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Which is the better reversible golf course: The Loop at Forest Dunes or the Links at Silvie's Valley Ranch?

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The elevated 14th tee on the Hankins course at The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch. (Jason Scott Deegan/Golf Advisor)

ROSCOMMON, Mich. - Other than being America's only two full-length reversible golf courses, The Loop at Forest Dunes and the Links at Silvies Valley Ranch don't have much in common.

The Loop was a high-profile project touted by arguably the most famous modern architect in Tom Doak. The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch was an obscure project in remote Oregon from an unsung (but talented) architect in Dan Hixson. The Loop took two years to complete. Silvies Valley Ranch took more than seven years of on-again, off-again efforts. The Loop is completely reversible. Silvies Valley Ranch is mostly reversible with 27 total greens ultimately making it work. In essence, they're very different animals.

Having been to each place about a year apart - one of the few golfers to have seen both - I'm now a big fan of reversible courses. It's hard to say [they will transform the future of golf](#) just yet as no other new full-length reversible projects have been announced. (The transformation of the [Bobby Jones Golf Course](#) in

Atlanta will [create nine reversible holes](#).) However, the fact that you can carve two unique playing experiences out of one site and use half the chemicals, water and maintenance crew required to operate two separate courses makes the concept very appealing to everyone - course owners, golf architects, golfers, land planners, environmentalists, etc.

What I find interesting is after both experiences I came away favoring the first course I played - the [Red](#) over the [Black](#) on The Loop and the [Hankins](#) over the [Craddock](#) at Silvies Valley Ranch. Coincidence? Or are those the favorites among most golfers? Does playing the second round, while trying to sort out what the hole looks like from the angle played the day before, cause some sort of distraction? I'm not sure.

Remember, for those who still can't wrap their heads around the reversible concept, you play a course one direction one day and then play it backward the next. Or, the case of The Loop, the Black playing clockwise one day and the Red counter clockwise the next. Nobody has to duck shots from golfers coming the opposite way.

Have you played either of these reversible courses? How interested are you in playing a reversible course? Does it intrigue you? Let us know in the comments below.

As much as I enjoyed both facilities, I do have a slight favorite. Here's how I rank America's two reversible "experiences" based on several key criteria:

Scenery

This was easy. The courses at Silvies Valley Ranch sprawl across vast acres of open range in Burns, Ore. Bucolic meadows of prairie grasses and sagebrush and hillsides blanketed in ponderosa pines extend for miles. The 140,000 acres owned by Scott Campbell remains a working goat and cattle ranch. Several elevated tees provide the perfect perch to enjoy the views. There's more than 100 feet of elevation change as opposed to subtle, but not insignificant, movement of the terrain on The Loop.

Particularly beautiful is the view from "The Hideout" at Silvies Valley Ranch, a hilltop clubhouse overlooking the nine-hole par-3 [Chief Egan course](#) and a pond. The clubhouse, featuring three all-glass garage doors that open to an outdoor patio, is run by solar power and completely off the grid.

Winner: Silvies Valley Ranch

Routing

Right away, The Loop gets bonus points for being walking-only. Golfers at Silvies can walk, but it's more likely they take the high-powered golf carts given to every guest to roam the property.

Where The Loop scores mega bonus points is it's truly reversible. The green complexes by Doak and associate Brian Slawnik are simply mind-boggling. That they can accept shots from two different directions is a miracle of art. Bunkers also dictate shotmaking from different directions. If you hit it long, you might end up in a bunker you couldn't even see from your direction because it was meant to be more in play from the other routing. Many of The Loop's greens are tabletop and incredibly firm, maybe too firm for some golfers. What you think is a good shot could easily catch a slope and be rejected off the green. Hixson's green complexes aren't as extreme. Unlike most architects, Doak's short par 4s tend to actually be drivable. True to form, I spanked a drive 280 yards (a rarity for me) on the Red course, skirting the ball past a menacing greenside bunker to the apron of the 12th green, where I two-putted for birdie.

Silvies has certain holes that play forward and backward through the same corridor, but some don't. The story goes that Hixson tossed out the idea of making a section of the course reversible somewhere around 2010. Hearing how the [Old course at St. Andrews](#) can be played forward and backward, Campbell suggested making the whole thing reversible. The second routing, the 7,035-yard, par-72 Craddock

course, joined the original, the 7,075-yard, par-72 Hankins course. Both layouts are named after the original Pioneers who homesteaded the land in 1883.



Instead of trying to force certain downhill holes to climb back up impossible ridges, as a true reversible course would do, Hixson simply built new holes around these obstacles. These ridges and hills do offer something The Loop does not, a few interesting blind shots.

At Silvies, there are seemingly greens and tees splashed everywhere, so signage is key to keep golfers going in the right direction. The Loop is naked in that regard, with no signs pointing where to go. Only once did my playing partner and I feel lost and almost tee off toward the wrong green. Looking at the scorecard and the two different color flags (one for the front nine, another for the back) sorted us out.

Winner: The Loop

Playability

Considering I shot my two lowest scores of the year - 80 and 84 - The Loop easily wins, 5-and-4. I didn't even take a caddie, which is probably recommended for everybody's first time. The fairways are much firmer and flatter than those at Silvies Valley Ranch, providing the extra roll I needed to set up shorter approach shots. Many golfers will struggle with the demanding green sites The Loop presents, but I'm very comfortable putting up dramatic slopes from off the green.

At the top of Doak's to-do list was keeping The Loop short (by today's standards). Both the Red and Black play less than 6,805 yards and as par 70s with one less par 5 and one more par 3. That's a scoring bonanza!

The good news is losing a ball is almost impossible at either property. Silvies Valley Ranch has only one wetland. Sure, you can jack one into the woods and scrub brush lining both courses, but that's your fault. The fairways are infinitely wide like most modern designs.

Winner: The Loop

Presentation

Both courses hit a home run here. I originally voted The Loop the winner, but changed my mind. The Loop's low-key presentation is the perfect vibe for the site. Every day, the maintenance staff just sticks a small flag in the ground somewhere behind or adjacent to the green you just played. That's where you tee

off. Its location could add 20 yards to the hole you're playing next. It could subtract 20. Because of these mobile teeing grounds have such flexibility, there are no tee marker signs. Garbage cans and coolers filled with water are often tucked away almost out of sight, so the course remains pristinely natural.



Silvies Valley Ranch goes in a different direction - looking to entertain golfers with a whimsical, almost cheesy, sense of humor. Its bunkers do follow Forest Dune's natural motif. The sand in them is actually more like dirt. It's the native blackish soil found onsite. Their texture might annoy some golfers, but the bunker rakes make up for any perceived shortcomings. They were all handmade by Campbell's son with funny messages carved into the metal heads. The first one I picked up said: "Yee haw!" I actually LOL'd. I spent the rest of the round actually seeking out rakes to see what other words of wisdom I could find. I found lots of sayings - Bad Bounce? Player! You a pro? Nice Knickers! Need a Drink? and Sand sucks - but I was disappointed to learn later I didn't find the one with a four-letter word on it.



A sign at No. 18 on the Hankins course (pictured in the photo gallery above) offers another interesting twist I've not seen anywhere else. It challenges players to hit the longest drives of their lives on a downwind and downhill par 5. Measuring markers line the fairway. A gimmick? Maybe, but it's caught on. A golf-writing friend proudly proclaimed on social media recently that he had captured the record.

Winner: Tie

Location

I have to give this another tie, because which location is better depends entirely upon personal preference. Both are among the [most remote golf destinations in America](#), but Silvies Valley Ranch takes that meaning to a whole new level. It's hidden in the high desert of eastern Oregon three hours from the nearest airport, and I almost ran out of gas returning my rental car to the Redmond Municipal Airport in Bend, Ore. Being at an altitude of 4,600 feet, Silvies is cursed with a short golf season that is relatively dry. Those factors make achieving prime course conditions a challenge.

However, the solitude and silence of the ranch - not to mention the amazingly bright stars at night - is a major part of the draw. Those who want more golf can fly in and out of Bend like I did and stay at any of its top resorts - [Sunriver](#), [Tetherow](#) or [Pronghorn](#), for example.

I like the location of Forest Dunes in that it's close enough to metro Detroit - give or take three hours - that you can drive up, play it and drive home all in one day if necessary. It gives golfers the "up north" feel without the 4 1/2-hour grind of a drive it takes to get to [Traverse City](#), [Gaylord](#) or [Boyne's three resorts](#). It can be a "stop" on the way north or the way south if you combine it with any other [fantastic resorts](#) in the [golf mecca that is northern Michigan](#). An issue with bugs, though, is a major detractor.

Winner: Tie

Resort

Being so isolated from the real world, both resorts are limited in restaurant and entertainment (especially nightlife) options. The good news is both feature modern accommodations in beautiful settings and the food served in their main restaurants is excellent.

The accommodations built by Forest Dunes owner Lew Thompson since 2012 are perfect for buddies trips. The Lake AuSable Lodge, located steps from the first tee of Tom Weiskopf's [Dunes course](#) and the Adirondack-style clubhouse, houses 11 standard rooms on the first floor and two suites on the second. Each bedroom in the suite has two queen beds and a private bathroom. The suite includes a sitting area, dining table, full kitchen and private balcony overlooking the first tee. Seven cottages, which can sleep 4-8 golfers, and three villas, which sleep four, are larger, more private and newer.

Although Forest Dunes does have a nice sandy beach on a 27-acre lake for volleyball, swimming, etc., there's not much to do besides canoeing, floating or fishing on the nearby Ausable River. This summer, it did add the HillTop putting course, an 18-hole putting course on nearly two acres of undulating terrain next to the practice facility.

Meanwhile, the main resort area at Silvies Valley Ranch cozies up to Otter Lake, a small pond. The luxurious two-bedroom cabin I shared with another writer can be divided into two units, one with a living room, full kitchen and hot tub on the patio. They're plush with elaborate décor – bedroom skylights, copper bathroom sinks and rain showers. Other units geared toward golf foursomes completed after my visit have expanded the footprint to 34 total guestrooms. A spa, fitness center and pool are scheduled for completion this fall.

The "ranch experiences" are what give Silvies Valley the edge here. Golfers can learn the cowboy way by taking target practice at the [shooting range](#), rustle up a cattle drive or go goat herding. There's also endless exploring by hiking, biking, fishing or experimenting as a wilderness photographer. The [goat caddies](#), available on the new seven-hole [McVeigh's Gauntlet](#) that recently opened, have made national news. I'd love to see what all the fuss is about.



Winner: Silvies Valley Ranch.

Price

For the quality of the golf, Forest Dunes is one of [America's best values](#). The Loop is actually cheaper than the Weiskopf course at Forest Dunes, costing between \$85-\$130 depending on the season. Taking a caddie adds some expense, but might be smart until you've played The Loop both ways at least once.

Tee times at Silvies Valley Ranch, are similar, costing \$70-\$165 for resort guests and \$90-\$185 for non-guests, depending upon the season.

Winner: Forest Dunes.

Overall

First off, if you're playing either of these reversible courses, consider yourself among the fortunate few. Neither is easy to get to. Once you're there, though, you're in for a treat. It's not just another round of golf. They're lessons in architecture and angles. Both Hixson and Doak showed incredible creativity, a deeper understand of their craft and a willingness to "think outside the box" with these projects.

The Loop (which won the price, playability and routing categories) is my favorite for a couple reasons: it's more player- and walker-friendly, two characteristics this struggling 10-handicapper doesn't find enough of in America these days. Being a true reversible course - something Hixson wasn't able to accomplish for a couple different reasons, some not entirely his fault - is ultimately the determining factor. Silvies Valley Ranch (winner of the resort and scenery categories) isn't far behind. They're both on my bucket list of places worth seeing again.

Winner: The Loop.