

Course Review: Gearhart Golf Links

There is no debate that Gearhart Golf Links is the oldest course in Oregon. In fact, it's likely the oldest course west of the Mississippi. What has been debatable was whether the word "links" truly belonged in the title — though, with a major 2013 restoration, Gearhart has changed a great deal since Don and Pete played there in the fall of 2008. So this review has been revised, with far less specifics and more of the general story, at least until we have the chance to get back there again.

The lore surrounding the history of Gearhart Golf Links doesn't always match date-wise, but somewhere between about 1888 and 1891, a small group of homesick Scotsmen supposedly buried tin cans into the area dunes and used sticks to knock golf balls into the cans. For these Scots, the legend goes, the landscape at Gearhart was strongly reminiscent of their native, ancient courses of St. Andrews and Montrose, and "thus began Gearhart as three holes of true links-style golf amongst the seaside meadows that characterize the North Oregon Coast." That may be a bit of a stretch, but there's no denying it caught on, and by 1892, golf was a regular pastime for guests of the Hotel Gearhart on this three-hole course just across the street.

Gearhart went from three to nine holes pretty quickly, then expanded to a full 18 in 1913. Today the golf course is about 5900 yards from the white tees and 6300 from the blacks (no blues), and stretches for about a mile from north to south, with the overall width equal to about three fairways. You can easily walk the course, but that's not to say it's "flat." You can correctly say the elevation stays constant, but Gearhart was literally built on top of sand dunes, so there's a lot of rolling up-and-down terrain. That means you actually walk farther and harder than the listed distance, and a flat lie is rare.

One great aspect of building on sand dunes is the drainage. When the local park district built Chehalem Glenn, our home course, it paid an extra \$200,000 per nine to sandcap the fairways — which makes Chehalem Glenn perhaps the best winter play course in the Portland area (quick plug). Gearhart does that naturally, so while the idea of winter



golf on the Oregon Coast may seem absurd, you can do so at Gearhart.

Understand that there are no actual ocean views at Gearhart — though you can see a portion of the almost adjoining Highlands Golf Course from the front nine. You do get coastal air, coastal winds and lots of seagulls flying about on most days. Gearhart's greens are medium size and medium speed. The bunkers use real, live Oregon coast sand, not pretty white sand, so it plays heavy out of the traps. There's even a pot bunker on one hole.

Gearhart did have quite a few trees during its recent history, leading to the contention about whether it was a "links" course or a "links-style" course. Links courses don't have trees, so "links style" was the more accurate description. However, the course underwent a major renovation in 2013 that saw most of those trees removed. The shore pines weren't part of the course originally, they were actually added as a Depression-era WPA works project. Many of them suffered from poor "tree health" over the past several years, but now they are apparently gone — as the owners are determined to make Gearhart a true links course. We are anxious to go back and see.

The clubhouse at Gearhart is old and historic; that's it as you come up No. 18 in the photo above. The on-site Sand Trap has good food, though you often need to be a little patient. Of course, nearby Seaside has lots of good eating options as well.