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# Silvies Valley Ranch: The Return of Dan Hixson

It's eight years since the opening of Dan Hixson's last new course. When his reversible layout at Silvies Valley Ranch opens later this year, golfers will be reminded just how talented he is.

By TONY DEAR

**D**an Hixson remembers the first time he became aware of reversible golf. It was 1968, and Robert Trent Jones had been hired by Eugene CC to update Chandler Egan's 1923 design. The seven-year-old Hixson was walking the course with his father (his grandparents were members and the family spent quite a bit of time at the club) and looked on bemused as big machines ploughed up the ground. He saw a man with a rolled-up set of plans and, though he didn't know it at the time, now believes it must have been Jones.

"I asked my father what the man with the plans was doing," says Hixson. "He told me he was the designer, and was basically changing the direction of the course. Most of the ponds were positioned close to the tees, and Jones wanted them fronting, or to the side of, the greens. I remember my dad telling me the 18th green was now becoming the 1st tee."

Jones essentially reversed the course, and young Hixson was intrigued. He realized for the first time that golf courses got built, they weren't just there. "I began sketching holes and course routings, and have never really stopped," he says. >>



«Hixson has therefore long been aware of the concept of reversible golf, and when the opportunity to build it came up at Silvie's Valley he was more than a little excited.

Founded in 1883, Silvie's Valley Ranch is a 140,000-acre property made up of leased and deeded lands 130 miles east of Bend. It is owned by Silvie's Valley Ranch L.L.C. which was set up in 2007 by Scott Campbell, a retired veterinarian who turned Portland's Banfield Pet Hospital into a multi-national company with over 800 clinics, many of them in PetSmart stores. A non-golfer, Campbell has little concept of conventional golf, let alone the reversible kind.

He knows enough about the game, however, to recognize visitors to his guest ranch, or rather retreat, (in July 2011, the Oregon Legislature voted in favor of Campbell's proposal to build 575 cabins) would probably appreciate a golf course, or two. He also understands its economic potential.

When it comes to the environment, Campbell is a preservationist at heart and has been keen to restore the ranch to something like its original purpose. He breeds prize-winning cattle; is developing a meat goat – the American Range Goat; and supplies stables and horse-owners with Silvie's Valley Ranch Premium Performance Blend Hay from its certified-organic meadows. The ranch's vision is to be a 'profitable livestock ranching and guest operation with abundant, healthy wildlife that sets the standard for the nation in best ranching and environmental practices where associates stay for their lifetimes and guests return time after time.'

If he could build a relatively inexpensive, lay-of-the-land golf course that required minimal inputs and which was so good it might attract golfers from far and wide, he would not only preserve the environment, but also contribute to the long-term financial well-being of the ranch. "We want the freedom to decide when and how to improve the ranch," he says. "That freedom only exists with profit. Without it, the bankers, lenders, and creditors call the shots."

Considering Campbell's criteria, Hixson was the ideal choice to build the golf course. For starters, he was a native Oregonian which appealed to Campbell. And though clearly a designer of great ability and imagination who made good use of what features and undulations were already present rather than plough the ground up and start from scratch, Hixson's name had not yet become so big he could demand the fees of a Nicklaus, Fazio, or Trent Jones Jr. Nor was he in the same tax bracket yet as Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore, or Tom Doak – other designers who likewise treated the land lightly but whose previous successes (C&C - Sand Hills, Kapalua, Bandon Trails, etc. Doak – Pacific Dunes, Banbogle Dunes, Cape Kidnappers, etc) had seen their commercial value skyrocket.

"I spoke with five or six designers," says Campbell. "Dan just ticked all the boxes. And what I really liked was that he would spend a lot of time at the ranch. Others told me how they would make an initial trip, then design the course using CAD (Computer-Aided Design) from their office and designate the day-to-day work to someone in their company. They would then return on the day the course opened. But on a huge project like a golf course, you make a hundred decisions a day. So having a designer/builder on site every day was a huge factor for me." Campbell was also impressed by Hixson's ethics and passion for the game. "It clearly wasn't about money or status for Dan," says Campbell. "He just wanted to build a great golf course. He's very sensitive to the history of golf."

Campbell made the initial contact in the late summer of 2009, shortly after the successful opening of Hixson's Wine Valley GC in Walla Walla, WA. Two hundred and forty miles north of Silvie's Valley, Wine Valley was built on exposed farmland that many designers might have rejected as bland and featureless. Hixson, however, had done a remarkable job creating interest, strategy, and variety. He was sat in the clubhouse following a round with a group of Golf Club Atlas regulars when Campbell's call came through. »

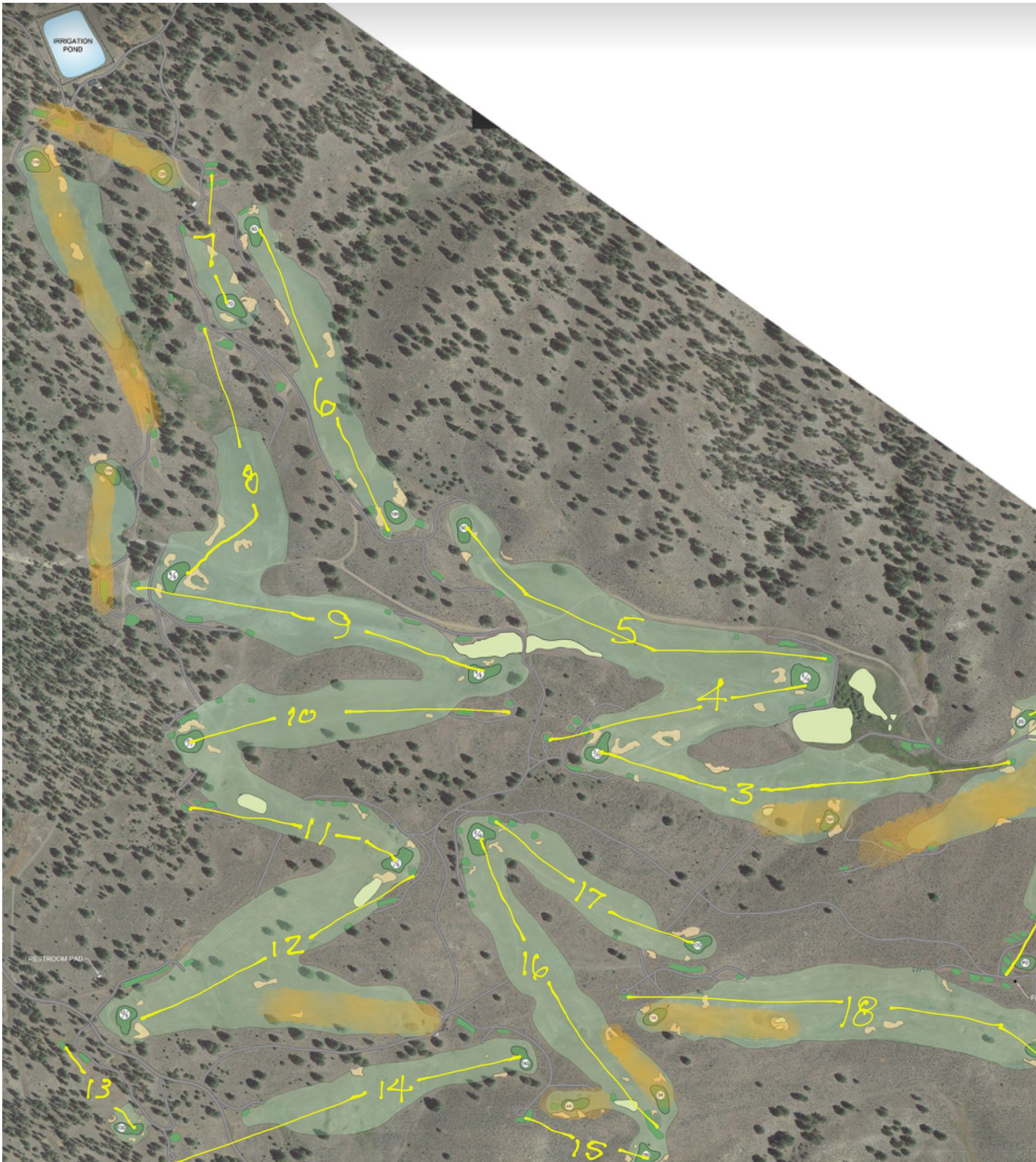






*Dan Hixson*







# THE HANKINS COURSE



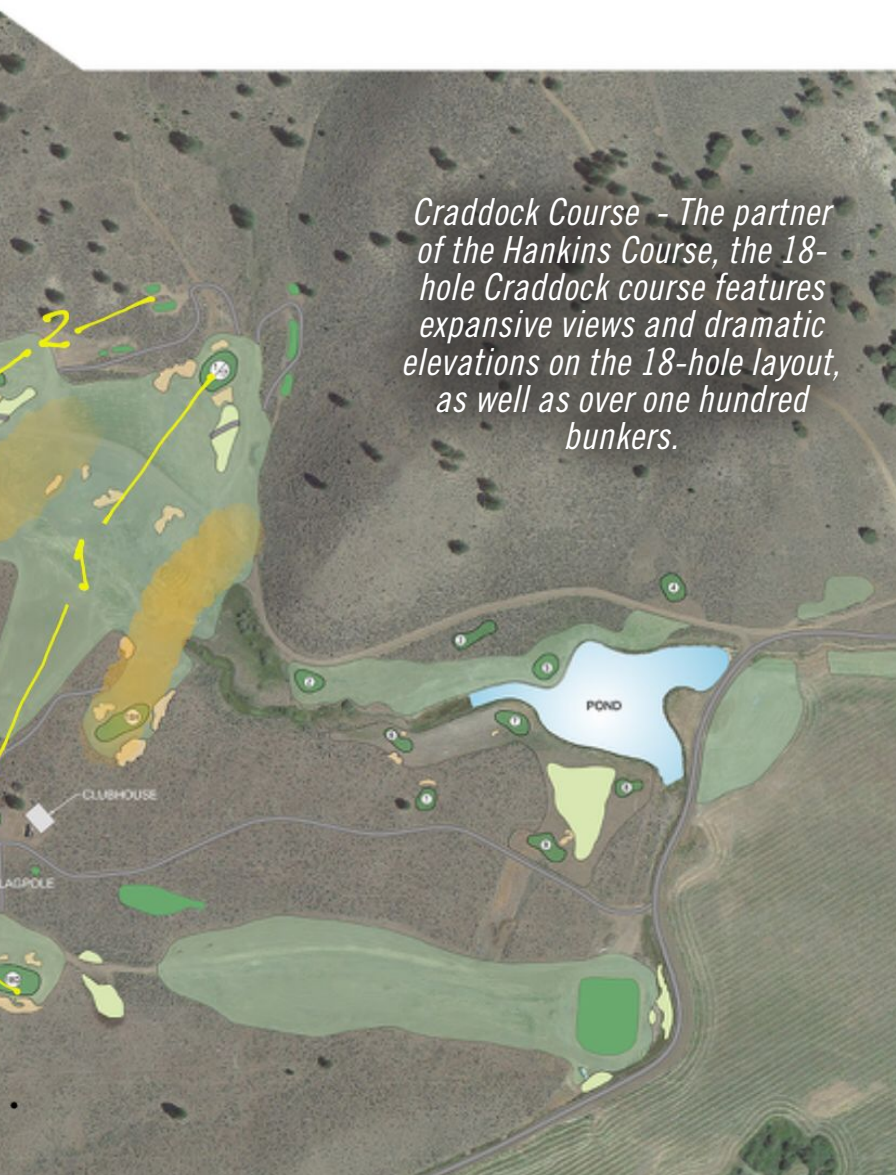
SILVIES VALLEY RANCH

LINKS GOLF COURSE

## CRADDOCK COURSE



Prairie #2



*Craddock Course - The partner of the Hankins Course, the 18-hole Craddock course features expansive views and dramatic elevations on the 18-hole layout, as well as over one hundred bunkers.*





*Hankins Course #1 and Craddock Course #17*



*Prairie*



*Hankins Course #4 and Craddock Course #14*

“I excused myself and went outside,” says Hixson who may not have opened an original course in the eight years since Wine Valley, but has kept extremely busy renovating long-established courses and creating masterplans for a number of Oregon private clubs. “The conversation lasted a long time because I remember walking all the way up to the 17th green and back.”

A few days later, Hixson flew to Silvies Valley in Campbell’s private plane, and they met three more times in the coming weeks when Hixson visited Campbell at his home in Portland.

Campbell laid out his hopes for the course, and Hixson suggested making it reversible, thus creating 36 holes of golf while technically having to maintain only 18. It would provide guests with two different experiences but cost less to build, and do far less damage environmentally than a typical 36-hole golf resort.

“I actually suggested making the middle six holes reversible,” says Hixson. “But Dr. Campbell gave me a strange look. I knew he had some Scottish blood, so told him about St. Andrews (where the Left-Hand Loop of the Old Course takes you on a backward route – 1st tee to 17th green, 18th tee to 16th green, etc. – which was the course’s configuration prior to 1870 when Tom Morris added the 1st green), and he thought for a second and said ‘Well in that case, let’s make the whole thing reversible’.”

In addition to all the environmental benefits, Silvies Valley Ranch would be the first reversible 18 (36)-hole golf course built anywhere in the world since the Old Course (a handful of reversible nine-holers were in play around the US – Trent Jones Jr had built one in Brainerd, MN., Tripp Davis designed nine reversible par 3 holes in Malakoff, TX, and former PGA Tour player Joel Goldstrand had opened a few in the Midwest in the 1980s. But Silvies Valley Ranch would have the distinction of being home to the first reversible 18.) The marketing potential from that alone would be considerable.

Only, neither Campbell nor Hixson seemed in



any hurry to get the course built. Campbell says his designer was more concerned with doing as good a job as possible than getting it done quickly. The designer though is convinced it was Campbell that showed little interest in establishing America's first reversible regulation-length course. "There was certainly never any feeling of desperation, or that we were on the clock," says Hixson who began staking the fairways toward the end of 2009.

Had circumstances been different, the job could probably have been completed by the fall of 2011. But besides the owner's apparent lack of urgency, a number of obstacles also saw it progress at snail's pace. "There were various environmental permits to get, and we spent a lot of time clearing the site of debris from the previous logging operation," say Hixson. "Plus we had a really small crew. Some of the ranch employees built roads and such around the site, but working on the course itself was basically just me, Norbert Painter, Jay Kenyon, Darryl Moulder and Torin Foster."

They cleared and shaped the course from the end of '09 to 2013, working 13/14-hour days for seven months of the year. They laid irrigation pipes in 2014.

Later that year, Tom Doak attracted a good deal of attention in the media when he announced he would be building a reversible 18 at Forest Dunes GC in Roscommon, MI. The national media knew nothing of Silvie's Valley Ranch, and Hixson didn't feel the need to put them right. But perhaps Doak's announcement would trigger some activity in Silvie's Valley.

No, not really.

"We definitely talked about it," says Hixson. "But we thought we would still be first. I don't really recall Dr. Campbell's reaction though." Clearly, the news for Hixson and Campbell came more as a mild surprise than a serious call to action.

"We did have a few setbacks with our well at that time which really affected seeding and grow-in," says Hixson. "But actually, my first thought following Tom's announcement was that it was »

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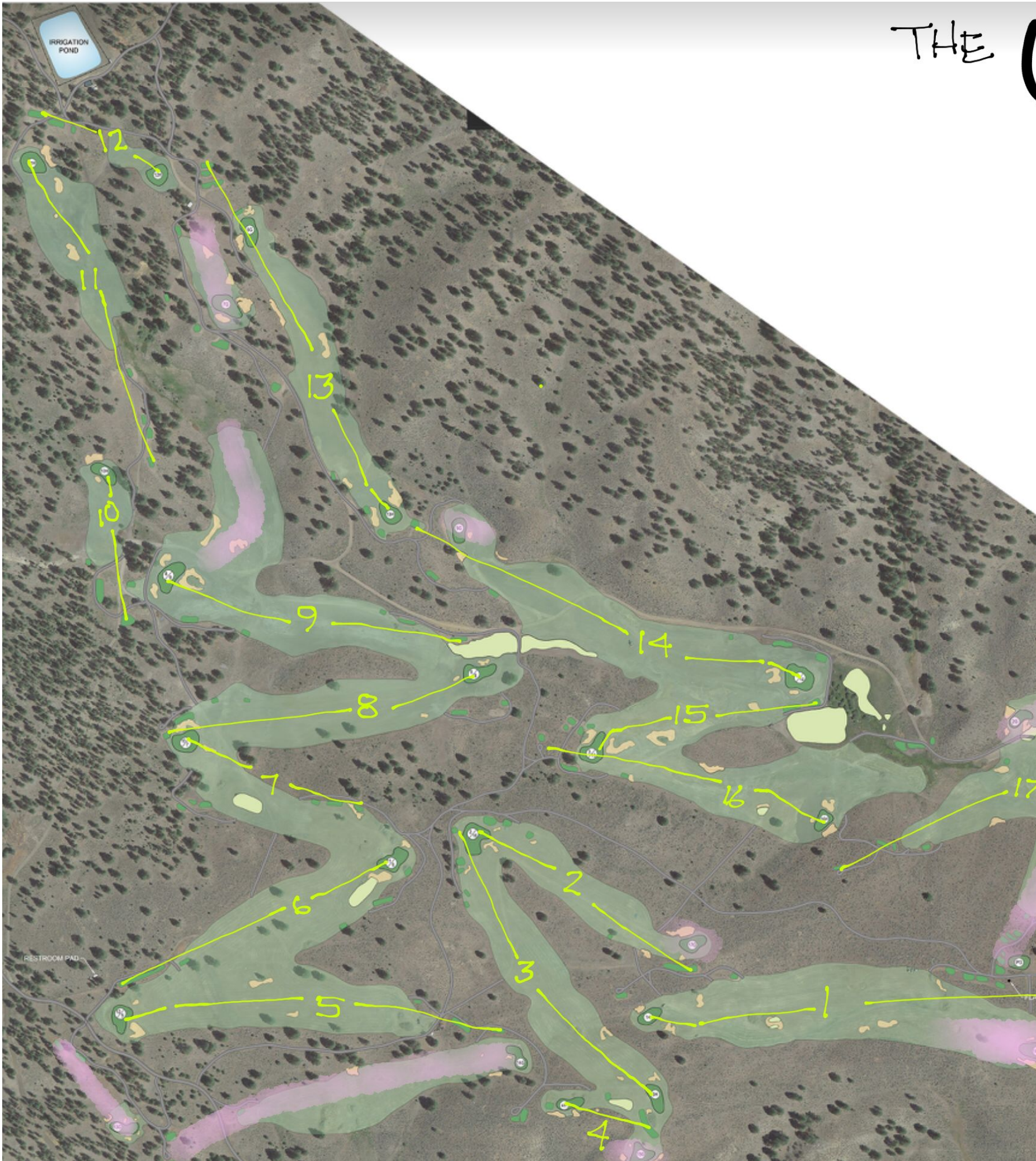


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THE





# CRADDICK COURSE



SILVIES VALLEY RANCH

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# HANKINS COURSE



*Hankins Course - Named for a Pioneer family that homesteaded the site, the Hankins course is an 18-hole reversible course with a variety of pin placements and tee box options, creating thousands of unique rounds.*

«great someone else was following our lead. It would validate the idea of Silvies.»

Campbell remembers having a long talk about it with Hixson over a bottle of Scotch. “We discussed what was most important to us,” he says. “Should Silvies Valley Ranch be truly reversible, or have no bad holes? Our site had a lot of drop-offs and elevation changes, and if we had made the course truly reversible, a few of the holes would have been uphill slogs. Dan and I decided we would rather have no bad holes than rush to be the first reversible course.”

The Loop opened in June last summer, by which time Campbell says his course was actually already in play. “We had been playing it since the summer of 2015, but weren’t ready to open,” he adds. “Dan puts a lot of time into the details, and wanted the course to be just right. I can honestly say I’m very glad with the outcome, and that Dan works the way he does.”

Because of Hixson’s insistence there be no bad holes resulting from playing a good downhill hole in reverse, the layout at Silvies Valley Ranch is actually quite complex. There are 16 fairways and 27 greens, nine of which will rest on certain days and be back in play the next. The two courses - Craddock and Hankins - are named after the area’s two original homesteaders, and will share nine greens and each have nine separate greens. Early feedback suggests there’s little to choose between them. “Hankins has better views, while Craddock is a tougher challenge,” says Hixson, whom Doak invited to his exclusive event - the Renaissance Cup - at The Loop last year.

Also opening at Silvies Valley Ranch this summer will be a nine-hole par 3 course named Chief Egan in honor of the last Paiute war chief. And next year, the dramatic seven-hole McVeigh’s Gauntlet will bring the retreat’s total number of holes to 52. The golf will be operated by KemperSports which also manages another quite well-known golf destination in »





*Hankins Course #3 and  
Craddock Course #15*



«Oregon. Indeed, it was Bandon Dunes’s owner Mike Keiser that introduced Campbell to Kemper. It’s difficult to know which aspect of Silvies Valley Ranch will take center stage later this year when Dan Hixson’s design finally opens to the public. That it is reversible will obviously be a major talking point, but not as big as it might have been had it beaten The Loop to the punch. Some publications will focus on the quality of the golf and how it will enhance Hixson’s reputation. Scott Campbell, meanwhile, hopes the ecological angle will be mentioned. “The course travels through four different eco-zones,” he says. “And we moved less than 15,000 cubic yards of dirt. The course creates an extremely small footprint.”

Also of great importance to Campbell are the jobs Silvies Valley Ranch will inevitably create. “I grew up in Burns when the logging and cattle-ranching

industries were at their peak,” he says. “But there are virtually no logging jobs left in Grant and Harney Counties today, so creating a tourism destination will hopefully have a positive effect.”

Whichever story makes the most noise this summer, Silvies Valley Ranch will put this remote part of Eastern Oregon on the map. Golfers are going to want to know where Burns, OR is, and discover what exactly Dan Hixson has been doing there.

*\*All photos courtesy Silvies Valley Ranch, Oregon*

