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JUNE 2006

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Centennial opens in Medford

18th Hole
Centennial Golf Club
Photo by Rob Perry

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At long last, Medford celebrates Centennial

Fought-design course now open for public play

MEDFORD, Ore.

By Tim Trower
The (Medford, Ore.) Mail Tribune

For some, it seems like only yesterday that the hillsides were dotted with cows grazing the vast expanse of former orchard land or crowding under a sturdy oak for shade.

For some, but not for John Fought, architect of Centennial Golf Club, which opened in late May in Medford, Ore.

It's been five years since Fought sat on the deck at Quail Point Golf Course and discussed options to add nine holes to that layout. Those blueprints have long since been discarded, replaced by countless other ideas from countless other meetings and countless other visits.

"I've been here winter, spring, summer and fall," said Fought, an Oregon native whose business is based in Scottsdale, Ariz. "I've been here for all the seasons. We worked on it for several years before we actually

started. To see it finished is really a fun thing. This is the culmination of what we've been trying to get to, and it's a wonderful feeling."

Nirvana engulfed Fought in May when he stuck his peg in the ground on the immaculate No. 1 tee box and launched the first ball onto Centennial, an 18-hole track that already has elbowed its way onto the landscape as one of Oregon's longest and toughest venues.

No, it didn't just sprout up.

Yes, it was worth the wait.

"Playing a brand new golf course with no divots, no ball marks, no broken tees ... it's perfectly pristine and ready to go, that is one of the really cool parts of this," Fought said.

The outing of three dozen or so executives from Rogue Valley Manor, Pacific Retirement Services, Inc., and OB Sports, the management company operating the course, served as a christening.

Not since Eagle Point opened in July 1996 — ending a blitz of four new courses in three years — has the Rogue Valley buzzed with such expectation.

Vince Domenzain, the course's general manager and director of golf, estimates he's taken visitors on some 40 tours, riding along the cart paths that line the alluring fairways.

"To finally do it with clubs," he said, "was pretty enjoyable. I'd always kind of played it in my mind, where I should hit it, where I should lay up."

He found the course to be relatively player-friendly, given its length and rating. There are challenging shots into many greens, but many areas where players might miss are not too penal. In essence, the tougher the hole, the less trouble around the green.

"It's more intimidating to the eye than it actually is," Domenzain said.

The course flows gently with the contour of the land. There was less grading required than on many courses Fought has built or redesigned, an aspect he found particularly pleasing. He likens it to traditional East Coast courses reminiscent of Donald Ross creations.

Were it not for the four ponds totaling nine acres, he says, there wouldn't have been much grading at all.

"The golf course is very, very natural," said Fought, who credits superintendent Matt Grove for getting it in "brilliant condition."

It follows closely his principles, key among them allowing the land to dictate routing and keeping in mind that players should have an enjoyable experience and still be tested.

Five tee options provide a course that plays 5,244 yards from the forward tees to the 7,309-yard back tees.

Fought lets players ease into the round with a compassionate, confidence-building first hole. A wide fairway beckons below an elevated tee.

The ponds come into play on eight holes, but that doesn't start until late on the front nine.

"I'm not a big fan of water," Fought said. "I don't want people losing their ball. I want them to play golf and enjoy it."

And he likes variety.

Continued on page 14.



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CENTENNIAL

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The third hole, the No. 1 handicap hole, is an uphill, narrow par-4 with bunkers along both sides of the fairway. The next hole is a downhill par-3 to the largest green on the course.

In his inaugural round, Fought found plenty of variety between Nos. 7 and 8.

It was one of the few surprises the former two-time winner on the PGA Tour and the 1977 U.S. Amateur champion encountered.

From the tips, No. 7 is an intimidating, 474-yard par-4. On this day, it played into the wind. Fought crushed a driver, but still had a full 4-wood into the green.

"That," he said, "was the longest par-4 I've played in a few years."

The next hole, a 452-yard par-4, however, was with the wind, and he went driver, wedge.

Similarly, on the back, the course's longest hole, the par-5 16th, plays to 603 yards, but it's followed by the shortest hole.

The course has 73 bunkers, a couple of which are in the middle of fairways. Further bite is provided by tall grass ringing the playing areas. Fought embraces the waving, thigh-high grass that will lend a striking contrast when it dries and tans in the summer.

"In Oregon, we tend to think golf courses have to have trees lining every fairway," he said. "That isn't the case. Scotland and Ireland have the most beautiful links courses in the world, and there are virtually no trees."

A few tree clumps at Centennial would be great, he says, but anything more would only impede "the beautiful views it has in all directions."

Bunkers are as much guides as hazards.

"I don't place bunkers out there to landscape," Fought said. "I put them in certain locations for a reason."

He cited the 15th hole, a dogleg right that plays slightly downhill. The closer a player gets to the bunker at the bend, the better the shot into the green.

"If you watch where the bunkers are, you can maneuver yourself around the course," he said.

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