

New Mexican

Miracle

Rockwind Community Links, located in the tiny town of Hobbs, is more than one of the country's best municipal courses. It's the blueprint for golf's future.

BY JON RIZZI | COURSE PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY ROBERTS

“THE PUMPJACKS WERE our trees,” remembers Stan Sayers of the oil-rich badlands near his hometown of Hobbs, New Mexico. He laughs. “That sounds like it could be right out of a Jason Aldean song.”

The town in which Sayers, the 2009 Colorado Section PGA Teacher of the Year, first learned his profession sits 10 minutes by pickup from the Texas border and 90 minutes from Lubbock, Midland and Odessa. This is *Friday Night Lights* country, as one look at Watson Memorial Stadium suggests.

The home of the Hobbs High Eagles football team holds 15,000—ten times the student body and nearly half the town's total population. Yet Hobbs' two state championships on the gridiron pale in comparison to its 17 in boys' hoops—more than any 5A school in New Mexico history, with the most recent coming last spring.

Hobbs, however, is also golf country. In 2012, the Hobbs High boy's team won its sixth state title—an impressive feat when you consider the team's home course, the 6,700-yard municipal Ocotillo Park, dated to 1955. It may have sported “the only trees in Hobbs, but you could blast it anywhere and score,” says the team's coach, Victor Rotunno. “The

pushup greens were super-small and flat.”

Sayers, who played “hundreds of rounds” at Ocotillo before leaving Hobbs more than 30 years ago, says two qualities defined that course. One was the cement-like caliche that was so ubiquitous that “everyone knew the course as “The Rock.” The other was the wind. “From February 15th to May 15th you'd wake up to a perfect day,” he recalls, “and by 9:15 A.M. the leaves would start to move and before long it would be blowing 20 miles an hour until dark.”

How appropriate, then, that after the Hobbs city council approved funds for a sorely needed renovation of Ocotillo in 2012, it soon rechristened the course, which would open for play last May, “Rockwind.”

In addition to a new name, the \$12.5 million revamp brought a wholesale overhaul of the facility—the course layout, irrigation, clubhouse, restaurant and golf shop—and, significantly, a philosophical change in how the community views a golf course.

The result, Rockwind Community Links, is beyond anything Stan Sayers or anyone who'd previously played the “the Rock” could ever have imagined.

At Ocotillo, for example, they'd never



have seen a young family enjoying a picnic at a table by the fifth tee, or men and women walking a 3.3-mile trail along the course's perimeter.

They'd never have watched 16 people simultaneously practicing on the range because the one at Ocotillo only had five spaces.

Nor could they have imagined the gratification that comes from having a separate, challenging nine-hole par-3 course (Li'l Rock) and a city-funded chapter of The First Tee.

They wouldn't have delighted in the Three Pig Sandwiches, blackened tilapia wraps and loaded sidewinder fries dished up in the Rockwind Grill. Nor would they have seen the groups of families coming from church for a late breakfast.

Their wildest dreams could not have included Rockwind's spacious golf shop, appointed by PGA Head Professional Linda Howell and brimming with brand merchandise and a welcoming atmosphere worthy of a top-flight resort.

And they most decidedly could not have envisioned a layout Fred Couples, Natalie Gulbis and Lee Trevino all described as

"phenomenal" and *Golf Digest* ranked as one of the 10 Best New Courses of 2015.

All this and more (including concerts and activities on the many open green spaces) transpires at Rockwind Community Links on a regular basis.

In the same spirit that St. Andrews becomes a public park on Sundays, Rockwind serves as an asset to the entire population, not just the 10 percent of residents who play golf.

"We're not saying that we've invented something new," explains Andy Staples, the Scottsdale-based course architect who trademarked the phrase "Community Links." "We're saying this is a forgotten part of golf—what it means to a city and a community."

Staples arrived in Hobbs at the invitation of Ocotillo Superintendent Matt Hughes, with whom he had worked at Thanksgiving Point in Lehi, Utah. Repairing more than 300 leaks a year on an annual basis, Hughes had been pushing hard for a less wasteful irrigation system. He knew that Staples, in addition to being an extremely gifted golf architect, had a strong background in sustainability, energy

OLD SCHOOL: Touches like "chocolate drops" and a rock wall add a classic character to Rockwind's 16th.



ROCKING THE ROCK: The 561-yard 4th; assistant pro Camren Bergman with charge Kelen Owensby.

efficiency and water conservation.

“Andy came and met with the city manager (J. J. Murphy) and pitched him on the Community Links idea,” Hughes remembers. “He hooked him on it like a big ol’ bass.”

“I basically said he should be looking at this comprehensively, that golf is integral to the quality of life. Here was an opportunity to grow the game and provide a reason why someone might move to Hobbs,” Staples remembers. “Every time we went in front of the city council, it was a 7-0 vote.”

Rockwind represents Staples’ first completed Community Links project. During his initial foray in Los Alamos, northwest of Santa Fe, he converted “a room full of tomato-throwers and anti-tree-movers” but the project ran out of funding.

That wouldn’t happen in Hobbs, which, according to Hughes, brings in \$5-6 million a month in gross receipts and has \$100 million in reserves. “It’s the third strongest economy in New Mexico,” he boasts. The city built Rockwind without incurring a

dime of debt, which, Hughes says, “takes so much of the financial pressure off.”

Rockwind’s rates reflect that. Depending on the time of day, 18-hole non-resident adult rates run \$20-\$30; seniors pay \$20-\$24 and juniors, \$12. For Hobbs residents it’s 50 percent less. Rockwind encourages walking; carts cost \$11-\$16 per person.

The course is a magnificent walk and ride, with short distances between each hole’s bentgrass greens and five teeing areas. Staples based his routing on Muirfield, The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, where the front nine loops the perimeter in a clockwise direction, cordoning a back nine that routes counterclockwise and incorporates a 14-million-gallon lake on holes 10, 11 and 18. The lake connects to a latticework of irrigation streams threading through the course.

“The routing affords flexibility,” Staples says. “You easily can do a six-hole loop using holes 1, 2, 15, 16, 17 and 18, or a nine-holer by crossing the channel between holes 4 and 14.” Rockwind also features far-forward



PHOTOGRAPH BY ION RIZZI

“Express Tees” on each hole. Based on the idea that beginners who only have 60 percent the swing speed of experienced players, these tees cut each hole by 40 percent. “This allows a beginner to experience the course as he or she would when he or she become accomplished,” he explains.

Staples combined this progressive approach with old-school touches like “chocolate drops” behind the 16th green (à la Garden City Golf Club) and multiple “coffin bunkers” (St. Andrews). A punchbowl green funnels your approach on the fifth, and the influences of Golden Age architects like Charles Blair Macdonald and Seth Raynor and the underappreciated Midwestern duo of William Langford and Theodore Moreau appear throughout.

Rather than fight the rocks and wind, Staples embraced both and deftly wove them into the design.

He stacked the chunks of excavated caliche into low rock walls that appear throughout the course. Some border holes, others define them. One serves as a “viewing bench” on the first tee; another strategically bisects the fairway on the short par-5 16th.



RARE BIRD: The 245-yard par-3 15th is the No. 1 handicap hole.



HOBBS HUB: Rockwind's modest clubhouse now buzzes with social activity.

"It's funny; if it's not perfectly stacked, people think it's historic," Staples muses.

Studying the prevailing wind patterns, he routed six holes to play with the wind, another six to play against it, and six with different directions of crosswind. To keep sand from blowing out, he designed flat-bottomed bunkers with grass faces. Believing "golf is more fun when it's a ground game," even the holes with water carries, such as the par-3 10th offer bailout areas.

Speaking of Par 3s, Staples purposely sited the 998-yard nine-hole Li'l Rock course right at the entrance to Rockwind so "the first thing people see are kids and families playing." The holes range between 65 and 187 yards, and a round sets non-residents back \$9 and residents \$6. Juniors pay \$4 and

\$3, with replays running \$1 to \$4. It's a blast.

Both the Hobbs High School and New Mexico Junior College teams practice at Rockwind, affording invaluable experience as they prepare for state tournaments. Their presence also encourages kids in The First Tee of Southeastern New Mexico.

For Parks and Recreation Director Doug McDaniel and Rockwind Golf Professional Camren Bergman—both of whom grew up playing Ocotillo—the new course couldn't be a better selling point for residents and visitors.

"I haven't heard one negative comment about the golf course from anyone," McDaniel says during an after-work get-together on Rockwind's patio.

Bergman, who starred at Hobbs High

and played collegiately at New Mexico JC and UNM, loves the facility's transformation and the opportunity to mentor young players like 9-year-old Kelen Owensby, who joined us for a Friday afternoon round.

"Pride is the best way to put it," Bergman says. "When we grew up we had nowhere to go to get better. There was a cap. These kids will have every option we never had. That's why I'm so passionate about this project."

Citing the number of visitors who come to eat, get married and not even play golf, Bergman jokes that "We've quickly become the most scenic place in Hobbs."

Still, is it worth making the trip from Colorado? The answer is an enthusiastic yes. The town's best restaurant, Pacific Rim, is owned and operated by the same folks, Joe and Sarah Yue, who run the Rockwind Grill. Carlsbad Caverns and the UFO Museum in Roswell are easy drives. And after a Friday round in the fall, just follow the bright lights to the football stadium.

Best of all, you'll play a challenging course and see a model for golf's future. You don't even have to have grown up there, like Stan Sayers did, to appreciate it. ●

Jon Rizzi is the editor of *Colorado AvidGolfer*. rockwindgolfcourse.com; 575-397-9297.

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