**Sand Hills Golf Club**

Mullen, Nebraska

Opened 1994

Designed by Coore & Crenshaw

Developer, Owner, Operator Dick Youngscap

In September 1994 I made a special trip from Summit, NJ to Mullen, Nebraska to play the highly touted Sand Hills. I played it twice and then had a long talk with developer Dick Youngscap. The thrill of playing the course on a beautiful day by myself and then talking to Dick was so overwhelming that I was seriously thinking of becoming a member. I did come to my senses when asking myself how I was going to justify annual visits to the middle of nowhere. Mullen is 65 miles north of North Platte, 286 miles west of Lincoln, NE and 320 miles east of Denver, CO. There are more cattle in the area than there are people.

Dick Youngscap is one of my all-time heroes. I’m into how courses became great and the people behind the story. Dick truly created a totally new category in the world golf course industry – **if you build a quality golf** **course in the middle of nowhere golfers will come.** All the highly rated remote courses built since 1994 such as Bandon, Barnbougle, Ballyneal, Cabot Links and the golfers who play these courses owe Dick a huge debt of gratitude.

In November 1997 I went to Austin, TX and spent five hours talking golf course architecture with Ben Crenshaw. Much of the time was spent on Sand Hills. Ben was so insightful about golf course architecture in general and Sand Hills in particular. It was truly a memorable meeting for me.

Therefore, I have this love affair with Dick Youngscap and Sand Hills. Early in January 2014 GOLF WORLD magazine published a lengthy article on Sand Hills. This is not the first lengthy article about the course. What caught my attention was the beautiful writing by author Roland Merullo. I was not familiar with Roland, but now think he is a brilliant writer. The Sand Hills article has the same beautiful rhythm that golfers find with the design of the course and the flow of the holes. The article gives the reader the total experience of being there from start to finish. This is the same approach that I have tried to give readers of “The Odyssey”. Thus, I thought people interested in quality golf courses experiences would enjoy the following.

**GOLFWORLD** JANUARY 13, 2014

By Roland Merullo

Driving toward Sand Hills GC through northwestern Nebraska, there comes a moment when you begin to believe that the place does not really exist. It’s only a fantasy. A fable. A myth. We tell ourselves there’s a golf venue out there on the Great Plains, a spectacular layout designed by a legendary tour player and a famous architect, because it makes us feel good to believe such a thing. We know the day will never come when we’ll actually play the course, or when anyone will actually play it, but we want it to be there the way we want paradise to be there: a flower of perfection growing out of the cares and disappointments of everyday soil.

This kind of thinking is spawned by the northwestern Nebraska landscape, which is vast and empty beyond imagining, and the precise opposite of flat. Just past the desolate poverty of the Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux Reservation in southernmost South Dakota, you cross into the Cornhusker State, slice through some farmland where winter wheat is grown and are soon traveling two-lane Route 27 where you do not see a house, a store, a gas station or another human being for 54 miles. To either side run the sandhills, a rumpled quilt of dollar-bill green, dusted everywhere with knee-high sunflowers the size of cupcake tops. This is a rippled moonscape of moguls and swales, hillocks and declivities, all of it spotted with shallow ponds, lined with strands of barbed wire fencing, and speckled here and there with small herds of Angus cattle. On and on it goes, covering one-third of the state of Nebraska, and at 20,000 square miles, the largest area of vegetated dunes in the world. Beautiful, yes, but as you turn east onto Route 2 the drone of tires on pavement plays background to a melody of doubt. Who would build a golf course here, really? And if someone were crazy enough to build it, who would come to play?

But then, on Route 97, 13 miles south of the railroad town of Mullen (pop. 509), there appears a tiny wooden sign. Miss it and you’ll travel another 70 miles without passing a town of any size. Take the right turn, drive several more miles along a dusty road, and you see another small wooden notice: Club House. Could it be real, then? But no, when you reach the modest clubhouse, though the parking lot is full of cars and there are neat lines of empty golf carts, there is no course. No driving range. No putting green. No tee boxes or waving flags. None of the visual clues we’ve come to associate with playing the game of golf. The sun is red and almost gone, the building enveloped by the kind of quiet that doesn’t exist on the Eastern seaboard. You are either going to play golf tomorrow, or find yourself at the heart of one tremendous practical joke, the essence of a golfer’s wishful thinking.

Early the next morning, after a dinner of excellent fresh scallops—how can this be true in rural Nebraska?—and a restful night in one of Sand Hills’ elegantly humble cabins, on the porch of which wild turkeys peck and frolic, you find a golf cart with your bag on it. You are given these improbable instructions: Drive the cart north one mile along a sandy lane. “Trust us,” the exceptionally friendly staff seems to say, “you’ll find a golf course there.”

You head out on pure faith. The sand road climbs through fescue, wildflowers and big sky, nothing else visible. At last you come upon a driving range, pure simplicity, and then a two story building referred to as “Ben’s Porch.” The House That Crenshaw Built—Crenshaw and design partner Bill Coore and an if-you-build-it-they-will-come Nebraskan visionary and developer named Dick Youngscap.

Waiting on Ben’s Porch is a lanky U. of Nebraska senior named Brett. He hoists your clubs onto one shoulder and leads the way over a sand dune, along a path so narrow and flower fringed you feel like you’re at your sister-in-law’s house on Cape Cod, headed for a curl of private beach. Sunflowers dust your shorts with yellow and a cool high-plains breeze stirs the air. On the other side of the dune what awaits is not a dip in the Atlantic but a northerly view of the endless landscape with a few mown strips of fairway running this way and that, pocked with gaping bunkers. A golf course, yes, after all.

The first hole—beautiful and daunting—is the prelude to a golf symphony in 18 movements. From the tee-box plateau you look down across 200 yards of native flora—bunchgrass, switchgrass, needle-and-thread grass, sunflowers, spiderwort, prickly pear cactus, yucca plants—to a fairway that angles away from you, closer to your right and farther away to your left. With Brett’s help, taking into account the distance added by the 3,400-foot altitude, you calibrate the shot. Too far right and you’ll fly the fairway and end up in the grasslands (so dense that a lost ball may be played here, Local Rule, as if it were in a lateral hazard). Too far left and you’ll fall short and end up in a bunker that looks like it could hold three of the coal cars on the mile-long BNSF trains that rumble all night through Mullen. You give Brett a rough idea how far you hit the ball, and he gives you the proper line, just right of the near bunker. Hit it too well and another bunker lurks on the far side. But there is a tongue of fairway there between them; your tee ball manages to find it, and o! you go down another sandy path, into golfer’s paradise.

Like most of its 17 cousins, the first fairway rolls and slants in the manner of a typhoon sea. You slip a long iron up the right side of this par 5 and find yourself in a bowl of perfect turf, looking uphill 40 yards at a green with a malicious false front, a gaping bunker and the mean-spirited grasses left and right. Welcome to Sand Hills.

The glory of the course comes from several features. First, at every turn, you are reminded of the surreal and vast emptiness around you, often with 360-degree views. Second, the conditions are impeccable: fine-blade-fescue fairways lacking any sign of divot, bentgrass greens that rolled true and fast on that day, close to 12 I would guess. Third, there are all kinds of optical intimidations. While the sign of divot, bentgrass greens that rolled true and fast on that day, close to 12 I would guess. Third, there are all kinds of optical intimidations. While the landing areas are generous, every drive from the two rear tees requires some sort of forced carry—not over water; there is no water on the course despite the fact that it sits atop the deepest part of the Ogallala aquifer—but over the diabolical tall fescue. Fourth, there are, in keeping with Coore and Crenshaw’s minimalist ethic here, no distractions. Simple wooden poles mark the 150-yard point. Simple circular log plates mark the 100-, 150- and 200-yard points. Very small wooden signs direct you only to those tee boxes most easily missed. There are two stations for drinking water and seed mix, grilled burgers at the turn and the rest of it is golf. From certain tees—like that of the par-4, 449-yard fourth—you stand on a high point from which you can see miles in any direction … but only a single fairway is visible. This creates a magical feeling, as if it is a one-hole course, or as if the architects are giving you a hint: Focus on the task at hand.

The task at hand is always fair, but invariably daunting. There are three sets of tees, the diamond, the square and the circle (from which the long carries are absent. “We wanted there to be something for everyone out there,” Crenshaw says). I played the square tees, 6,401 yards in a steady 15-plus-milean- hour wind and pared the first two holes before discovering, on Nos. 3, 4 and 5, that errant shots searched for and found in the native grasses will almost always result in double, triple or quadruple bogey.

To my mind, one mark of a great golf course is the lack of any foolish holes, and the lack of any one hole that too closely resembles another. Sand Hills easily fits both criteria. Two favorites were the uphill, par-4 15th, 422 yards from those middle tees, with its pin tucked so far left behind a grassy dune that it is invisible from mid-fairway; and the absolutely magnificent par-3 17th, “a neat little hole,” Crenshaw calls it: only 150 yards with a 3,200-square-foot green, but asking for a precise draw that lands just past the whale-mouth bunker front left, and just this side of the deep grasses beyond. The 18th—my excellent caddie Brett said it was the signature hole—is a 432-yard par 4 that plays considerably longer than its yardage, over another massive bunker, then all the way uphill, into the prevailing wind, toward Ben’s Porch, your final resting place.

“The elements there can be vile,” Crenshaw states, and among those elements the wind deserves special mention. In fact, it plays such a central role that the holes are handicapped differently each day. So, No. 4, for one example, might be the first or the seventh handicap hole on the card depending on the wind direction. Strangely, there is no slope or course rating for Sand Hills. Cameron Werner, the director of golf, told me afterward, “We just want people to come out and have fun, not worry about score and handicap.” This was the only part of Sand Hills’ uniqueness I found overdone. I’ll take care of the fun part; I wanted an objective standard by which to measure the course’s difficulty against other courses.

Still, unlike Bandon Dunes and Cabot Links, two other recent additions to the elite, remote-golf rotation, Sand Hills is not there to please the wider audience. In fact, there is next to no outside play allowed. The membership quickly topped out at 170, three-quarters of them from outside Nebraska—though there are some special arrangements for locals. One member lives in Brazil and plays the course only on a single annual junket, and that is not a particularly atypical situation. Members can bring up to seven guests at a time and can sponsor a foursome for a one-time visit. Other than that, the club protects its joys from overuse—there are only about 8,000 rounds played per year, in a five-month season that usually ends by Oct. 1. At moments one senses the fragrance of privilege, but the staff was exceptionally hospitable and the other players perfectly friendly. As starter Bob Beitel said in the breeze and scent of grilling Angus on Ben’s Porch, “Everyone’s equal here. A member told me he brought seven of his friends here last year. ‘You’re going to be treated like family,’ ” he warned them. “ ‘And you should treat the people who serve you like family, too … or else you’re never coming back.’ ”

Those fortunate enough to play Sand Hills are there for the golf, and only the golf. A cliché, I know, but nowhere is it truer. When Youngscap heard of the availability of 8,000 acres outside Mullen, he thought: golf course. And even he claims not to know what possessed him at that moment. “Fate,” his friend Crenshaw supposes. Given the isolation—it’s 60 miles to the nearest commercial airport, in North Platte—very few people on this planet would have entertained that thought for more than a minute or so. Youngscap had a measure of trouble raising the necessary funds, but it helped when Mike Keiser signed on the dotted line—without ever having seen the property. Keiser was buying up the land for his Bandon complex at about this same time. “We never regarded it as a race to see who would come first,” Keiser says. “We knew we were on the same track to do similar links-type golf courses.” But Bandon, delayed in part by permitting issues, would not open until 1999, four years after Sand Hills, and while Keiser was the last thing from certain that his remote Oregon venture would succeed, he acknowledges that the extraordinary publicity Youngscap earned early on “emboldened me.”

Youngscap, as decent and kindly blunt as the Nebraska stereotype, had a bit of an uphill climb convincing skeptical locals that he wasn’t going to plant some fancy, big-city-style clubhouse and course on their land, a place with artificial lakes and that piece of flora entirely missing from the sandhills landscape: trees. In addition to meeting with reluctant residents, at one point he had large photos of Royal County Down and other linksy British Isles courses taped up on the windows of the local newspaper office so the citizens of Mullen would realize how little the land would be altered. Coore credits him for those diplomatic efforts and says, “We all wanted it to be a complement to the culture and the way of life of the people in that part of America.” In time, local opinion evolved from suspicious to proud.

Youngscap had no trouble convincing Coore and Crenshaw— not quite so famous a design team before Sand Hills as they were after it—that the land was made for golf. Wanting to broach the idea in person, he paid the duo a visit during their work on Barton Creek in Austin. On that day, as Coore recalls, the color-blind Youngscap was wearing a bright pink shirt (“almost fuschia”) that he believed was tan, and he sat under a live oak for hours watching Coore grade a putting surface. Years before, Crenshaw had seen a magazine layout of Nebraska’s sandhills and the images had stayed with him, so he was immediately excited at the thought of building a course there. Two decades after his first visit, Gentle Ben still gushes over the landscape, calling it “intriguing ground” and “entirely unique” and asserting that Youngscap’s invitation to design a course there, on terrain that reminded him so much of his days across the pond playing the British Open, was “the best thing that ever happened to Bill and me.” His partner is equally grateful and thrilled. “The golf design business is just filled with clichés and bombastic statements,” Coore notes, “but I’m not sure I’ve yet to see anyplace else like the sandhills in terms of its individual identity.”

While Youngscap was raising money and courting local opinion, Coore and Crenshaw mapped out 136 possible holes in a series of visits that stretched across two years. They then whittled those down to the best 18. Asked if the pair faced any particular obstacles, Crenshaw says, “We were just fearful we would leave some good holes out.” And even after they’d chosen their final routing, he admits, they knew they’d left some great holes out there. (The suitability of the remote Nebraska land for golf has brought other courses to the region since Sand Hills was built. Nearby Dismal River GC, a private facility that opened in 2006, has designs by Jack Nicklaus and Tom Doak. The Prairie Club, 75 miles northeast of Mullen in Valentine, Neb., has courses by

Graham Marsh, Tom Lehman/Chris Brands and Gil Hanse.)

Pretty as the terrain can be on an August morning, the sandhills are next to useless for agriculture and not especially good for grazing cattle either. Between 1904 and 1917, thanks to the Kincaid Act, homesteaders were given 640 acres of sandhills land, no charge. Just about every one of them failed to make a living there and most of the tracts were abandoned. The rule of thumb for typical pastureland is one head for every three acres; in the sandhills the ratio is one to 35. Because of this, Youngscap paid only $150 per acre for the 8,000 acres he purchased, as compared with the nearly $2,000 an acre Keiser and partners paid for their treasure on the Oregon coast. Since so little earth was moved at Sand Hills (about 3,000 cubic yards, a minute fraction of what is done on most other venues), the course was built for the paltry sum of $1.2 million, roughly equal to what the land cost.

None of this, of course, was in my head as I led the day’s other lucky golfers around those 18 holes. I listened carefully to Brett’s sound advice. I studied the wind, admired the layout, did everything I possibly could to avoid the deepest bunkers and the waving grasses. As the first one o! in the early light on a marvelous Midwestern summer day, playing on fairways with hardly a divot, and on greens with barely a ball mark, I occasionally had the sense during those three hours that I’d passed away in my sleep and was playing some kind of otherworldly golf links, imaginary, fantastical, untouched. That I was living, as people say, the dream. To be honest, without exactly knowing why, I’d long wanted to play Sand Hills more than I wanted to play Augusta National or Pine Valley or Pebble Beach. Disappointment, I can report, was not part of the morning’s emotions.

The cabins are fine for a night or two; the food, as mentioned, was exceptional; and the clubhouse, which has a small collection of memorabilia on the walls (including a signed 18th-hole flag from the 1995 Ryder Cup at Oak Hill and a display of 100 different species of barbed wire), is well stocked and presided over by the friendly Jodi (“A traffic jam in Mullen is four carts in line at the grocery checkout,” she quipped). The place runs with the efficiency of a Coast Guard cutter. But what draws well-heeled members and their guests from all corners of the country isn’t the thought of a post-round dip in the nearby Dismal River, or a breakfast of biscuits and gravy at Big Red’s Bar and Grill in town, just the dream of playing golf in nearly untouched terrain that mimics the terrain where the game was born; the dream of pitting yourself against the deep grasses, false fronts, undulant fairways and massive bunkers (only two of which are manmade; the rest—locals call them “blowouts”—were already in place), the winds and elevation and quick greens.

I played the back nine in 40 strokes, a good score for me, but, memorable as it was, I cannot say that my round at Sand Hills was relaxing. The truth is, I didn’t want it to be. Every shot— every tee ball and approach, and almost every putt—was a mental and physical challenge, exactly what I was hoping for in the years I dreamed of playing this Nebraska sanctuary.

I drove away thankful but relieved, and strangely comforted, even though I’ll surely never play it again, that the exclusive little paradise called Sand Hills actually exists.