

Sand Hills Trip Report *by Adam Sachs*

The biggest "nearby" town is North Platte, located off state road 97 more than an hour south of the Club. The naturally friendly staff—nothing contrived here, just genuinely nice people—primarily comes from Mullen and Tryon, tiny towns within 20 minutes or so from the course. Nobody puts on airs at this place, and this happily included my host, Ron Page, a national member from the County Club at Castle Pines, near Denver.

The most striking thing I can say about the spectacular golf course—which was developed by Dick Youngscap and designed by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore—is that while it can be very intimidating, especially as the swirling winds kick up, it is visually inspirational and absolutely fun to play. A scrappy 16 handicapper like me (no ball-striking ability, pretty good feel for the short game, doesn't totally wilt on fast greens) can make some pars and manage to record a decent score as long as they can avoid too many blow-up holes. Unlike most modern courses, you can actually run the ball up to the greens. From the 7,000-yard back tees, with the wind kicking up, and under less-than-drought-like conditions, this course would be incredibly difficult to play. My host and playing partners didn't let their egos get the best of them, however, so we "played it forward" from the 6,400 yard members' tees and had a tremendous experience. The indexes in our 11-man group ranged from 8 to 18, our scores ranged from 75 to around 105, and most of us eked out scores in the 90s.

If at all possible, you are going to want to get 3 or 4 tries at this fabulous golf course, and the first time or two out you would be far better off with a forecaddie. In addition, you are advised to try and work through any kinks before you arrive on the premises, since practicing is not encouraged. Each golfer is given a small bag of 15-20 balls to hit on the bare bones range, which is located about halfway along the mile or so golf-cart ride to the putting clock, Ben's Porch (the halfway house), and the No. 1 tee.

No. 1

This is a visually striking par 5 with an especially ominous bunker on the left side. A slight pull and/or greedy, less-than-flush drive has a good chance of finding sand and setting up a bogey or worse to start your day. A big but blocked drive to the right could easily mean an early journey into one of two big bunkers to the right of the fairway.

The approach shot to the significantly elevated green is a bit scary: sand to the front right, gunch to the left, and a false front can make things miserable for a bad ball-striker like me.

(Round One: mishit 9 iron from 125 darts into the greenside bunker. Up and out, two putts and a bogey. Round Two: "Perfect" 8 iron from 135 takes one bounce on the green, rolls 50 yards back down the hill, devastating double bogey. Round Three: over the green with a 9 iron from 120, nervous chunk just on the green, three putts for a double. Round Four: 8 iron from 135 pulled to the left on top of the gunch to the left. Chip on and two put for a 6.)

No. 4

At 409 yard from the middle tees, and a cavernous bunker to swallow up any pulled approaches,

Number 4 is a challenge. The obvious bailout is to the right of this elevated green

(I bailed out to the right every day. On day one I decelerated a 25 yard chip, leaving me with the ball back at my feet and another scary chip back up the hill. I rocketed my second chip to the back of the green, and accepted a questionable gimme come-backer after my first putt drifted four feet past. I bailed out again the next morning, which left me pin high at the bottom of the hill to the right of the green. This time I hammered a putt up the hill, leaving myself a downhill 3-footer for a very satisfying par. The guys who probably thought I was a wimp for putting up the hill all walked away with bogeys.)

No. 7

At 283 yards and a bunker as big as a three story house guarding the left side of the green, this is a very fun risk-reward hole. No. 7 is reachable for long hitters able to hit a high draw. Anything hit reasonably well to the right leaves you with a short shot to a green which slopes off dramatically to the right. Big guns must hit an iron here unless they are comfortable keeping the ball to the right and still holding the ball on this sloping left to right fairway. This one can be good for the scorecard and the ego.

No. 8

This is another very short par 4—367 from the members' tee—guarded by a relatively friendly pot bunker directly in front of the green. Keep the ball in play here and you've got another real scoring opportunity before you get to the longer and more difficult back nine.

No. 14

Very difficult par 5 with huge fairway bunkers and one of the smallest and most heavily protected greens on the golf course. Big trouble off the tee if you miss it left. Approach shot is a knee-knocker.

(I day one I thought I hit my drive pretty well, rolling just off the left side of the fairway about 225 yards out. Once I got up there I realized the deeeep bunker had swallowed my ball and sent me on a triple-bogey train. The devilish bunker on the right side of the green gladly took my approach shot. The next morning I doubled the hole after being forced to hit a left-handed, backwards 4-iron from the edge of the same troublesome fairway bunker. I finally got back at the hole with a GIR par during the afternoon round.)

No. 16

Maybe the best—and most dramatic—par 5 I have ever played. An elevated tee shot must clear a massive bunker which frames the left side of the fairway. The hole spans 612 yards from the tips and 563 from the middle tees. The second shot must avoid more major sand trouble to the left. Things finally open up around the green, offering a chance to regain a modicum of respectability with an up-and-down.

No. 17

They tell me this is considered one of the greatest hundred holes in the world, and I am not at all surprised. Notwithstanding its comfortable 150-yard length, bunkers to the right, front and left sides of this itsy-bitsy green swallow most less than optimum tee shots. Probably the most

picturesque hole on the course.

No. 18

This very long par 4 makes you earn your way to a cocktail on Ben's Porch. An elevated tee shot simply can't go left (big bunker trouble again). A large mound blocks the view of the right side of this dramatically elevated green. The good news is that most shots which make it over the mound filter nicely on to this relatively expansive green.

(A 40-foot putt from the back edge—after a chunked approach—served as a par-saving crescendo to a very good back nine on day two. It also led to a couple of celebratory Budweisers on Ben's Porch.)

Adam Sachs, August, 2012