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## Golf: Club offers pines, dunes — and public access

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The Pines Course at Prairie Club's 12th tee shows off nature.

VALENTINE, Neb. — You don't have to be a member to play at Prairie Club, unlike the other two golf clubs in the Nebraska Sand Hills.

But it's not like plunking down \$40 for 18 holes and a cart on a Sunday morning at Benson Park in Omaha. Try \$240 for that same round at Prairie Club on either the Dunes or the Pines Courses.

But that's the price to pay for experiencing the unique landscape — stands of pine trees, enormous sand dunes and the rim of the Snake River Canyon — that the state's first golf-destination resort offers to members and non-members alike.

South Dakota-based developer Paul Schock saw Prairie Club's niche as a resort. Not a private golf retreat, like Sand Hills, nor a private club with plenty of amenities, like Dismal River Club.

Schock sought to create another golf experience like Bandon Dunes in Oregon or Whistling Straits in Wisconsin — places not easy to reach by car or plane, but without the “fences” of an ultra-private club.

Is it folly trying to do this in an area 20 miles southwest of Valentine, two hours from either Interstate 80 or 90, with no regional airport closer than Rapid City, S.D.?

“Remoteness, it's a good thing,” said pro golfer Graham Marsh, who designed the Pines Course. “If there's anything about golf we have learned in the last couple years, it's that the avid golfer is still prepared to travel to remote locations and play courses on great pieces of land. It's something that has great appeal as distinguished from the huge amount of residential golf as served up the last 20 years in this country.

“The Sand Hills is one of the greatest pieces of golfing country in the whole United States. The logic of that as being a destination is not at all fantasy.”

Schock first persuaded about 40 people to invest in the project, which has grown to a reported \$34 million. Then the club exceeded its goal for opening day when it had 186 members as of May 31. Initiation fees currently are \$17,500 for individuals and \$20,000 for families.

Tim Jennings, the “golf experience manager” at Prairie Club, said about 40 members are from Valentine and Cherry County, with others from Omaha and Lincoln. He said the club hopes to have 800 members from far and near when it is fully developed. Construction begins in the fall on a third 18-hole course, Old School.

But as membership grows, the public component will gradually shrink.

The 7,403-yard Pines Course and the 7,583-yard Dunes Course, designed by 1996 British Open champion Tom Lehman and Chris Brands, could be named the top two new courses in the country for 2010.

The Pines winds in and out of the canyon rim, the pines and open dunes areas. The Dunes has wide fairways, some greens 80 yards from front to back and blowout bunkers. Each course is a par-73, which adds to the club's uniqueness.

So does this: One course each day is for members only, the other for public play. The designations change the next day.

A third golf option is the Horse Course next to the imposing clubhouse that faces the canyon. There are 10 greens and 10 teeing areas. The intent is to allow the golfer who tees off first to select the next tee and green.

The clubhouse includes fine- and casual-dining areas, a bar, a golf shop and lodging rooms on two floors. Additional lodging is being built as cabins closer to the canyon.

"We literally opened three different businesses on May 31," Jennings said. "The courses, the restaurant and a boutique lodge. Guests come in, see the lodge and their expectation level is actually raised by seeing it. In turn, we've had to raise the bar a little bit more.

"And we're being compared to Bandon Dunes and Whistling Straits. Bandon's been there for like 10 years and Whistling Straits a couple years less, and all of a sudden they expect us to be at the same level within 30 days."

Selling the club to its neighbors has been much easier for General Manager Tyler Swedberg, a former Kansas State linebacker.

Valentine, with a population of 2,800, already is enjoying an economic boost from golfers, especially non-members, utilizing its motels and restaurants. And the club had a larger population to draw from for its staff than did either Sand Hills or Dismal River. For both of those clubs, Mullen and its 500 residents is the largest community for miles.

"Tyler has done a wonderful job the past three years establishing relationships around the Valentine area so that we are not on the outside looking in, or vice versa," Jennings said. "And they have embraced us."

**Tuesday:** Graham Marsh talks about the Pines Course.

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