

Published Jul 12, 2010

Published Monday July 12, 2010

Golf: Q&A with Graham Marsh



STU POSPISIL/THE WORLD-HERALD

From the tee of the par-5 18th hole of the Pines Course at Prairie Club, golfers gaze over a 595-yard finish that ranks as the third-longest hole on the course. Australian designer Graham Marsh compares the potential of Prairie Club to Bandon Dunes in Oregon and Wisconsin's Whistling Straits.

Graham Marsh designed the Pines Course at the new Prairie Club golf resort southwest of Valentine, Neb.

Marsh also designed Sutton Bay, near Pierre, S.D.

The World-Herald recently caught up to the Australian professional golfer, now playing on the PGA's Champions Tour, to ask about his Pines Course that is one of the first two 18-hole courses (the other is the Dunes Course, by 1996 U.S. Open winner Tom Lehman and Chris Brands) open at the new club developed by Paul Schock.

* * *

W-H: How did you react to seeing the Prairie Club site for the first time?

GM: We covered the whole property. I didn't know which part I would be involved in. When it was decided I would be doing the Pines, I was very happy about that. It's just a beautiful piece of property. The biggest challenge was routing the course to maximize the use of the land forms (pines, Snake River canyon, dunes) and achieve a flow to allow it to be interesting from start to finish.

W-H: What design principles did you incorporate?

GM: You think about having as much variety in the holes as you can get. It's very easy to go out and find good golf holes. The trick or the art is to get them in a continuous form that allows you to challenge the golfer in a seamless manner where he's subliminally tested with a variety of golf shots.

W-H: How often were you on the property to route the course and then during construction?

GM: I spent a lot of time there. It took about 18 months for the routing. I'd walk it and leave it for a couple months. We were looking at other areas, and some of those areas we didn't get. At one time, I wanted to go farther down the canyon (toward the northwest), and the clubhouse I wanted farther north.

The construction period was short, building it in 16 or 17 weeks (in 2008), and when working with that short time frame, you have to be on site. I maybe was there 60 days.

W-H: Let's first talk about the par 3s. None of them is exceptionally long, even from the back tees.

GM: Par 3s are the easiest to find. If you walk out there, you should be able to find 30 par 3s, easy. You try to have an interesting variety and vary them to have each point on the compass. It's difficult on this site in that it loops, but what we did achieve is getting three in the pines and one in the dunes.

I look at these 3s as being unique. The third hole is out there totally exposed. Whatever the wind is, you have to fight it. The sixth is against the canyon, with a dramatic green. Ten is into the canyon, and 17 is sitting out on a ridge, with danger on either side of the hole.

- No. 3, 168 yards; No. 6, 159 yards; No. 10, 173 yards; No. 17, 183 yards.

W-H: Your par 4s seem to have a lot of variety.

GM: Paul Schock had an influence in the way we thought, but it was along our same lines. He's enamored with Alister MacKenzie (who designed Cypress Point and Augusta National) and the fact that he wanted to have as much golf played on ground as possible. Make it hard and fast and have shot variety around the greens. The other thing is that Paul has a love of short par 4s, and I have it, too. That was a prerequisite of his, find drivable par 4s on either nine, and we hunted for those.

We made certain the long par 4s were mixed up in direction. Even the two short ones run in different directions, so you wouldn't have the opportunity to drive both on the same day with the same wind. We wanted some holes in the pines, some in the open. Some of the greens are of a perched style and others, like on 8 and 13, are punch bowl sites.

- No. 1, 419 yards; No. 4, 479 yards; No. 5, 416 yards; No. 8, 462 yards; No. 9, 314 yards. No. 12, 461 yards; No. 13, 422 yards; No. 14, 345 yards; No. 16, 460 yards.

W-H: How about the par 5s?

GM: There's a terrific variety. The second hole is out in the dunes, with spectacular blowouts. Seven runs along the canyon, a double dogleg, a very natural site. Eighteen (usually) comes downwind with the challenge of the canyon coming in from the left. I'm very, very happy with the 5s.

- No. 2, 548 yards; No. 7, 616 yards; No. 11, 602 yards; No. 15, 581 yards; No. 18, 595 yards.

W-H: So it's par 73, and so is Tom's Dunes Course. Why is yours a par we don't see often?

GM: I had two layouts in mind. I gave Paul the option of 11 being a par 4, with 10 in another location but still a dramatic par-3 hole, and whichever option he chose, I could have lived with. Eleven would have been a brute of a par 4, onto a plateau, dogleg right, to the same green site. 'Hey,' he said, 'I like the 3-5 combination.'

W-H: Your favorite hole here?

GM: All my life as a course designer, I've tried to stay away from that. I never look for a signature hole. Usually a signature hole gets determined by the owner, or some of the members or strangely enough, by photographers. They say, 'It's the hole we like, and it gets tagged' when it not necessarily has the best strategy.

W-H: What's Prairie Club's potential?

GM: It has a huge opportunity in the same way as Bandon Dunes and Whistling Straits. All three of those are competitively different in what they have to offer, and that's what the golfer is looking for. He doesn't want the same look every time.

For those who travel to Ireland and Scotland, this offers a very viable alternative if you spend three or four days in one location rather than travel great distances. Prairie Club has the opportunity to challenge both Bandon and Whistling Straits as being a very high-end destination.

— **Stu Pospisil**

Copyright ©2010 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.