

Course Review: Vernonia Golf Club

With the goal of “breaking 70” before the end of the year, Don and Pete hit the road in NW Oregon on Dec. 31 to visit the 9-hole courses in Vernonia and St. Helens. And no, “breaking 70” doesn’t refer to our stroke scores, but rather the number of courses left to complete The Quest. By the end of the day, that number dropped from 70 to 68.

Vernonia is located in the foothills of the northern Coast Range in Columbia County, some 25 miles or so from Forest Grove, where Don grew up. Subsequently, Don had played the Vernonia Golf Club a handful of times in his youth, though not since the late 1970s. Vernonia itself is a quaint family town of about 2,100; the local economy has always been logging-based.

If you last played at Vernonia some 30 years ago and returned today, as Don did, the course would look much the same other than taller trees. But such wasn’t always the case. The course went through some transformations over the years, including the addition of a second nine at one point in time. But a couple of years ago the family that owned Vernonia Golf Club lost its patriarch and put the course up for sale; local resident Nick Zavales and his brother bought the property in May 2012 and returned it to the original 9-hole layout that was first established in 1929.

When we arrived at VGC around 10 a.m., there was no one there and the clubhouse was locked up tight. But Nick quickly arrived to inquire if we were there to play, opened the doors and got us on our way — with a pair of nice logo balls. He warned us jokingly to beware of elk. We didn’t see any of the beasts in the flesh, but we certainly saw plenty of “evidence.” Indeed, Don had to move his ball on the first green to avoid a pile of elk scat.

For Dec. 31, the course was remarkably playable. Areas that looked as though they should be soggy weren’t. Nick was quick to admit that was due more to the winter’s lack of rain than it was to the course draining well; usually, he said, the layout would be pretty wet in December. The course measures about 2700 yards and plays to a par of 35.



The 353-yard, par 4 5th hole was our collective favorite. The raised tee box requires you to shoot through a fairly narrow window off a small bluff toward a dogleg, ambling hole. A great variety of both evergreen and deciduous trees line the hole. We both remarked how beautiful the hole would be in spring, summer or early fall when the deciduous trees had leaves. We are anxious to return one day for a look-see.

No review of our day at the course would be complete without this: unique upon our arrival in the clubhouse parking lot was a large charter fishing boat with “Vernonia Golf Club” emblazoned upon the side (see photo). It turns out Nick and his brother, in addition to being golf course entrepreneurs, also run a fishing charter. That immediately piqued Pete’s interest; he likes to catch fish. (Don likes to eat fish, but doesn’t feel the need to actually chase them down himself.) Pete and Nick also engaged in conversation about fishing the Nehalem River in and around Vernonia. Indeed, there’s a nice fishin’ hole right off the ninth tee box.

Oh, incidentally, Nick isn’t the only one who will happily greet you upon your arrival. There’s a young black lab that frequents the parking lot and the ninth green who insists that you pet him. He belongs to the neighbors, but Nick doesn’t run him off. That’s just not how things are done in Vernonia.