing in a \$10 meal voucher at Starbucks and contemplating the last leg of a 38-hour journey from door-to-door.

The sunset flight down the west coast to Portland is ridiculously scenic - an unexpected bonus of the missed flight. Out the window of our turbo-prop are extravagant seaside communities, dense forests and hazy mountain peaks. Then, the distinctive shape of Mt. St Helens comes into view, which I recognise immediately from a well-loved *National Geographic* issue covering its famous eruption in 1980, causing the largest known debris avalanche in recorded history (and one that caused the mountain itself to lose 400 metres in height). Fifty-seven people were killed, primarily by the vicious pyroclastic flow that was released after the north side of the mountain collapsed. The resultant lahars (volcanic mudflows) completely destroyed over 600 km<sup>2</sup> of pristine wilderness. In the weeks following, U.S. President Jimmy Carter surveyed the damage and said, "Someone said this area looked like a moonscape. But the moon looks like a golf course compared to what's up there." Which reminds me why I'm here.

Picking up my hire car shortly before dark, it's a race to get out of the city and put a dent in the 303-mile drive eastwards before darkness falls. I make pretty good time, and twilight through the pine trees at the base of Mt. Hood is spectacular. Before long it's just the road - whatever the high beams can illuminate - and a flickering GPS signal to my phone's navigation. About this time I notice the handy 'miles remaining' stat on my dashboard. In my enthusiasm to 'get some miles behind me' I have thrashed the engine to the point where fuel is now an issue. The buffer between my destination and reserves is about 60 miles and dropping fast. I start coasting down hills and taking it easy up them: techniques my thrifty grandfather taught me on road trips through rural New Zealand. But it isn't working. A wrong turn courtesy of the 'blue dot' being MIA for about 10 minutes doesn't help. I need fuel. It's now 9pm and all the most populated places on the route have passed. I drift through tiny towns along the Ochoco Highway with nothing names like Mitchell and Dayville, no fuel in sight. Mt. Vernon is my beacon in the night. I pull up at a station just as the sole employee is getting on her bike. I plead my case and she says 'I wish I could help ya'll' in a voice so friendly that 'well, you can, please turn on the pump, I've been travelling for 36 hours and it would be a massive help' doesn't make it to my lips. With 20 miles remaining in the tank I pull into an abandoned Chevron and hope like hell one of my cards works. On the fourth (and last) attempt, it takes. Fuel flows into the tank like adrenaline into my veins. Which is handy because that's the only fuel I'm running on at this point.

Another hour on the road and I see the glorious 'SILVIES RANCH' sign glowing in my headlights. Damon, the head chef, lives on site, and interrupts some down time to show me to my room. Suddenly, I'm in luxury. Plush carpets, log-cabin style walls, a giant super-king bed with Pendleton wool blankets, a comfortable couch, and a cold beer in the



fridge. After nearly two full days on the move, I collapse into the comfiest bed of my life.

Up at dawn for a photography session, I find that I've landed on the set of a western movie, except that nothing here is artificial. Pine trees, log cabins, meandering creeks surrounded by lush meadows, and hills covered in semi-arid scrub that stretch for miles in every direction. A minty, herbal smell of sage permeates the air, which is cool and crisp in the pre-dawn light. As the first rays of sun touch the lush fairways, I know I'm somewhere special.

Photographing a golf course before you've played it can be a bewildering experience – you have no idea what's what. But in this case it's doubly confusing, because Silvies' premiere course is a reversible routing. Based on the day's date, on odd-numbered days you play it clockwise (known as the Hankins course), and on even days counter-clockwise (Craddock course). It also has 27 green complexes, meaning that nine of the greens are common to both courses, nine are unique to Hankins and nine are unique to Craddock. This gives the routing a degree of flexibility that allowed designer Dan Hixon to fully explore the landscape available at Silvies, whilst still bringing the host of advantages that a reversible course can bring. To quote Hixon: "The reversible design supports sustainability in golf, which is of course very important to the philosophy and mission at Silvies Valley Ranch. It creates two unique layouts within the same footprint of land, utilising less resources."

Having 27 greens also means that, unlike Tom Doak's The Loop in Michigan, or indeed The Old Course at St. Andrews, it's not as if you are approaching greens from the complete opposite direction each time. Indeed, many of the fully reversible holes here are situated in a zig-zag formation, meaning you approach common greens from the same side, but at perhaps a 40-50 degree different angle from the previous day.



All this adds to a sense of adventure as I play the course for the first time. There is a lot of head turning on fairways and frequent references to the excellent course guide (also reversible) to try and figure out not only which hole I'm playing, but which hole I will be playing tomorrow. Whilst wayfinding on the course could be improved, as I complete a round on the Hankins I have a firm grasp of the entire layout, including a good look at what I'll be facing tomorrow on Craddock.

*Here you can see the zig-zag nature of the routing, where the green is approached from alternating angles depending on the direction of play. The two-tier green above plays as the short par-4 11th on Hankins, approached from the bottom left of frame, then as the longer par-4 6th on Craddock, approached from bottom right of frame.*

Exploring the land out here through golf is a joy – the serenity is unmatched. Even a gentle gust of wind can first be heard in the pines nearby, then the usually unheard sound of air moving against earth, washing over me with the scent of sage. During one photography session, I spot a deer far in the distance and send my drone over to capture it wandering down a fairway. It

gets spooked and gallops to the undergrowth. A full eight to ten seconds later, I'm the one who is spooked, as I hear another deer approaching me from behind. I leap back into my golf cart and look around for the attacker. My heart is pounding. Nothing. Huh. I dismiss it initially and get back to work, but then think: wait - I definitely heard footsteps approaching. I didn't



*Top: View down 17th and 18th on Hankins makes for a memorable run home  
Bottom: In the foreground are 15th green for Hankins (right) and 4th green on Craddock (left).*

have a chance to stop for some of the newly legal cannabinoids on the way up here. Eventually I realise that it had to be the sound of that far-off deer galloping away, delayed by a slightly slower speed-of-sound at this altitude, and carrying so incredibly clearly that I perceived it to be a different animal moving within a few metres of me. It is a completely surreal experience.

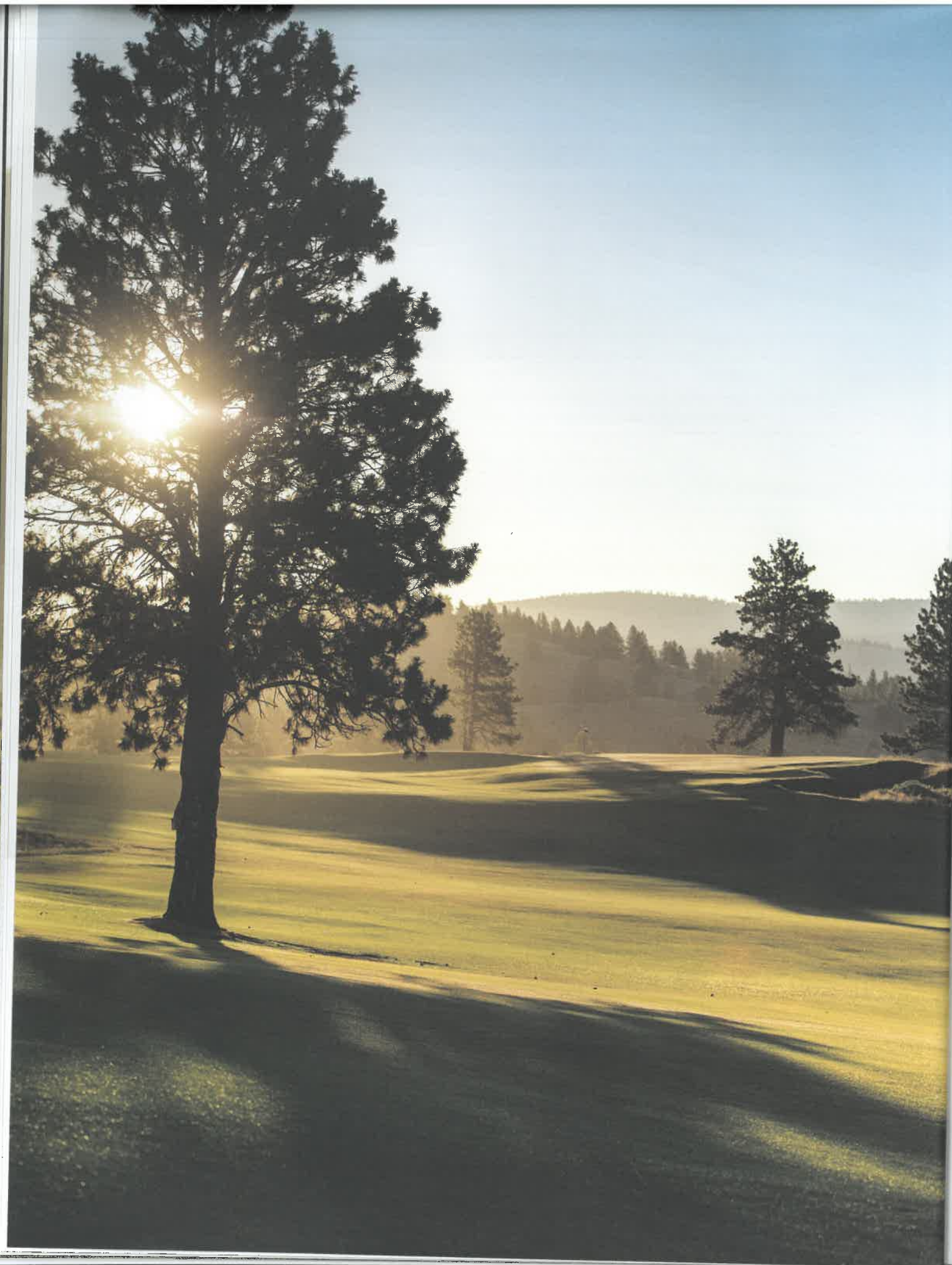
In this environment, a well-struck drive echoes through the valleys, and the soaring ball flight, given an altitude of nearly 5000 feet, is really, really satisfying. Hixon has recognised this and offered at least a half-dozen elevated tee shots across the property. Some of which, like the 8th and 14th on Hankins, seem to offer an endless hang time, before your ball gently plops on the fairway 200-feet below (which, again, you can hear). The bird-song is frequent and beautiful, and standing on fairways surrounded by pine covered hills brings a level of relaxation I wouldn't have thought possible given my relatively compressed time here.

Both courses are tremendously fun to play. There are options off every tee, a great variety of holes and every club in the bag is required. The bunkering across the course is a little too gentle for my tastes – as you'll read in our extensive Sandbelt feature, bunkering in my hometown is a kind of a big deal. I would have loved to have seen some more aggressive shaping and bold faces around the course, especially given the terrain. But punishing the golfer is not the focus here; it's about fun, playability and relaxation, while still challenging the better players and posing strategic questions off every tee. The cleverly crafted run-off areas around the green complexes offer a variety of chipping and recovery shots – Texas Wedge players will be right at home here in Oregon – and provide the strongest defence to wayward approaches. Most holes have a bailout zone and a no-go zone, which asks players to take a risk if they want a good look at birdie. The steeply undulating greens are a heap of fun to putt on – creative players will enjoy taking the 'long road'

occasionally, where putting at right angles to the hole at the right pace makes for a pleasing journey. The pace on the greens is spot on, rolling out just enough to temper my aggression slightly, but with enough forgiveness to make the come-backers fairly straightforward.

There's a good flow to both directions of the routing. A broad, sweeping opening with views across the course, a middle nine holes that bring a more secluded and intimate vibe as they meander up into the valleys of the nearby ranges, and then on the 14th of both directions, you bust back out into the expanses of the prairie lands for the run home. Not that there's any rush to complete your round – it's such a serene environment to be in that it's impossible not to relax. During our round one of our foursome, charismatic local sports radio presenter Michael Williams, is determined to get back to watch the World Cup semi-final. "I'm just playing nine" on the first tee turned into "maybe I'll just watch the second half," to "okay one more hole" to "I'll just watch the replay".

I don't think Michael ever ended up seeing the match. Later that afternoon, we're out on a shooting range, rifles in hand, exploring the expanses of the ranch in awesome little 4wd buggies. We spot a massive herd of antelope (our guide reckons more than 70 head), a baby elk and its mother, the famous crabapple tree (where the local signature 'Horseshoe Nail' cocktail gets its homegrown garnish), and even an early adopter beaver. Our guides are educated and passionate about the land, the animals and the guest experience. There's also a concerted effort to respect and communicate the history of the land the ranch now occupies, and to restoring some of the riverways and meadows that were devastated by the removal of beavers in the early 1800s ('removal' is too kind a word here). At that time, Oregon was under a joint occupation agreement between Britain and the United States. The British were occupying the area primarily through the operations of The



Hudson Bay Company: a global fur goliath, already with hundreds of years of trade under its belt since its founding in 1670.

As US interest in Oregon gradually increased, and the riches of fur became apparent, the HBC, under instruction from British hierarchy, went about creating a 'fur desert', thereby devaluing the land and making it less attractive to US pioneers. Whilst not constrained to Oregon, these missions, ominously named Snake Country Expeditions, wiped out hundreds of thousands of beavers in the space of just 8 to 10 years. As well as being incredibly brutal to beavers (and probably providing very cheap fur hats to Europeans) the policy proved to be an environmental disaster.

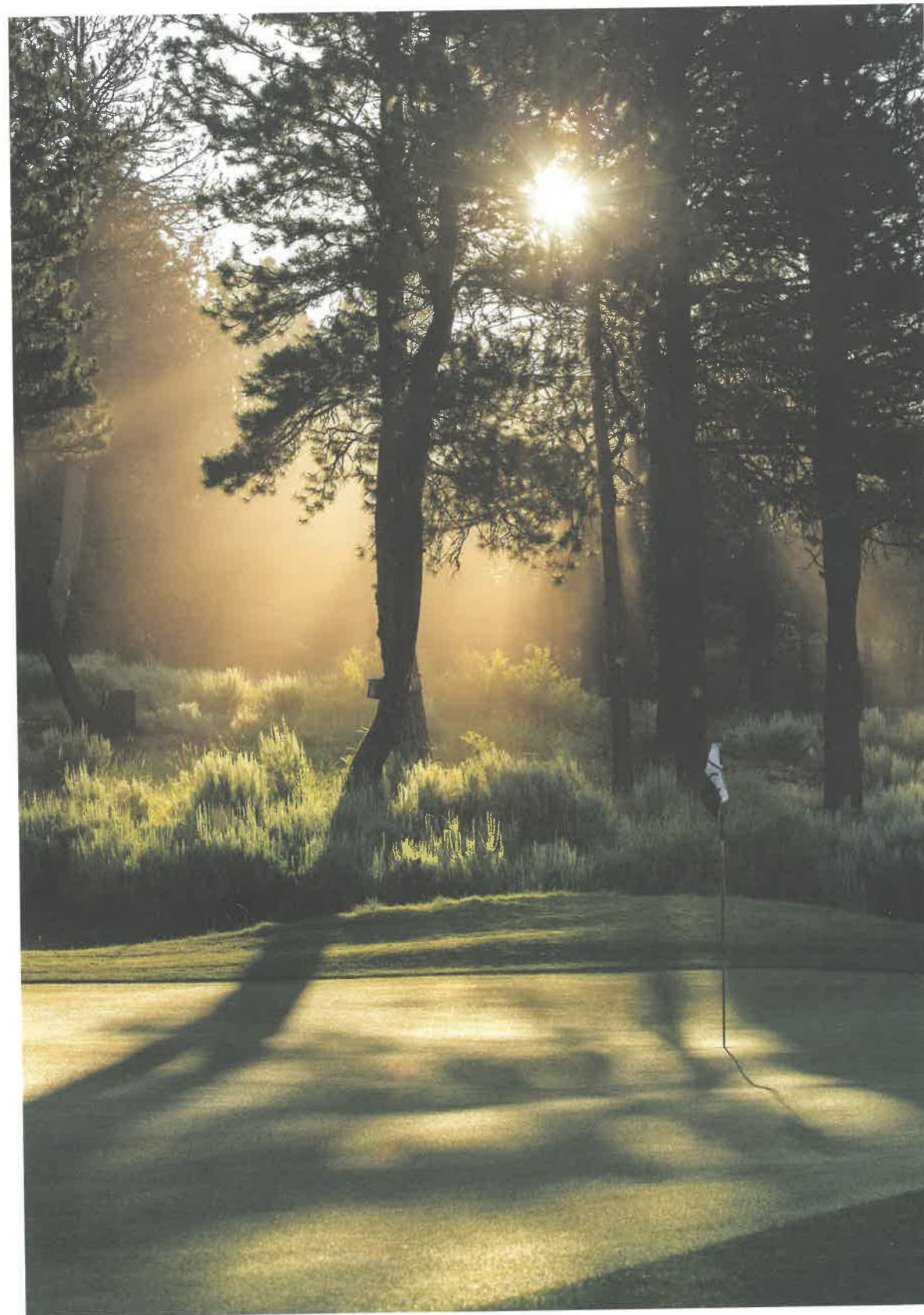
Why is all this important? You see, beavers are bloody hard workers. They spend their lives building dams out of sticks and branches collected from hardwood trees that grow along the banks of the river (which also happen to be their primary food source). These beaver dams have the handy side-effect of slowing down the flow of a river, and, over time, can turn otherwise arid land into a huge sponge, capable of soaking up snow melts throughout the summer and providing an abundant habitat for a variety of flora and fauna.

With the beavers gone, their dams fell into ruin and eventually washed away. The rivers began to streamline. The water ran right on through previously lush meadows and started to dig canyons as it went, which only further accelerated its progress. Trees that previously thrived in the moist ground near the river suddenly found themselves in an arid setting and quickly died. The few beavers that remained gradually lost their food source and construction materials. The arid-loving sage bush, previously confined to higher ground, began marching into the prairie lands. Before long the land was unrecognisable from before.

Silvies owners Scott and Sandy Campbell are now 'bringing back the beaver' to their property, through targeted river projects that aim to reverse this entire process, step by step. First, they have to slow the water down again to create the sponge effect – without that, the willow trees won't grow, and a beaver population will struggle to survive. They're doing this through the construction of artificial dams along the route of the river, encouraging a snaking route through the valley and creating rejuvenated meadows. The first of these projects, on a river that runs alongside the McVeigh's gauntlet course, has been a raging success. The beavers are back in small but increasing numbers, the meadow is lush, and the sage bush is in retreat for the first time in centuries. Silvies is seeking permits to do this on every river on the property. It's great for beavers, but it makes economic sense too: over time a property currently covered primarily by pine forests and arid bushland will contain more areas of lush grassland and hardwood trees. That will open up more opportunities for grazing, fishing, and wildlife spotting, which are already part of the offering at Silvies.

This long-term vision permeates everything that Silvies Ranch does: things are built to last – not just for years, but for decades. There are nice touches everywhere at Silvies, like naming each course after the previous frontier inhabitants of the land, with accompanying background on their life and times. So too, the custom metal-work across the entire property, including bunker rakes with two or three word messages into them (my favourites are 'nice polo' and 'you're screwed'). If I was engraving a message to future golfers out here it would have to be 'how's the serenity?'. Because out here, I feel like Darryl Kerrigan at Bonnie Doon\*. ♪

*\*Apologies to our international readers for this gratuitous and highly colloquial reference to '90s Australian cult movie The Castle (well worth a watch).*



# Dan Hixon

## *Course Architect*

### **What was the biggest challenge in making a reversible course at Silvies?**

There are many challenges when working on a course like Silvies, mostly due to the remote location. This means that there is a lack of labour force, more limited communications and more time spent away from friends and family during the summers. Plus, converting the natural, rough and wild landscape into playing fields.

### **What are some of the benefits of a reversible layout in terms of design process, maintenance, and resort management?**

The design supports sustainability in golf, which is of course very important to the philosophy and mission at Silvies Valley Ranch. It creates two unique layouts within the same footprint of land, utilising less resources.

### **What is your general philosophy towards course design?**

I know this is a cliché, but I always try to focus on fun, and balance that with excitement and challenge. For new courses I like to work with the natural features of the land that would make for unique for golf – I am lucky to have been able to work on a property like Silvies that allows me to do this. I am certainly more minimalist and only try to make grading changes when the site requires it. The more I can leave

the natural grades 'as is', the benefits are realised through construction, grow-in and savings to the owner.

I also do a lot of remodel work for a wide range of clients, from simple courses to high-end country clubs and everywhere in between. Therefore, I have to be flexible and adaptive to design and build golf features appropriate for the given project needs and budgets. I love that element of my business, as it is in some ways more satisfying to provide a well designed and built project at a course that normally would not receive quality design. I often learn in the creative process of trying to stretch the budget more so than working on well-funded projects.

### **What is your biggest skill or asset as a course designer?**

I think it would be the flexibility I try to have, which allows me create appropriate designs for any type of course or situation. I think this comes from my background in the game of golf and never having worked for anyone else. By growing up in the game and being a club professional prior to design, I have perhaps a different view of course design. Even though I am self-taught I have been thinking about course design since my youth. It seems there are a large number of designers and architects that tend to design the same as their former boss or mentor. I also think this flexibility allows me to be



open to unique ideas from outside sources. A good design idea is a good design idea, regardless of where it comes from. Being able to recognise that someone else may have an idea that is better than my own and figuring out how to incorporate it leads to a good project, and that's more important than who thought of the idea.

### **So far you've specialized in PNW designs - what makes this area distinctive in the world of golf?**

The Pacific Northwest has incredible diversity in land, weather, vegetation, climates and quality course in all different types. I have built courses on the coast in thick forest, on ancient sand dunes with 70+ inches of annual rain, and I have built on desert at 4800-foot elevation with sage brush and 7-inches of annual rain. I have worked on sites in the mountains, near wetlands,

next to rivers, around ponds and in grassy meadow valleys. I have built a course with zero trees, and I have worked on courses with over 4000 trees on the property. The Northwest has everything except courses with warm season grasses. Maybe that is why I think being flexible is one of my best assets!

### **What are some locations you would love to work on outside of this region?**

I would enjoy designing anywhere on sand. Like so many of my peers, this is the ultimate. The playability of the turf and drainage are great, but the construction opportunities and the creative options are endless, especially around the greens. I have played in Australia and New Zealand and I would not hesitate for even a second given a chance to design there. 🏌️