

No. 16 on The Prairie Club's Pines Course

COURTESY OF THE PRAIRIE CLUB



**PAUL SCHOCK'S  
VISION ELEVATES  
A REMOTE CORNER  
OF NEBRASKA INTO  
A GOLF WONDERLAND**

# Prairie pioneer

By **Martin Kaufmann**

Valentine, Neb.

**This town of 2,820 residents**

refers to itself as America's Heart City, which, unwittingly, is more than just a play on the name. It is, in the most literal sense, America's heartland. If someone were to bisect the United States by car on a north-south route, that person likely would arrive via U.S. Route 83 in Valentine, which is almost precisely equidistant from San Francisco and Baltimore – a little closer to the West Coast than the East. The heart is, after all, aligned slightly to the left.

This is where Paul Schock decided to build The Prairie Club, which opened May 31. Given its location and the scope of the project – two 18-hole courses, a 10-hole short course, lodging for 50, with a third 18-hole layout and more lodging in development – The Prairie Club arguably is the most audacious and unlikely American golf resort development since Bandon Dunes.

If you're the sort of person who gets queasy at the thought of divine guidance, you'd probably say that Schock arrived in Valentine by pure, unadulterated happenstance. Heck, even Schock, whose faith has survived some brutal beatings, probably

wouldn't argue the point. But if not, if you're convinced that God has a sense of irony, you'll believe that there's something more that brought Paul Schock to the heart of America.

Schock's life, personally and professionally, in times sublime and tragic, has been defined by the heart.

This is a man who was acing Stanford's pre-med program, but returned home to Sioux Falls, S.D., after his freshman year to marry his high-school sweetheart. He forged friendships so deep and lasting that pals since grade school still talk about his Little League exploits. His decades-long quest for a state golf championship was filled with the type of heartache, and ultimately joy, found in Hollywood tearjerkers. And he built a highly successful venture-capital firm by worrying less about a man's capital than his character, because, he says, "good people tend to find a way to win."

At The Prairie Club, Schock will test that maxim.



With his ponytail, tattered Minnesota Twins cap, earthy clothes and ever-present pointer lab, Rylee, the 52-year-old Schock doesn't

automatically evoke the image of a successful businessman and accomplished amateur golfer.

"There is no pretense in Paul Schock," says Dave Austad, president of Sioux Falls-based Austad's Golf. "What you see is what you get."

Boy Wander, that's what they call Schock. His younger brother Steve hung that nickname on him when he was a kid, and it stuck. He's just as skilled with a fly rod as he is with a putter, which is saying a lot because Schock is a lights-out putter. But if the fish weren't biting when he was young, Schock would disappear for hours. Sometimes his mother would launch a frantic search, only to find Paul wandering home, usually with his daily haul of trout.

The nickname still fits. Not long ago, while hunting along the freezing Missouri River, he managed to give himself hypothermia trying to corral one last duck.

"I was always wandering off, trying to make something happen," Schock says, shaking his head at the memories. "I pressed the envelope so many times."

It was his wandering nature that led him to Valentine. Schock, a member of Sand Hills Golf Club, had gotten wind of a river not far

**Schock, P44 >>>**

No. 7 at The Prairie Club's Dunes Course



COURTESY OF THE PRAIRIE CLUB

<<< **Schock, P43** from the club with some of the best trout fishing in the region. He quizzed former Sand Hills head pro Jim Kidd, who grudgingly shared the secret of the Snake River Canyon near Valentine. Soon Schock was knocking on the front door of Cleve Trimble's home, which sits quite spectacularly on the rim of the Snake River Canyon.

As it turned out, Trimble, also a Sand Hills member, was considering trying to replicate that club's success on his ranch near Valentine. Schock, a quick study when assessing deals, was intrigued. Schock's venture-capital firm, Bluestem Capital, had helped launch VeraSun Energy, an ethanol company, in 2001. When it went public in 2006, Schock used his proceeds to buy 1,700 acres from Trimble. "I tell people that I was rich for about a month," he deadpans.

Valentine, though tiny, is home to nearly half of the residents of Cherry County, which, at 6,000 square miles, is larger than several states. Of late it has emerged as a trendy vacation spot for folks who like to fish on Merritt Reservoir, camp near Smith Falls, stare down herds of bison in Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge or canoe down the Niobrara River.

It's dark here, owing to the fact that

Cherry County is so sparsely populated, and each night brings another light show in the sky. Every August, hundreds of people come to the sandy beaches of Merritt Reservoir for the Nebraska Star Party.

But the folks around here have never seen anything like The Prairie Club. It sits 17 miles southwest of town, through the northern Sand Hills and across the Niobrara River on Highway 97, at a turnoff marked by a rickety old windmill and a wind-whipped flag.

At first glance, most people probably would say that The Prairie Club's remote location works against it. "People said, 'Where is this? You're going to do what?'" says Steve Sanford, Schock's attorney.

But Schock views the location as an advantage, and he's not spinning when he says it. The Prairie Club combines the things he loves the most: golf in a setting that is as beautiful as it is peaceful, and the chance to walk and talk with close friends and family, free from the constant distraction of cell phones, which have little utility here. It's an adventure.



Schock always had excelled in

sports. Tommy Reynolds, a cardiovascular surgeon and close friend since childhood, recalls that in Little League in Sioux Falls, "People would come to watch him pitch, and if he didn't throw a no-hitter, he would hit a home run."

Schock won the South Dakota high school golf championship as a sophomore and was one of the state's most accomplished amateurs for the next 30 years.

"He reminds you a lot of Freddie Couples," Reynolds says. " 'Oh gee, golly, I hit a lucky shot.' He gives you that little grin like Freddie as he makes his fifth straight birdie."

At age 19, while holding a three-shot lead in the state stroke-play championship, he had a "Tin Cup" moment, rifling three consecutive 5-irons out of bounds and making 11 on the second hole at Westward Ho. Later there was the opponent who stuffed a recovery from the practice range for birdie to win a playoff in the state match-play tournament. Another time, his pal and occasional business partner Mark Amundson, pulled off a similar miracle – an "ammo," as it's known in the state's golf circles – to crush Schock's hopes.

Every year, he would walk off the course, call his first wife Julie, who

always was too nervous to watch him play, and say, "Honey, it just didn't happen."

Through it all, Schock insists, "I did not choke."

Maybe it was something else. Pat Lockwood, another of the state's top amateurs, remembers that his close friendship with Schock was formed in the mid-'90s when he was bouncing Schock from the state match-play tournament. They swapped hunting stories, and soon their families were spending time together on land Schock owns north of Sioux Falls.

"He's probably more interested in learning about the person he's playing with than in competing," Lockwood says. "So he makes people so relaxed that they probably are comfortable playing against him."

By 1999, Schock's confidence was in freefall. After shooting a million in the state mid-am, he told his son and caddie, Kyle, then 10, that he was done with tournament golf.

A few minutes later, he saw tears streaming down Kyle's face.

"Dad, I don't care what you shoot," Kyle said. "I just like coming to the tournaments with you."

The kid had a point. The game was supposed to be about more than trying to make birdies. So Schock decided to continue his amateur career and rededicate himself to the game, eventually seeking out sports psychologist Bob Rotella in 2001. He left a two-day session with Rotella with several pieces of advice, the most important of which was this: "I always believed this intellectually, but not in my heart, that the good stuff could happen to me."

And it did.

The next year he arrived at the 18th hole of the state match-play semifinal needing a 30-foot birdie putt to extend the match. He told Kyle he was too nervous to pull the trigger, so the child picked the line and the father holed the prayer. He advanced on the first playoff hole.

The next day, Schock built a big lead in the 36-hole final, but started to collapse down the stretch. On the day's 34th hole, unable to pull the trigger on the tee, he feigned having something in his eye to buy time. "I can't swing," he told Kyle. "I'm too nervous."

The Schock clan is deeply religious, but, friends say, never preachy. But at that moment, the child needed more than just a keen putting eye.

"I remember Kyle saying, 'Lord, just help my dad calm down and help him to remember that whatever happens, I love him,'" Schock recalls.

Schock nearly eagled, hitting the pin on his approach and settling for a tap-in birdie to close out the match. A few steps off the green, he called Julie: "Honey, I did it."

Later that summer, Schock rolled to the state stroke-play championship.



To outsiders, Julie was the picture of health, a woman who exercised daily. But she suffered from cardiac arrhythmia and monitored the condition constantly.

On Christmas Eve 2003, Julie sent the children to the mall so that she could wrap gifts. When they returned home, they found her dead. On the countertop was an open can of Coke. Apparently Julie had decided to treat herself to a soda for the holiday, and the caffeine ignited her heart.

Shortly after Julie was found, Schock called a friend who had lost his wife in a car accident a few years earlier. "Am I going to make it?" Schock remembers asking.

Schock soon exited Bluestem, the company he co-founded, to focus on his four children. And after years of avoiding dogs because of allergies, Schock decided his kids could use a companion. It turned out that Rylee became Schock's constant companion.

"Rylee was very much a part of the healing process," he says.

He also began to immerse himself in the project that would become The Prairie Club. In 2005, Schock remarried. His wife Nancy loves the land near Valentine nearly as much as her husband. They've picked out a bluff along the canyon rim, a couple of hundred yards removed from the club's Pines Course, where they eventually plan to build a house.

To outsiders, this might seem like an improbable place to build a major golf resort.

To Boy Wander, it feels like home. ○



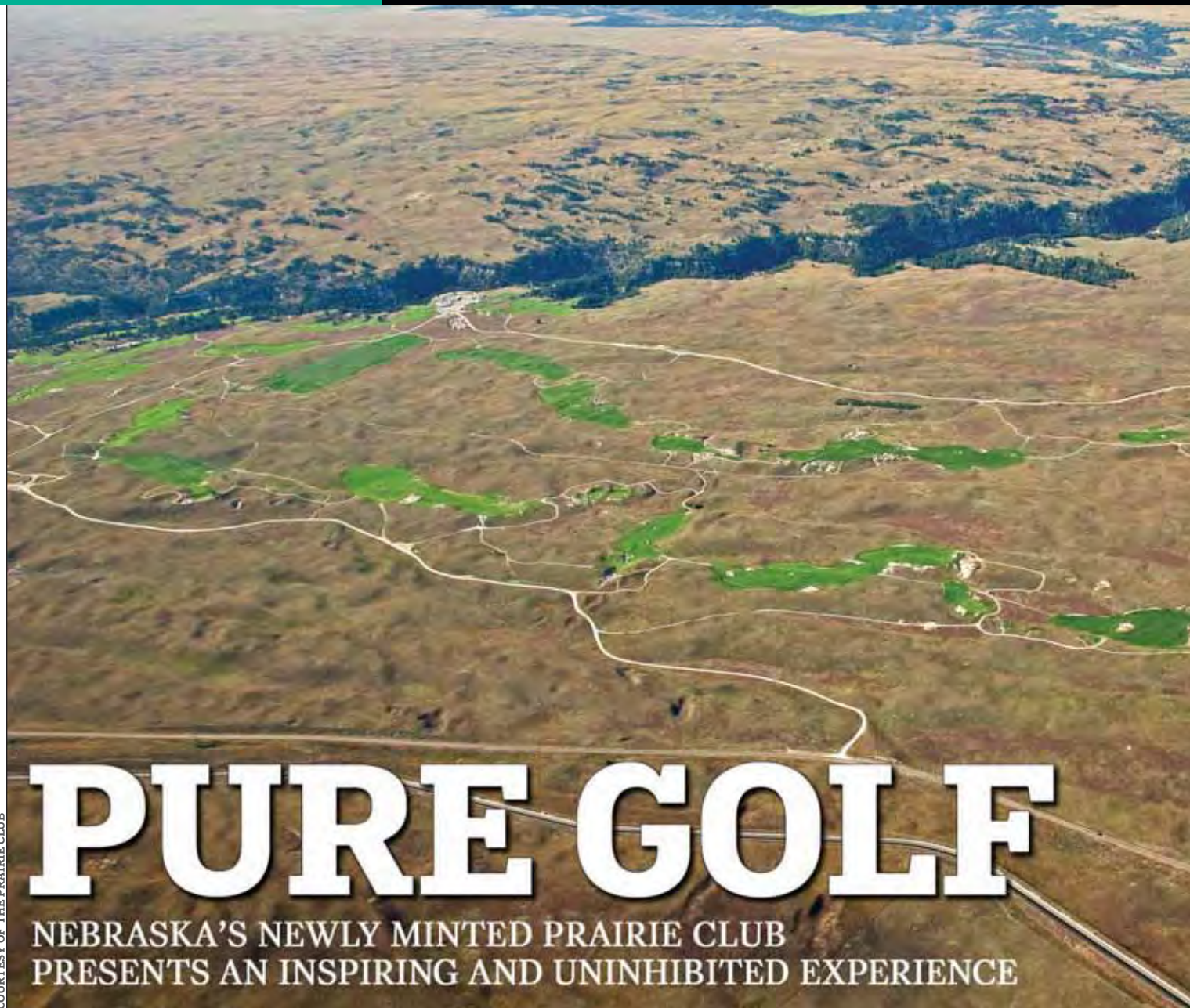
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COURTESY OF THE PRAIRIE CLUB

# PURE GOLF

NEBRASKA'S NEWLY MINTED PRAIRIE CLUB  
PRESENTS AN INSPIRING AND UNINHIBITED EXPERIENCE

By **Martin Kaufmann**

**Valentine, Neb.**

**Nebraska's Sand Hills region** is a geological anomaly spanning 20,000 square miles, almost entirely in the north-central part of the state. Waves of grassy sand dunes roll across the landscape, sometimes rising more than 300 feet, defying the notion of the pancake-flat Great Plains.

The Sand Hills, the largest tract of stabilized sand dunes in the Western Hemisphere, does not lend itself to growing crops. It can grow only grass, which serves the dual purpose of feeding the livestock that lazily graze the region while holding the

sand dunes in place.

Whether by happy coincidence or dumb geological luck, the Sand Hills region sits smack dab on top of the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the world's largest sources of groundwater.

This is, in short, perfect golf terrain. Driving along Route 97 or U.S. Highway 20, imaginary golf holes, framed by huge, naturally formed blowout bunkers, pop off the landscape.

The region, however, didn't register with people in golf circles until Dick Youngscap got the crazy idea to build a private club just down the road in Mullen, population 485. But then Sand Hills Golf Club turned out to be the

greatest American course of the past 50 years, added to many golfers' bucket lists. Suddenly, the Sand Hills region carried with it a magical connotation.

Paul Schock, who developed The Prairie Club, loves Sand Hills Golf Club. He joined when it opened and still calls it one of his favorite places. But when he began crunching the numbers four years ago, he quickly decided the Sand Hills region did not need another pricey private club. He was more intrigued by the Bandon Dunes model – a remote, multi-course destination set in an exotic location, but with a membership component. He quizzed dozens of Bandon customers,



*Tom Lehman's Dunes Course*

asking them how they had arrived at the Oregon resort. Almost invariably, they told him they had flown to Portland and driven four-plus hours south to Bandon. It was exciting, they told him, an adventure, a chance to explore a part of the country they wouldn't otherwise visit.

Just as Bandon's guests would pass wineries and small beach towns as they drove down the Oregon coastline, so too, Schock reasoned, could visitors to The Prairie Club experience the grandeur of Mount Rushmore or the stark, eerie beauty of the Badlands on the drive to Valentine.

The landscape is similarly distinctive

at The Prairie Club. The massive, exposed dunes of Tom Lehman's Dunes Course tumble downward to Graham Marsh's Pines Course, where several of the tree-lined holes dangle on the rim of the Snake River Canyon.

"We've never taken anyone there who has not been awestruck," says Steve Sanford, Schock's attorney. "When we first took Tom out there, he walked around for a day and just giggled."

Schock, 52, whose greatest professional joy as a venture capitalist was finding money for small businesses, had to line up his own financing. His first stop was his old firm, Bluestem Capital. It wasn't a no-brainer for Steve Kirby, who co-founded the company with Schock in 1992.

"You rarely read the terms 'golf course' and 'profit' in the same sentence," Kirby says.

Tyler Stowater, another Bluestem partner, says the firm spent nine months studying the plans, careful to avoid the perception it was making a "friendship deal." Schock had to convince Bluestem and others that the deal would pay dividends.

In the end, the biggest selling point was the land itself. "We've never had trouble getting people to invest once we took them there," Sanford says.

What appealed to Bluestem was that The Prairie Club wasn't another real-estate play aimed at the mass golf market. Schock is adamant that the club be a pure golf experience, with no homes on the property.

"We wanted to focus in on a product that avid golfers would want to come and play," Stowater says, adding that he thought The Prairie Club could draft off of the mystique surrounding Sand Hills Golf Club. Of Schock, Stowater says simply, "I trust him with everything."

The Prairie Club launched in a strong financial position. Schock says it's a \$34 million project with only \$6 million in bank debt. Roughly 40 investors have backed the project, including Bluestem, which threw in \$4.5 million.

The Prairie Club opened May 31 with 186 members, each of whom paid the introductory initiation deposit of \$15,000. (That fee recently rose to \$17,500 for individuals and \$20,000 for families.) The club has booked 1,500 room-nights. One course will be reserved for member play each day.

The strong early response persuaded Schock to move forward with a fourth course, Old School, which will be a Gil Hanse-Geoff Shackelford collaboration scheduled to open by early 2012. (The team designed the 10-hole Horse Course.)

Schock's muse on course-design issues is Alister MacKenzie, whose book, "The Spirit of St. Andrews," is Schock's architectural "gospel." Schock wanted courses that would be easy to walk, with springy turf, openings to greens to accommodate the ground game, and big, fast putting surfaces.

"One of the best things you can do for a golfer is (provide) a pleasant surprise," Schock says.

Lehman's Dunes Course is Schock's formula on steroids, partly out of necessity. Fairways on the elevated, treeless, windswept terrain often are 70 yards wide or larger. The Dunes' blowout bunkers, which mimic natural formations found in the Sand Hills, are visually daunting, but the course is so big that their presence often serves more to provide definition than hazards.

Marsh's Pines Course, particularly on the front nine, looks more like something out of the Sand Hills of North Carolina rather than Nebraska, with the early, tree-lined holes close to the canyon eventually giving way to a wide-open landscape. While wind often whips across the Dunes, barely a gentle breeze is felt on parts of the Pines because of the trees and lower elevation. As on the Dunes, the greens tend to rest in natural settings that underwent minimal grading.

"We really focused on places (for greens) that were pleasant spots to be," Schock says.