



Grand County's rugged and expansive terrain inspired Craig Stadler's and Tripp Davis' efforts at Grand Elk.

The Heath Is On

GRAND ELK'S "HEATHLAND" DESIGN WILL COMPLETE YOUR EDUCATION IN GOLF-COURSE ARCHITECTURE—AND TAKE YOU TO SCHOOL IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE **BY TOM FERRELL**

When you think of old-world golf, your mind wanders to the famed seaside links of Scotland. Indeed, it was on those windblown spits of land that the game was born. In honoring that heritage,

architects throughout the ages have attempted to assign the "links" moniker to their work. The result has been a watered-down definition of the links style. That's why we found the Grand Elk Ranch & Golf Club's claim to be the first "heath-

land" course in Colorado quite intriguing. Rather than take the easy way and adding to the growing misperception about links golf, Grand Elk bucked the trend and challenged golfers to dig deeper into architecture books to learn



Occupying open, rolling hillside terrain peppered with unforgiving rough, Grand Elk suggests such heathland classics as Wentworth and Sunningdale.

about a style largely ignored in the United States.

Haven't hit the books yet? Don't worry; we have. All you'll need to do to complete your education in heathland golf is make the drive over Berthoud Pass to the high-valley burg of Granby and experience for yourself the unique Tripp Davis and Craig Stadler design at Grand Elk.

Before we discuss the details of your homework assignment, let's review a little background. The

British Isles gave us three distinct architectural styles: links, parkland and heathland. Links golf is characterized by a windswept and dune-studded seaside setting. Most greens allow for a run-up shot because windy conditions favor players who can keep the ball close to the ground. Parkland courses—which include the vast majority of American layouts—feature tree-lined fairways, seeded rough, and plenty of strategic bunkers and water hazards, creating forced carries on both

drives and approach shots. Heathland courses occupy a space between these two extremes. Heathland courses tend to occupy rolling terrain that is open to the elements. Heather and gorse punish golfers who stray from the fairways. And deep bunkers, frequently placed some distance in front of the greens, demand a well-executed approach to hard and fast targets. The heathland style is showcased at such classic British courses as Wentworth and Sunningdale, and it is by far the most rare type of design in American golf.

And that's what makes Grand Elk special. Sure, it takes some liberty with the heathland philosophy—there are far more water hazards on it, for instance, than a heathland traditionalist would prefer. But taken as a whole, Grand Elk does fit the bill.

Grand Elk may be located amidst some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in Colorado, but this isn't a mountain course. It doesn't have any dramatic elevation changes or tree-lined fairways. Instead, like the classic heathland courses of the old country, Grand Elk is designed to be open and vast, playing fast and firm throughout the season. A secondary benefit of the course's open hillside location is an extended golf season—as much as three weeks more in both the spring and fall. And though you may not encounter heather and gorse off the fairway, the desert sage is challenging and frustrating to golfers who spray the ball, and the sage and other native grasses provide the seasonal change of colors that help make heathland courses so sublime and beloved.

Davis and Colorado resident Stadler open their first collaboration with a straightforward par five that lets you get a feel for the scope and

pace of the course. You may have a chance to reach the slightly elevated green in two, but be advised that the huge undulations on the putting surface will make putting or chipping treacherous. A well-placed wedge may be a better call. Complete your warmup at the first because the heathland challenge heats up quickly starting with the second hole, a 187-yard par three that showcases a classic heathland feature—a deep, gaping greenside bunker that protects the entire putting surface and encourages a faded tee shot to another difficult green.

At just 418 yards, the par-four third doesn't seem overwhelming on the card, but the hole is magnificent on every level. The tee shot features a forced carry over natural wetlands to a fairway that slopes from left to right. The left side is guarded by a large bunker that penalizes those who get greedy off the tee. From the plateau of the



In addition to a dense, club-turning rough of sage and native grasses, Grand Elk's cavernous greenside bunkers and firm, fickle putting surfaces will test the mettle of your short game.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE THE "SPLASH" SHOT

One of the distinctive features of heathland-style golf courses is the deep greenside bunker such as the one to the right of the green at Grand Elk's par-four third. In such a bunker, you need a shot that will land softly to avoid running through the green—the "splash" shot.

Start by laying the clubface of your sand wedge open—wide open. To compensate for the open clubface, align the leading edge of the club at a right angle to the target line and widen your stance and body. Play the ball forward in your stance. Make a nice, smooth swing, swinging back along the line of your shoulders and cocking your wrists early in the backswing. Then swing through, keeping your wrists firm through impact to prevent the clubface from closing down. The "bounce" of the sand wedge will let you "splash" the ball out, high and soft.

While many of the bunkers at Grand Elk require the splash shot, you'll soon find that it is the most effective way of playing from almost any greenside bunker.

—Philip Martin
Director of Golf



landing area, you'll need to be accurate with a mid- or short iron. Miss it left, and you bring the sage into play. Miss it right, and there's another deep bunker to contend with. If you're looking for a signature hole, this may be it.

The par-five fourth continues your heathland education. Tall, native grasses protect the most direct line to the pin, so big hitters can give it a go, but they'll pay a steep price if they fail to carry the rough. Shorter hitters beware as well. A lone fairway bunker some 75 yards short of the green punishes a careless lay-up shot. This is one of the secrets of heathland golf: Know what risk is involved in every shot.

A seemingly innocent miss can lead to a lot of trouble.

The front nine at Grand Elk features three par threes, all of them strong in their own right, and while the 241-yard sixth may not qualify as pure heathland, it certainly can be pure hell if you lose your long-iron (or wood) approach into the pond on the right. There is ample room to bail out left. Take it, and you'll give yourself a shot at par.

Grand Elk's front nine closes with three heavyweights. The 464-yard, par-four seventh is the course's number one handicap hole. A gentle dogleg left, the hole requires a long tee shot to an elevated fairway followed by a long- to mid-iron

approach that plays into the wind to a wide but shallow putting surface. The 222-yard, par-three eighth serves up a beautiful view toward the peaks of Rocky Mountain National Park. A steep-faced bunker wraps around the right side and back of the green, with deep grasses and double-bogeys lurking beyond. The outward half closes with another long par four (463 yards) that plays sharply downhill. Land your ball just over the classic heathland bunkers short and right of the green in order to get it close.

The back nine at Grand Elk trades in the high desert sage for more natural wetlands, and though this nine features a number of water holes, it manages to retain its heathland design. Lay up to the fat part of the fairway on the 441-yard tenth. Though you'll face a longer approach, you need to play from the short grass to this narrow green. The green opens up a bit to the right, so watch out for the left sucker pin. A short-sided approach will leave a difficult up-and-down.

Forced carries over native vegetation are at the heart of the heathland experience, and the 592-yard eleventh has plenty of force—250 yards, to be exact, from the championship markers. Another forced carry on the second shot leaves a short pitch to one of the flatter greens on the course. Be smart and you can reap a reward here.

Next up are a pair of contrasting par fours designed to keep you honest. The 439-yard twelfth is a sharp dogleg left. A fairway wood off the tee is plenty of club—a driver invites the native wetlands on the right side into play. Another steep heathland bunker lies 20 yards short of the green. Avoid it or learn what "penal" bunkering is all about. The 314-yard thirteenth would seem to be a birdie hole, and it can

be. But again, risk and reward are balanced beautifully by the heathland features of native grasses on the left of the fairway and deep bunkers short and right of the green. Both can turn this drivable par four into a round-killer. Give it a go if you choose, but never lose sight of the risk.

The fourteenth and fifteenth, while enjoyable enough, represent the only true lull in the Grand Elk design. But take the breather and try to pick up a birdie because you'll need it before gearing up for another tough three-hole stretch to finish off your round.

The 218-yard par three favors a right-to-left approach. Overcook it, though, and you'll find yourself in another of the cavernous greenside bunkers that mark the course. The course turns for home at the 567-yard, par-five seventeenth. This is a gambler's dream-cut as much or as little off this dogleg left as you dare.

The water stretches along the entire left side. But don't go too far right, or you'll be back in the sage or, worse, in the wetlands beyond the hillside. An elevated green plays havoc with distance perception on your approach. The seventeenth is an excellent par five, rewarding well-heeled bravery while demanding well-executed strategy from those less bold.

The course closes with a brute of a par four, playing 474 uphill yards. In a final mark to the track's heathland legacy, prepare to run your approach on the green. Attempting to fly it close to the hole brings in the sage and scrub beyond the green—an architectural reminder that you need to use all that you've learned, right up to the bitter end.

The daily-fee Grand Elk Golf Club is part of an expansive multi-million-dollar development that features a luxury club with a private clubhouse and pool, homesites and

townhomes. Skiing, hunting, fishing, and hundreds of miles of hiking and biking trails are located within miles of Grand Elk.

Of course, we're impressed by all the amenities, but in the end we went looking for a unique golf experience, and we found Grand Elk to be a golfer's course. While scenic, it's hardly as beautiful as its more wooded and mountainous neighbors. But its emphasis on a little-known and under-appreciated architectural form makes it a unique and welcome challenge among Colorado's golf offerings. If the test of a good golf course is that it teaches you something about how to play the game, then Grand Elk will have a place at the head of the class. **A**

GRAND ELK RANCH & CLUB
1300 TEN MILE DRIVE, GRANBY
RATING/SLOPE: NOT YET RATED
PAR/YARDAGE: 71/7,206
970-887-9122

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