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COURSE REVIEW

Ballyneal Golf & Hunt Club: Colorado's sand hills course could be the best of all

By [David R. Holland](#), Senior Writer

HOLYOKE, Colo. - The caddie pointed to a spot on one of **Ballyneal Golf & Hunt Club's** thousands of fairway humps some 20 yards off the fescue putting surface of No. 7's green - a tricky, multi-tiered expanse that culminates a circuitous dogleg left, 352-yard route.

"Knock it down right here," the caddie said. "And it should roll right up by the pin."

Welcome to Ballyneal - Colorado's sand hills gem - a 7,147-yard, par 71 on the northeastern plains, a mere 12 miles from the Nebraska border, in an area rich with cornfields. This minimalistic work of art, designed by traditionalist Tom Doak, was the dream of two brothers, Rupert and Jim O'Neal, who grew up in a farming family in the tiny outpost of Holyoke, population 2,300.



Carve your drive around this blowout in the seventh fairway and you might reach the green, 350 yards away.

it is perfectly smooth on the greens. Putts roll true, so much you have to worry about speed when you are above the hole."

Ballyneal's greens are massive and tempestuous - relentlessly sloped with some friendly backstops, ridges and bold rolls - but maintained at a speed you can manage.

Creativity is the word. **Flying** a towering shot into a green is a learning experience - your Pro-V1 doesn't respond like it does on an over-watered bentgrass putting surface. Your mind has to visualize a lower trajectory shot or a bump-and-run that will take the contours and then hugs the ground and rolls to the pin.

How does Ballyneal compare to Nebraska's sand hills courses?

Doak, who admires **Sand Hills Golf Club** near Mullen, Neb., said it was inevitable that the two would be compared. But Rupert thinks Ballyneal's wall-to-wall fescue (blend of five different fescues and some colonial bent) sets his golf course apart from the other sand hills courses like **Dismal River Club**, Sand Hills, and **Wild Horse Golf Club**. Those golf courses have bentgrass greens.

Ballyneal is a course full of memorable holes and you will get to see all of them on foot - there are no carts (for golf), no cart paths, no signs giving specifics of the hole, and few tee markers - just ask your caddie or tell him what distance you would like to



Ballyneal's seventh hole is a favorite with multi-tiered green and a myriad of approach options.

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"We are just about golf and having fun," said Rupert, whose farming experience gave him knowledge of the soil conditions and climate to grow what is a true links experience grass - fescue.

Brother Jim, a golf professional at **The Meadow Club**, north of San Francisco in Marin County, was the one who actually first dreamed that the acreage they called "chop hills" would be perfect for a British Isles-styled layout.

"One learns quickly that this type of course takes a variety of shots," Rupert said, "This sand creates great drainage and supports the fescue. And we think



Ballyneal Golf & Hunt Club's scenic 145-yard par-3 third is surrounded by blowout bunkers in a natural amphitheater.

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Holyoke Golf Articles

Ballyneal Golf & Hunt Club: Colorado's sand hills course could be the best of all

Tabbed by Golfweek as being among the top 10 modern courses in the U.S. and lauded by Golf Magazine as being among the greatest courses of the last 50 years, ta [...]



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play.

Stunning describes the third hole at Ballyneal - a par 3, 145 yards, that dives into a rugged amphitheatre with muscular blowout bunkers exploding out of dunes in the sloping terrain that encircles the green. Unless you spin the ball like Tiger Woods you will most likely be on the back fringes of this 4,500-square-foot green.



David R. Holland/WorldGolf.com
This massive natural blowout guards the right side of Ballyneal's uphill 362-yard par-4 ninth.

"The best courses in the world have great short par 4s," Doak said.

And the seventh, a favorite of many, mirrors that. It is 352 from the back tees and includes a large bunker into a dune about 220 yards out. The green, with a tricky upper tier, is the defense of 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 in front and in the rear.

But if you hit a perfect drive, drawing around that fairway bunker you can reach the hole with the driver.

Ballyneal Golf & Hunt Club: The verdict

If you yearn for diversity - something different than your typical city park golf course then Ballyneal is it - purist heaven. But most of you won't be able to access this experience. Opened in September 2006, membership will cap out at 130 and only 24 spaces remain available.

Golfweek's Top 100 Modern Courses List (1960 to present) tabs Ballyneal No. 8 in the U.S. and Sand Hills Golf Club No. 1. I'm thinking the two could even be reversed. *Golf Magazine* just named Ballyneal No. 24 greatest golf course of the last 50 years. *Golf Digest* doesn't even list Ballyneal citing lack of golf carts and the fescue greens. Can you say "clueless"?

Ballyneal amenities include more birdies

Ballyneal Golf & Hunt Club offers members access to upland game bird hunting, dominated by the ringneck pheasant, which is also name to one luxurious bunk house - Ringneck. Meadowlark and Terrapin are the two other [lodges](#) (Wi-Fi, flat screens, etc.) and fine dining is found in The Turtle Bar and Dining Room.

The driving range and putting and chipping greens are excellent and caddies of varying skill levels are mandatory.

Out-of-state members are only two and a half from Denver International [Airport](#) or can fly privately into Holyoke Airport. Prospective members are welcome.

Pray for [economic recovery](#), because the O'Neal's would entertain the possibility of a public 18 in the future. Proposed name is Grateful Dunes, because of Rupert's love of the Grateful Dead.

If it happens they should name the course restroom "Dead Head."

October 1, 2009

David R. Holland is an award-winning former sportswriter for The Dallas Morning News, football magazine publisher, and author of The Colorado Golf Bible. Before launching a career as a travel/golf writer, he achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force reserve, serving during the [Vietnam](#) and Desert Storm eras. Follow Dave on Twitter at twitter.com/David_R_Holland.

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