

The Preserve at Honey Creek Resort: Challenging, forgiving, enjoyable

By Michael Schaffer
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MORAVIA — The Preserve Golf Course at Honey Creek Resort is a combination of old and new intertwined to provide golfers of all skill levels an enjoyable experience.

The old are the numerous expanses of native prairie stands that separate and define most of the 18 holes. The new are the bent-grass tee boxes, fairways and greens and the overall approach the course architect took during the design phase to minimize the environmental impact and what the course superintendent is doing to promote environmental sustainability.

Kevin G. Norby, principal/project architect with Herfort-Norby golf architects based in Shasta, Minn. said the morning of Sept. 2 that the natural features and elevation changes on the approximately 180-200 acres covered by The Preserve lent itself to creating an environmentally friendly golf course that blended easily into the surrounding landscape.

"And in general what we do is we try to follow the topography and minimize moving dirt around because the more dirt we move the more expensive the golf course is going to be to build," Norby said. "And the more we can follow the natural terrain, the less expensive it is to build, the less expensive it is to maintain. And the more it just feels like it fits the lay of the land. So this was really an ideal piece of property for a golf course."

Some golfers might find teeing off on two par-5's to start the round somewhat different, but Norby said the topography dictated the placement of the holes for the 6,987 yard par-72 golf course rather than conforming to some stereotypical routing sequence.

"We did that here because our primary goal was to create the best golf course we could," Norby said. "And the lay of the land sort of dictates where the golf holes go. And you sort of have to find the golf holes out there. You don't go out and just create them and say, 'I'd like to have a par 4 here.'"

Norby said the goal was to create a course that would be challenging for advanced golfers and forgiving for the average golfer. And in the end, a course that would entice golfers of all skill levels to want to return.

"We're really in the business of selling fun here," Norby said. "We want people to enjoy themselves. We don't want them to lose a lot of golf balls. We want them to have some birdies and some pars."

And one way the average golfer can perhaps shoot a decent score is to take advantage of the five sets of tees on each hole. Tee off from the "tips," or black tees and cover the full distance of the course. Or tee off from the green tees and cover 6,598 yards, or from the silver tees and cover 6,269 yards or from the gold tees and cover 5,826 yards. The women's tee box covers 5,254 yards.

Strategies to create an environmentally sustainable golf course starts at the design phase and can include water management through programmable, modern sprinklers that minimize water consumption, the use of a growth regulator that controls grass growth and allows for less mowing, water and fertilizer, basins to collect rain that is used to water the golf course and collection areas where chemical or fertilizer run off can accumulate and not reach surface water.

"And frequently what we see is that there is actually less runoff getting to those bodies of water after the golf course because we create a lot of areas, what we call 'collection areas,' where water can accumulate on the golf course and percolate back into the ground and it never really gets a chance to run to the lake," Norby said. "So, I don't know if that was the case here, but typically that's what we see, is that golf courses actually are a benefit to the environment, because they attempt to control erosion issues."

In addition, Norby said, The Preserve has implemented a chemical and fertilizer management system, treating for weeds and insects on a reactive basis rather than proactively, which counters most people's intuition that golf courses are a major source of pollution.

"There is this misnomer that golf courses put a lot of pesticides and a lot of herbicides on golf courses. In fact, they really don't," Norby said. "And they put it on only in the amounts that it's needed."

The idea to adopt environmentally sustainable strategies is not new, Norby said, and dates back to 1980s and 1990s federal regulations.

"And ever since people really became more tuned in to the environ-



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The Preserve Golf Course is located at Honey Creek Resort State Park near Moravia in Appanoose County, Iowa. The resort's Web site is www.honeycreekresort.com.



The 5th hole at The Preserve is the shortest par 5 on the course at 536 yards.



The 3rd hole at The Preserve is the course's longest par 3 at 243 yards.



The 12th hole at The Preserve is a dog-leg to the left. Large prairie stands challenge golfers as they try to navigate the 365 yard hole.



A look across the course exposes native prairie, woods and hills making The Preserve challenging and beautiful.

ment, golf courses have been more highly scrutinized," Norby said. "And so I think golf architects have always tried to minimize dirt and reduce erosion and minimize the use of chemicals, but it's becoming even more prevalent now."

Norby said The Preserve came in at \$4.7 million, \$400,000 under the \$5.1 the state had budgeted for the course.

"Which made of course everybody at the state very happy," Norby said.

Out of approximately 850 acres at Honey Creek Resort State Park, The Preserve covers approximately 200 of those acres. Out of that 200, there are between 80 to 90 acres of maintained turf that requires water, fertilizer, pesticides and mowing, said the course superintendent, Erik Hanson. Some native prairie was removed during construction, but 22 acres of additional prairie was added back.

Hanson, 35, said the course is a member of and should receive Audubon's Classic Sanctuary Classification certification later this year or early next, which could make The Preserve the first in Iowa. He said the certification recognizes certain environmental process and requires an integrated pest management plan.

"You're looking for different ways to either build healthier turf, control insects and diseases, without just blanketing everything with a lot of chemicals," Hanson said. "And that also gets into our fertilizer practices, more applications at a lot smaller amounts, which then also helps reduce runoff."

Hanson, who has been The Preserve's superintendent for two years, said pesticide applications are made on a curative rather than a preventative basis.

"Meaning preventative, you're just out there every 14 to 21 days applying products," Hanson said. "This we wait until conditions are favorable for certain diseases or we actually physically start to see some of the diseases coming out and then we go and apply."

Even the way they water is not what most people would expect.

"All of our water is reclaimed water. We do not use any treated water here at all," Hanson said. "But to build stronger, healthier plants, you water heavy and less frequent. You're trying to promote stronger roots, which then in turn builds a healthier plants, which helps to fight off diseases well."

The Preserve uses slow-release fertilizers, which have a longer life and don't leach as bad, Hanson said. And the insecticides they do use are species specific, which interrupts the targeted insect's life cycle and is not harmful to other insect species.

Other processes that are part of an environmentally sustainable golf course includes establishing, maintaining or promoting native plantings and habitat for various native wildlife, like bat, bluebird and wood duck houses, Hanson said, and incorporating filter strips along the edges of water and adhering to proper water and fertilizer use.

"Sustainability, what you're trying to say is, this is a golf course, but the practices that we're doing are actually enhancing wildlife and the native community," Hanson said. "We're removing invasive species in wooded areas and in prairie areas, getting back to more of your native woodlands. It's just not just about cutting grass and making it look pretty and green."

"You actually have to do your part to create habitat as well as preserve and maintain," Norby said. "The days of building golf courses where you level everything and remove all the trees and put turf from fairway to fairway are gone. Today, we are taking fairway here and fairway here and the area in between that is frequently vegetated with native species or grasses that require low water consumption, low fertilizer. And so that's what you're seeing here, with the fescues, the prairie drop seed, the little blue stem and wildflowers that attract butterflies and birds."

David J. Newinski, associate designer with Herfort-Norby golf architects, following play Sept. 2 on the 18th hole and the front nine, said the course from the "tips" can be difficult.

"You have to keep it straight. And playing it the first time, it's always a little more difficult to get to the pins because you don't know exactly what the green surfaces are doing," Newinski, a four-handicap golfer, said. "But I think it's fair. If you hit good, straight shots, keep it close to where you are aiming, you're in pretty good shape."

Additional information about The Preserve, including rates, architect drawings and notes can be found at www.honeycreekresort.com.