

exclusive

BALLYNEAL, ARCHITECT TOM DOAK'S CREATION IN THE EASTERN COLORADO SANDHILLS, PORTENDS TO TURN THE WEE TOWN OF HOLYOKE INTO A GOLF MECCA

BY DAVID R. HOLLAND

WISPY, GOLDEN native grass waves on a wild prairie framed by colossal sandhills. Ribbons of green grass roll up a draw defined by serrated edges that on occasion funnel into blown-out bunkers that mimic the natural erosion that has occurred over millennia. The wind swirls and howls, blowing as if off a shoreline. Nary a tree dots the landscape. The fairways are fast, firm and as naturally rumped as an unmade bed.

It's a tableau that gets every golf purist's heart racing—one that suggests the way the game has been played for centuries in the British Isles.

But this isn't Machrihanish or Carnoustie. It's not even Sand Hills Golf Club, the famed "minimalist" course near Mullen, Neb., to which Coloradoans make five-hour pilgrimages.

"Nope," says Rupert O'Neal of Holyoke, located on Colorado's northeastern plains. "This is Ballyneal."

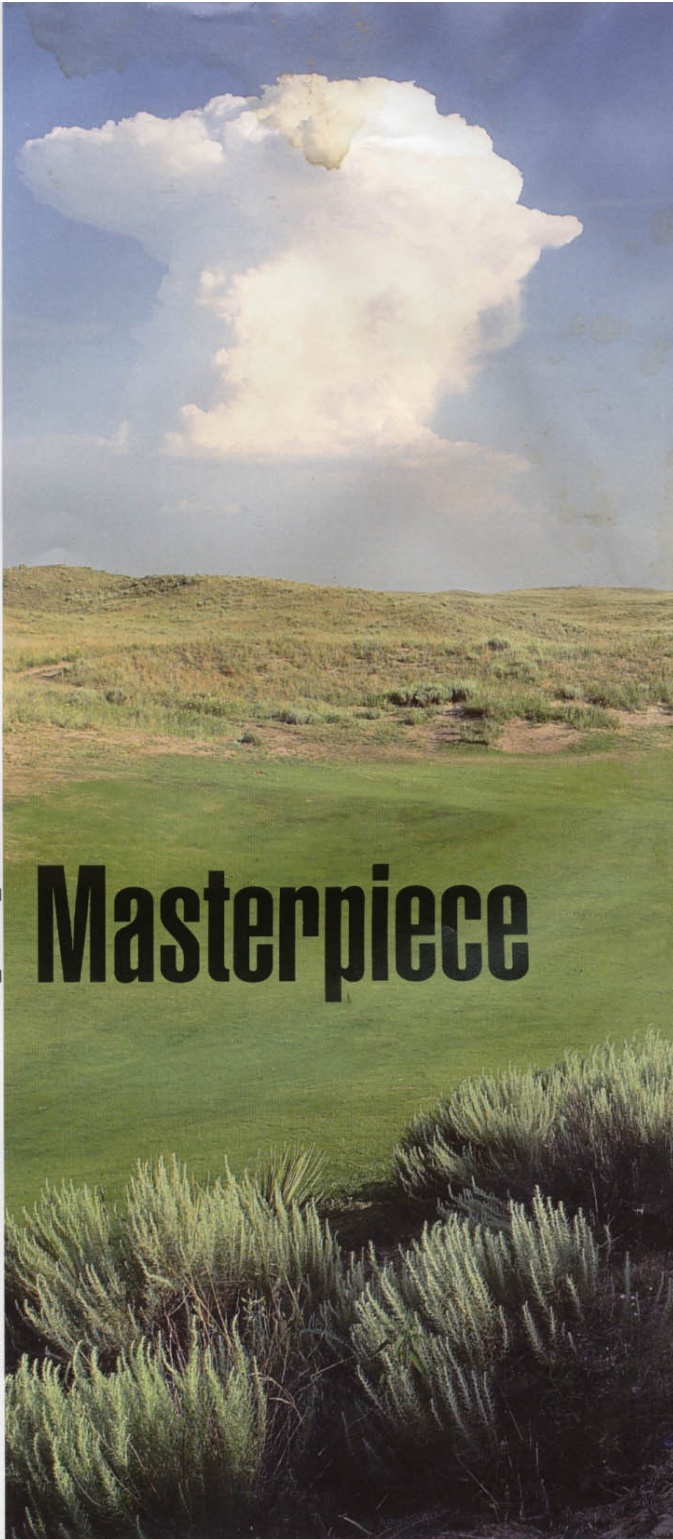
Sometime next summer Coloradoans are going to have their own links layout, playing through towering sand dunes—some rising 70 feet in the unspoiled, pure clean air west of the Nebraska border.

Minimalist Masterpiece

Ballyneal, a combination of the Irish word "bally," loosely meaning "town", and Neal, for O'Neal, is the dream of the O'Neal brothers, Rupert and Jim, who grew up in Holyoke, descendants of a farming family. Their vision is to create a singular golf experience in Colorado and to stimulate an economy with 75 to 80 non-agricultural jobs. An existing upland-bird hunting club, which Rupert founded, will add to the club's uniqueness.

Rupert says the idea to build the course originated when Jim, who's now 37 and currently the head golf professional at the Meadow Club in Marin County, Calif., was in high school and told his family that the land where local cattle grazed would be ideal for an old-style golf course. "We ignored him at the time," says Rupert. "But the idea flourished the more we watched British Opens on TV."

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOCK DURANCE/COURTESY BALLYNEAL





SHIFTING SANDS: Medium-sized dunes, yucca and prairie grasses frame Ballyneal's undulating, downhill 502-yard par-four 10th.



BUMPS AND RUSES: Both par-4s, the heaving 485-yard 13th, top, and 362-yard 14th dare you to play the ball along the ground.

Looking out over the property's more than 1,000 acres, to the east one sees massive rolling mounds of sandhills dotted by yucca, native grasses and flowering plants. Then the landscape transitions into smaller, broken, more abrupt-angled protrusions called "chop hills," which are about one mile wide and three miles long.

It's within these chop hills that golf-course architect Tom Doak, who designed award-winning Pacific Dunes in Bandon, Ore., has fashioned Ballyneal. The O'Neals entrusted Doak because they believed in his "purist" philosophy that includes game strategy and believed he could do justice to the sandhills topography.

"I was hearing incredible feedback about Pacific Dunes in Oregon in 2001," explains Jim. "People were traveling to Bandon Dunes and then getting to play the new course and saying it was even better."

Jim O'Neal first met with Doak in January 2002. "We felt the Doak design team was passionate about helping people discover the fun in the game that can be found most readily on a firm and fast sur-



face," Jim says. "They have taken our site and used its contours to make a course that will be wide open with many options for all levels to select their line of play. And the variety of bounces and rolls will make every round a new adventure."

"The trick was to ensure visibility from one landing area to the next, while keeping

greens and tees close together so the course can be easily walked," says Doak. "I think all the world's great courses are walkable."

In fact, his purist design features no cart paths. It will just be you and your caddy soaking up rural America, standing in a fairway listening to the larks and locusts, and letting your senses draw upon the silence.

"This is going to be a comfortable place to come and play golf for a couple of days or a week, and hopefully the members will be recharged and relaxed when they leave," says Rupert. "We might have one golf cart for someone with a medical problem, but we will encourage him to get fit enough to walk the next time."

The expressed intention at Ballyneal is not to have an artificially lush, green look. A mixture of fine fescues and Colonial bent grass will carpet the treeless landscape, with no water, and no boundary or hazard stakes.

Ballyneal's success hinges on strong reviews to attract a national membership—the winning formula at Sand Hills. Even though Doak says there's no way to predict what courses will be ranked on the world stage, he does think Ballyneal could produce his company's best work yet and says that he's been spoiled during the last five years with amazing sites to work with.

Pacific Dunes came along in 2001, and two beauties Down Under have also been acclaimed: Cape Kidnappers in New Zealand and Barnbougle Dunes in Tasmania. Another project is Sebonack Golf Club, a collaboration with Jack Nicklaus that rolls across 300 Long Island acres near the National Golf Links of America and Shinnecock Hills Golf Club.

Ballyneal will play at par 71—7,027 yards from the tips. Back tees on holes six, 10 and 13 might not be advertised, bringing the total down to 6,885 yards. Fairways are wide and generous to allow for the

windy conditions, and misdirected shots can be either played or deemed lost in the native areas. The wild-looking, blowout bunkers will use native sand and will evolve over the years in the windy environment.

The course opens with a classic risk-reward 382-yard par four. "The fairway angles away from you right to left, and you

exclusive

bite off as much as you want over a big bunker 175 yards out," says Jim, who will serve as the club's director of golf. "You are sitting up on a ridge and can see the vista of the chop hills and several holes."

The third is a 138-yard par three that shoots into a picturesque dunes amphitheater where dramatic bunkers explode out of dunes in the sloping terrain and encircle the green. The prevailing wind is a crosswind, so if you aren't pinpointed to this 4,500-square-foot green, you are scrambling.

Doak is partial to short par fours, and the seventh is a beauty. It's about 350 from the back tees and includes a large bunker into a dune about 220 yards out. The green, with a tricky upper tier, defends the hole. It is an unusual, oblong shape fitting into a natural saddle between dunes. The high side is left, and anything hit here will bounce right. Drift too far right and a couple of massive bunkers can collect your shot.

The eighth is a par-five 525-yarder playing into the wind with a fairway that's wide for the tee shot and a massive cross bunker 300 yards out down the right. The safe play is down the left side, but the fairway narrows to 20 yards past the cross bunker. The green's most receptive area is front and left, but go right and the green rises six feet.

The par-three 11th is 200 yards and somewhat intimidating from the tee. The left side drops into no-man's land, but there's lots of bailout right, which you can't see very well from the rear tees.

The fairway is wide and generous on the 13th, a 485-yard par four from the back tees. Hit it between the left fairway bunker and two center bunkers and your angle to the green is excellent. But as Jim says, "Everything depends on how the ball rolls and where it ends up. It could be a blind approach or a short iron shot into the green. You never know until you walk up to your ball."

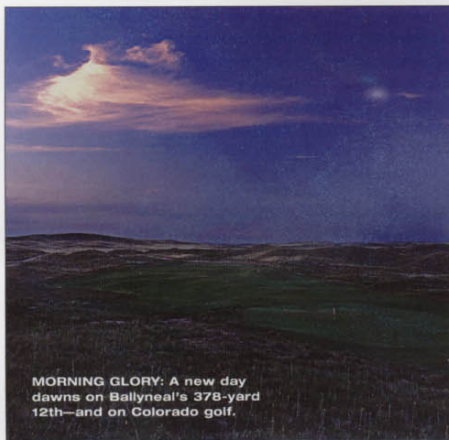
If you crave scenic par threes, hole 15 is for you. It's a downhill 230 yards situated in a natural depression surrounded by sandhills and a punchbowl green. A large sand ridge defends the left side and defines an upslope that can stop shots 40 yards from the green.

The final two holes are beauties, with the 17th being Doak's favorite. It's a 470-

yard par four with the tee shot playing over a large dunes bowl, doglegging slightly right. You can see it all from the tee as a broad ridge—with a bunker at its base—moves into the fairway and bunkers sweep toward the green.

The finale is a 452-yard par four that is flatter than most of the holes and slightly uphill. To the left there's a natural blowout dune, and the green is large and subtle, guarded by bunkers front and left.

The O'Neals' aim is to find wealthy aficionados of links golf who will pay an initiation fee of \$50,000 and approximately \$5,000 for annual dues. Many players will arrive via private jets at Holyoke's existing municipal airport. O'Neal envisions around 7,000 rounds a year, and amenities will



MORNING GLORY: A new day dawns on Ballyneal's 378-yard 12th—and on Colorado golf.

include a 10,000-square-foot clubhouse, a restaurant directed by Frank Bonanno of Denver's Mizuna and Luca D'Italia fame, 12 four-bedroom cottages for overnight use, and access to O'Neal's bird-hunting club.

Course construction began last September, and cost a mere \$2.4 million. The O'Neals' on-site right-hand is Rich Cummings, Rupert's partner in his dog breeding business, and the founding members include Max and George Caulkins III, sons of Vail Resorts founder George Caulkins, who died this spring. Max is heavily involved in Ballyneal's day-to-day operations.

"While it would be presumptuous and ridiculous for us to compare Vail and Ballyneal, George and I were attracted to the

clear parallels between this project and what our father encountered when he and his group started building a ski resort from the ground up in the late '50s and early '60s," says Max Caulkins. "One of the constant recollections of the original founders was a total absence of greed. They just wanted to build a cool place to ski with their friends. That's exactly what we are trying to accomplish with Ballyneal; a place to play golf, hunt and enjoy good company."

Still, Caulkins isn't just throwing money around. The brothers have played Sand Hills, Augusta National and Whistling Straits in Kohler, Wis. "We looked at the Ballyneal land and thought, 'Herb Kohler paid, what, like \$40 million to create a golf topography that already existed in Holyoke? This might not be such a crazy idea after all!'"

Ballyneal does have some Nebraska neighbors coming. Doak protégé Gil Hanse is designing The Prairie Club in Valentine. Dismal River Club, a Nicklaus design financed by four Denver businessmen, is underway just a few miles from Sand Hills.

Rupert O'Neal half-jokes that state pride is at stake. A University of Colorado alum, he admits it "ticks me off that Nebraska had a Sand Hills and we didn't."

Not only will Coloradoans save money on gas—Ballyneal, only 186 miles from downtown Denver, cuts the drive to Sand Hills in half—but they'll experience the work of arguably the world's most sought-after course architect and the timeless spirit

of the game, the way it was intended to be played. **AG**

Contributing Editor David R. Holland is author of The Colorado Golf Bible (coloradogolfbible.com).

BALLYNEAL GOLF AND HUNT CLUB
216 S. InterOcean Avenue, Holyoke
970-854-5900
ballyneal.com
7,027 yards, par 71
Ballyneal will be fully private when it opens next year.
The course has not yet been rated.