

Sand Hills Club: From space, a patchwork of green

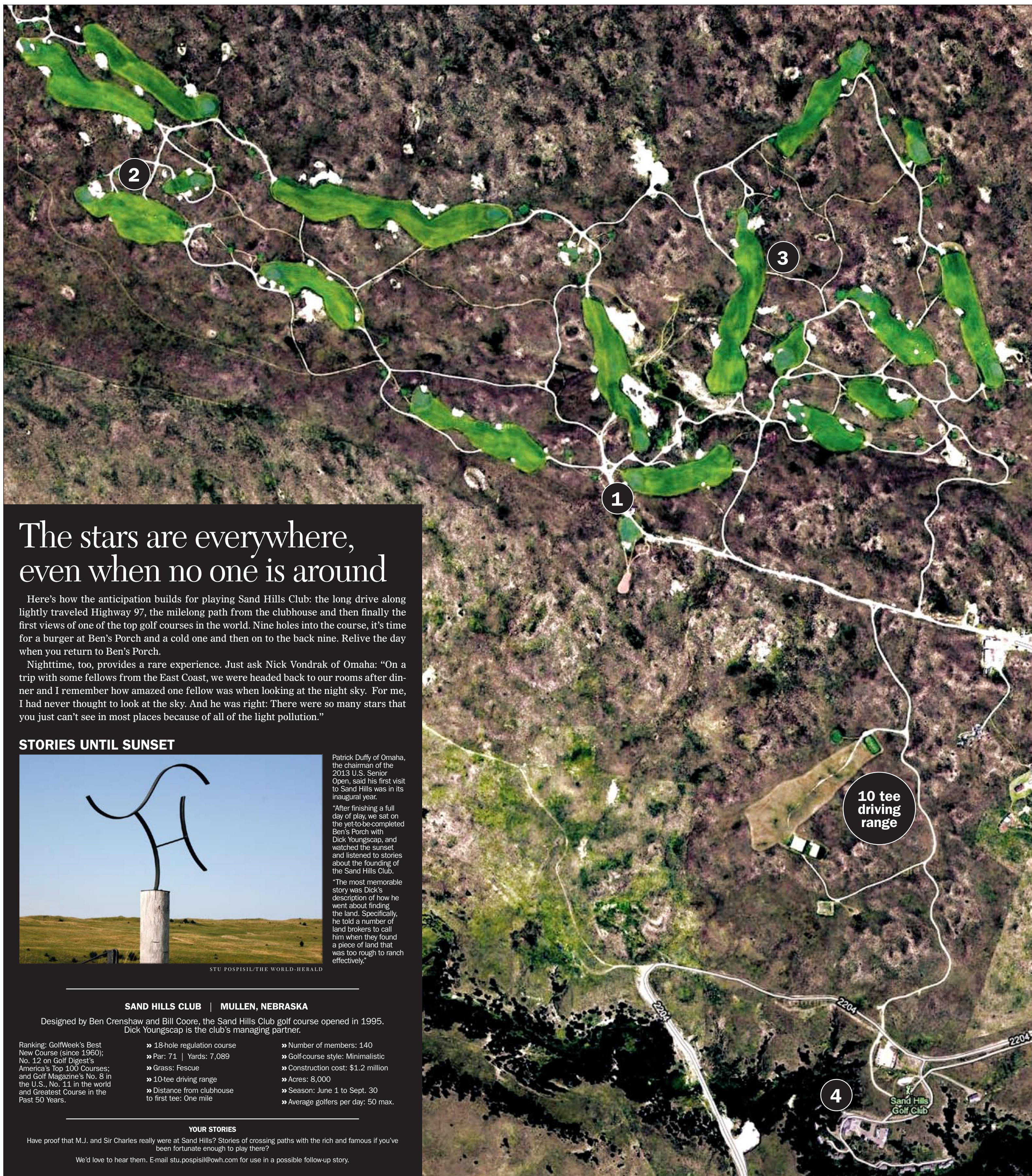


PHOTO BY GOOGLE EARTH

The stars are everywhere, even when no one is around

Here's how the anticipation for playing Sand Hills Club: the long drive along lightly traveled Highway 97, the milelong path from the clubhouse and then finally the first views of one of the top golf courses in the world. Nine holes into the course, it's time for a burger at Ben's Porch and a cold one and then on to the back nine. Relive the day when you return to Ben's Porch.

Nighttime, too, provides a nice experience. Just ask Nick Vondrak of Omaha: "On a trip with some fellows from the East Coast, we were headed back to our rooms after dinner and I remember how amazed one fellow was when looking at the night sky. For me, I had never thought to look at the sky. And he was right: There were so many stars that you just can't see in most places because of all of the light pollution."

STORIES UNTIL SUNSET



STU POSPISIL/THE WORLD-HERALD

Patrick Duffy of Omaha, the chairman of the 2013 U.S. Senior Open, said his first visit to Sand Hills was in its inaugural year.

"After finishing a full day of play, we sat on the yet-to-be-completed Ben's Porch with Dick Youngscap and watched the sunset and listened to stories about the founding of the Sand Hills Club.

"The most memorable story was Dick's description of how he went about finding the land. Specifically, he told a number of land brokers to call him when they found a piece of land that was too rough to ranch effectively."

SAND HILLS CLUB | MULLEN, NEBRASKA

Designed by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore, the Sand Hills Club golf course opened in 1995. Dick Youngscap is the club's managing partner.

- Ranking: GolfWeek's Best New Course (since 1960); No. 12 on Golf Digest's America's Top 100 Courses; and Golf Magazine's No. 8 in the U.S., No. 11 in the world and Greatest Course in the Past 50 Years.
- 18-hole regulation course
- Par: 71 | Yards: 7,089
- Grass: Fescue
- 10-tee driving range
- Distance from clubhouse to first tee: One mile
- Number of members: 140
- Golf-course style: Minimalistic
- Acres: 8,000
- Season: June 1 to Sept. 30
- Average golfers per day: 50 max.

YOUR STORIES

Have proof that M.J. and Sir Charles really were at Sand Hills? Stories of crossing paths with the rich and famous if you've been fortunate enough to play there?

We'd love to hear them. E-mail stu.pospisil@owh.com for use in a possible follow-up story.

This view of Sand Hills Club, from Google Earth, is a composite of satellite images taken 308 miles above the Earth. The tees, fairways and greens are in stark contrast to the unirrigated, native grasses of the 8,000-acre property.

HOP ON A MOWER

Corey Crandall of Ogallala worked at Sand Hills as course superintendent. In an area with sparse population, he said, labor was in short supply.

"I think I taught every ranch wife how to roll and mow greens," he said.



STU POSPISIL/THE WORLD-HERALD

Ben's Porch. The only building on the course, named for course co-designer Ben Crenshaw, includes a snack bar and restroom facilities. Many a round ends on the "porch," with players recalling the day's experience.

1 HONOR SYSTEM

In the days before the club completed itself, there was a cooler with sandwiches and beverages at the start of each nine. You helped yourself, signing your name and what you took, to be billed later.

HEISMAN WINNER, 'TOUR GUIDE'

Chris Wiemers of Happy Hollow in Omaha, who was in a group with two foursomes, was asked what tees he wanted to play. "I responded, 'I'll play the back tees, so I could see the entire course.' One of the guys yelled out, 'Wiemers! You want to see the whole course, just play with (Eric) Crouch, you'll for sure see it all then.'"

FALDO'S ACE

Nick Faldo missed the cut one year at the PGA Tour's International in Denver, so Bill Kubly of Landscapes Unlimited in Lincoln flew in the winner of six major championships. Faldo fashioned a smooth 6-under-par 66, including an ace on the uphill, 220-yard 13th with a 4-iron. A witness said, "He came up to Ben's Porch (the course refreshment stand) and showed me everybody's human. He was like a little kid in a candy store."



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DOWNTOWN MULLEN

Ben Crenshaw has brought the likes of Nick Faldo and Tom Watson into Mullen, and the townspeople "don't know them from Adam," a club member said. "They don't have any idea who they are."

A FAST ONE

Sand Hills begins with a par 5, one with a green that tilts severely from back to front. How much? Let former state champion Tom Olson of Omaha tell us:

"The first time I played Sand Hills was with member John Ziegenbein, a scratch player and a very long hitter. He reached the green in two, while I was on in three. Our golf bags were close together, about 30 feet behind the pin, and we were putting to a front pin position.

"John warned me that the putt was very fast and could easily be putted off the front of the green. He said that I should watch his putt closely. I did just that and watched as he putted past the hole, off the front of the green, down the big hill and 50 to 60 yards into the fairway!

"I was laughing really hard and couldn't resist adding insult to injury. So I suggested that he declare the ball unplayable and put another ball into play at the same spot on the putting green.

"Even though I was kidding, he thought for a moment, did just what I suggested, and then proceeded to make the 30-foot putt for a routine par."

HARD TO TOP HIS DAY

Nebraska Golf Association board member Bob Hills has a story that is priceless, as in those credit card ads.

"The NGA board held a meeting at Sand Hills in August 1996. I played from the back tees and broke par, shooting 70. Very good for me. I was pretty pleased to have broken par on one of the greatest courses in the country.

"Pete Godwin and I decided to go out and play a 216-yard nine holes before dinner. On the third hole, a Nicky par 3, I hit a 4-iron and made it. Yes, a hole in one.

"We finished up the nine holes. The whole board was around for a celebration and, of course, the obligatory round of drinks. For me, it was pretty much a perfect day on the golf course. Great weather, great golf course, great friends, and an 18 and a hole in one I will not forget."

MAKE IT ENJOYABLE

Another NGA board member, Walt Radcliffe, has another story from the same outing.

"I arrived late the first day, after the other board members had teed off, and found Virgil Parker, our pioneering executive director, in the clubhouse. I persuaded Virgil to join me on the first tee. When we walked to the tee, Virgil commented that he 'couldn't reach the fairway from back there.'

"I suggested that we move up a tee box. Not being a long hitter myself, I appreciated the opportunity, as I would be able to hit shorter shots to the greens. It remains one of my most memorable rounds at Sand Hills.

"As I look back and remember, it was not about my course or any great shots. Rather it was the playability of the course, the beautiful setting. And most of all, it is about a very fond memory of my friend Virgil, who was a true friend of Nebraska golf."



STU POSPISIL/THE WORLD-HERALD

TOM

Anyone who's played Sand Hills knew who Tom was. Mullen resident Tom Mullen fired up the grill every day at Ben's Porch, fixing burgers and brats.

Saturday, Simonson died unexpectedly. He was 81.

"A total stud," said Mike Dugan of Omaha. "A true cowboy. Big hat, big belt buckle. He grilled a mean burger."

Simonson's special seasonings are sold in the Sand Hills golf shop. You just didn't ask him, a man in cattle country, for a grilled chicken sandwich.

THE PROPOSAL

Sand Hills' clubhouse has seen its share of story-swapping and card-playing. It also has seen at least one marriage proposal.

"It was the coolest thing. I was the first one to be proposed to there," former Omahan Melissa Fahrenbruch said. "Nobody else was there — they closed the dining room. And Mr. Youngscap was watching the whole thing through the kitchen window."

'YES, HONEY'

Former Nebraska split end Guy Ingles was on a couples trip to Sand Hills with his wife, Jeanette, and friends Jim and Debbie Boier.

"We got on the course about two hours ahead of our tee time, because our rooms were not quite ready, and another large 'stag' group was on the way.

"We proceeded to play 18 in short order, and now I'm thinking, 'Check in, a little lunch, sit on the porch, in other words, boring.' And my wife looks right at me and says: 'We're gonna keep playing, aren't we?' And I said, 'You bet we are, honey.' We were on that first tee in a flash. She had never played 36 in one day, ever, nor had Debbie."

COMING TO THE RESCUE

Once, the grill went out in the clubhouse restaurant. A call was made to Mullen, and soon a bunch of cowboys pulled up in their pickup trucks, unloaded their grills and started firing up steaks.

EVEN A BOAT

Before Sand Hills was open, it wasn't golfers who were on the course. The curious showed up in droves, sometimes getting past the maintenance building and mistaking cart paths for roads. There even was an RV towing a boat.

HAVE A JET?

Nebraska PGA Executive Director David Honnens was sitting on Ben's Porch one evening with his group when a gentleman sat down at the next table and perked Honnens' interest.

Honnens: "Sir, I don't want to bother you, but are you a member here?"

Man: "Why, yes, I am."

Honnens: "Could I just ask one question? How do you handle all the requests from people who want to play here?"

Man: "It really is very simple. I just tell them to pick me up in their jet, and we're on the tee."