



DISMAL RIVER GOLF CLUB

FIRST NICKLAUS, NOW DOAK

"This is the place for golf." — TOM DOAK, COURSE ARCHITECT

By Mark Pazdur, Publisher

MULLEN, NEBRASKA: Having finished a two-day business trip in New York City, I was excited to be taking a detour to visit Dismal River Golf Club before heading back to Los Angeles. If golf in Nebraska hasn't appeared on your radar—it probably should. The topography of the Sand Hills of Nebraska provides a golf experience unlike anywhere else in our country. It is akin to playing in Ireland or Northeast Scotland, but with more comfortable weather during the long, warm summer days.

It is difficult to describe the scale of the land. You are taken aback by its vastness. Only 491 people live in Mullen (I think there were that many passengers at JFK waiting in the boarding lounge). As a result, the landscape at Dismal River is pristine. There are no trees, no water, no buildings, and no homes—only miles and miles of dramatic sand dunes covered with native prairie grasses and prickly pear and dog's ear cactus.

THE STORY BEHIND THE NAME

Dismal River is a private golf club with a striking Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course; a Tom Doak course in the design phase; a large, rustic clubhouse; and 78 rooms in well-appointed cabins.

The land has changed little since the Sioux Indians hunted wild North American bison over the vast prairie. As western cattle ranchers encroached, the area became controlled by a tight-knit group of families. Over time, the

ranches would be passed from generation to generation. To this day, it is uncommon for a ranch to become available for sale to someone without a family connection in town.

"Land out this way," said Chris Johnston, owner of Dismal River, "rarely becomes available to outside buyers."

The ranching heritage is still evident at the club. There are numerous "cattle rubs" on the golf course (a chain connected between two wooden posts for cattle to be able to scratch their backs). And, in case you were wondering, you do get relief from the cattle rubs with no penalty.

"Our name is a real conversation starter," said Johnston. "The question typically is 'why?'"

The club is named for the Dismal River that snakes through the property. The river is the most consistent flowing river in the United States. Central Nebraska sits on top of the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest underground river in North America. "You only need to dig down eight feet to hit fresh water," explained Johnston. "As a result, our water is fresh and plentiful."

TRUE SAND HILLS GOLF

The Nicklaus Course at Dismal River has generous, firm, and fast fairways with numerous valleys and saddles; big yawning bunkers (the sand has the consistency of cake mix); and punch bowl greens. Although many holes look intimidating, the course has wide fairways and it is unusual to lose a golf ball during a round.



The course is an imaginative Nicklaus design. The 10th hole, much like Riviera Country Club's famous par 3, features a bunker in the middle of the green. "The front right pin position is a magnet for holes-in-one," revealed Johnston. "All shots funnel down to the hole."

"The nines don't loop back to the clubhouse so it is a tradition to stop at Hooker's House for a snack and drink at the turn. Our land has a lot of history behind it, but Hooker's House isn't named for the first thing that pops in your mind [or maybe the second thing]," laughed Johnston. "Joseph P. Hooker, nicknamed 'Fighting Joe,'

"THE LAND AT DISMAL RIVER IS LIKE STEPPING BACK IN TIME AND SEEING WHAT THE DUNES OF NORTHERN SCOTLAND MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE A HUNDRED YEARS AGO. IN EVERY DIRECTION, I SAW GREAT GOLF HOLES." — JACK NICKLAUS

was the commanding general of the Union Army and was relieved of duty three days before the Battle of Gettysburg. He was a colorful character, and our county is named after him."

A DESTINATION GOLF CLUB

"We knew the club had to have an outstanding gathering spot and lodging to match our fine golf facilities,"



explained Johnston. "Our clubhouse is perched on a gigantic sand dune 3,100 feet above sea level. After a day on the course, you can play pool on our two hand-hewn pool tables made from aged wormwood, watch a movie in our theater room, play horseshoes or bocce, play a spirited game of poker, or just relax in one of our pine rocking chairs around the fire pit."

ANNOUNCING PLANS FOR THE TOM DOAK COURSE

"I was excited when Chris called me about the second golf course at Dismal River," said Tom Doak. "I first heard about the Sand Hills region thirty years ago from Ron Whitten and Dick Youngscap, and I was fortunate to have seen Sand Hills Golf Club developed from its inception. Working in the same neighborhood would be near the top of any architect's wish list. After Chris sent me a map of the property, I flew out to meet him, and spent a couple of days wandering around."

"Almost from the get-go, I gravitated to the land down by the river," continued Doak. "Just across the river to the north, there is a steep bluff, more than 200 feet high, which will make a dramatic backdrop for several of our holes on the back nine. The front nine winds up into the dunes and back down, with two of the best par-3 holes I've ever seen just sitting there waiting to be grassed."

"Chris doesn't want to do anything halfway, so he asked if I would consider becoming a partner in the project. I agreed right away," said Doak. "I think the course has incredible potential, but we're past the era where architects get paid for potential. So, Chris and I are in the same boat—our goal is to make the whole project a success, and then there will be plenty of reward to go around."

"Because the golf season is so short in Nebraska, we must be very cost conscious. Having two golf courses, versus one, makes Dismal River, a true club for 'destination golf' purists," explained Doak. "The beauty of two golf courses is you double your capacity without doubling your costs."

“THE GOLF COURSE IS SET IN AN EXTRAORDINARY AREA. IT IS ONE OF THE BEST GOLF EXPERIENCES IN THE COUNTRY. DISMAL RIVER REMINDS ME OF DONALD ROSS AND ALISTER MACKENZIE DESIGNS.”

— CHARLES MECHEM, MEMBER AT DISMAL RIVER, AND LPGA COMMISSIONER 1990-1995



The 4th hole

PHOTO COURTESY JIM MANDEVILLE/NICKLAUS DESIGN

“MEMBERSHIP AT DISMAL RIVER PROVIDES MANY BENEFITS. WE HAVE SISTER CLUB ARRANGEMENTS WITH BOTH THE CONCESSION IN SARASOTA, FLORIDA, AND CRUDEN BAY IN SCOTLAND.” — CHRIS JOHNSTON, CEO

COYOTES AND THE NIGHT SKY

“My wife Mindy and I are avid golfers,” said Barry Major, current member at Dismal River. “During the summer season, we trek out to Dismal River once per month from our primary residence in Omaha. The Sand Hills of Nebraska are one of the few places in America where the land looks the way it did centuries ago,” described Major. “Most of the ranches don’t even have fences marking property lines. The boldness of the land grabs you.

“There is a magical moment that occurs almost each evening before the sun sets. The coyotes, off in the distance, start yipping and howling. Every time I hear them, this incredible emotion rolls over me. I realize the power of nature and how special the Sand Hills are. On clear nights, the Milky Way is vivid in the sky. The stream of stars are so dense, it looks like a cloud overhead.”

AN ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Chris Johnston has been in the golf business for 15 years and has been a member at the celebrated Sand Hills Golf Club (only eight miles away as the crow flies) since it opened. He was involved in the ownership of Teton Pines in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and his family has been lifelong friends with Charlie Mechem, the former commissioner of the LPGA. “Marilyn Mechem, Charlie’s wife, was the matron of honor at my mom and dad’s wedding,” said Johnston.



Lower Cabins

“We don’t want to create significant barriers to keep you from joining our club and sharing in one of the best experiences in golf,” continued Johnston. “Our dues are half of what you are probably paying at your home club. Becoming a member at Dismal River is quite reasonable.

“We understand this would be your second club, and Dismal River must be priced accordingly. We want to be within reach of a wide group of people who share a love and respect for the game. I invite you to create memories with your family at our club.” ■

Getting to Dismal River Club: The golf season runs from mid-May to early October. United Express flies into North Platte, Nebraska (LBF), about a 90-minute drive away. Omaha and Denver are less than a six hour drive. Trego-Dugan Aviation in North Platte is the closest private FBO.

For special membership pricing, contact Chris Johnston at (308) 546-2900 or e-mail him at cj@dismalriver.com. For a complete overview visit dismalriver.com.