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MONTANA'S LONGEST DRIVE: USING A
TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SKILLSET
TO DESIGN, DEVELOP, AND PROMOTE
GOLF IN MONTANA

Sean Ryan

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MONTANA'S LONGEST DRIVE: USING A TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION SKILLSET TO DESIGN, DEVELOP, AND PROMOTE
GOLF IN MONTANA

by
Sean Ryan

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Technical Communication

Montana Technological University

2019



Abstract

The purpose of the Montana's Longest Drive project was to apply the core competencies of Technical Communication and those skills to design, develop, and promote golf in Montana. This project demonstrated a mastery of the Technical Communication program outcomes of Writing & Speaking, Visual Design, Solution Design, Organizational Design, Project Development & Execution, Content Development, and Advocacy for the purpose of gaining access to play all of the golf courses, promoting the project, and fostering the relationships between golfers in Montana and the courses they call home.

Keywords: Golf, Travel, Montana's Longest Drive, Montana, Public Relations, Digitally Focused Campaign, Social Media, Blog

Dedication

I wish to thank my family and friends for their support as I took this dream and made it into a reality. This project and the summer of 2018 was only made possible because of my family and friends all across Montana who helped me do something truly extraordinary and share it with so many others. A special thank you goes to my mom and dad who helped every way they could to send their son on an 87-day and 8,507-mile adventure.

Acknowledgements

As there are a great many people involved in the planning and execution of this project I would like to acknowledge and thank them

My graduate committee, consisting of Dr. Chad Okrusch (chair), Dr. Glen Southergill, Dr. Michael Masters, and Jon Wick have been active in encouraging me, following my progress, and always available for advice and inspiration.

Second, the numerous golf professionals, course managers, and golfers who answered my letter, reached out to assist with this project, hosted me for a round, and made this dream into a reality.

Third, the friends that I made while on all the courses across Montana who offered to take me in for a night, reinvigorated me with the energy and desire to keep on schedule, and made 87-days on the road feel like home.

Lastly, the sportswriters, broadcasters, and media members who helped share the story of Montana's Longest Drive with people all over the world through articles, news stories, and interviews all along the way.

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Table 1 Core Competency & Methodology Matrix4

1. Introduction

Montana's Longest Drive's mission was to document the story of playing every golf course in Montana in one summer through social media and daily articles. Montana's Longest Drive started with the question: "Is it possible to play every golf course in Montana in one summer?" and snowballed from there. The idea grew into a plan to visit every golf course in the Treasure State, play golf with a local, and write about the experience. Starting on May 9th of 2018, Montana's Longest Drive began as the project to play every golf course in Montana with new playing partners at every stop telling the stories of the people I played with, where to get a good burger and beer at every stop, and what a full summer of living on the road playing golf in Montana was like.

As a project, Montana's Longest Drive required an immense amount of work in multiple disciplines pertaining to Technical Communication. From the design of the project's logo on signs, business cards, and in digital formats that required digital publishing and design expertise to go along with an understanding of visual rhetoric. Montana's Longest Drive required research and understanding into digital publication, mass media promotion, website development, and public relations. The creation and integration of a social media presence that promoted interaction and website views along with keeping followers informed and up to date with the progression of the trip. Montana's Longest Drive also required a heavy amount of document design and database management work. The introduction letter that was sent to every course in Montana in the spring prior to the trip had to be professional in format and accurately tell the story and intention of the project in a concise manner. This letter also required the research and creation of a database that contains the names of every course professional, golf course name, and golf course address in the state of Montana.

2. Project Objectives

The Montana's Longest Drive project required an expectation of project objectives and goals that would serve as demonstration of the mastery of concepts and practices in Technical Communication. These core concepts of Technical Communication are intended to highlight the professional and academic skills that are in high demand professionally. The Technical Communication core competencies as defined by Rainey, Turner, and Dayton (2005) and Baehr (2015) are listed as:

1. Writing & Speaking
2. Visual Design
3. Solution Design
4. Organizational Design
5. Project Development & Execution
6. Content Development, Management, and Production
7. Advocacy

These core competencies of Technical Communication are a foundation for the project objectives that I set while planning Montana's Longest Drive. As a complete project, Montana's Longest Drive required intensive knowledge and understanding in each of these core concepts and the objectives laid out would comprehensively demonstrate a mastery of these skills and practices.

2.1. Project Objectives

- Create and develop a visually appealing logo for print and online publishing, marketing, golf apparel, and brand development

- Design and disseminate a media packet that includes details about Montana's Longest Drive for members of radio, print, and television media for use in news stories and interviews
- Design and publish a user-friendly website for Montana's Longest Drive that will house the itinerary, contact information, media packet, and blog posts of the project
- Design business cards for Montana's Longest Drive
- Design, revise and mail out a letter to all the head golf professionals at the golf courses in Montana to reach out and get correspondence started for tee times and playing partners
- Design and implement a social media presence for promotion of Montana's Longest Drive on Facebook and Instagram
- Successfully document the journey of playing every golf course in Montana in one summer with a local playing partner at every golf course through blog posts and photography

Montana's Longest Drive required a daily display and mastery of the core competencies of Technical Communication in order to achieve and meet the objectives outlined in the beginning of this project. The next sections of this document will explain some methodology required to meet the initial objectives designed to display the mastery of the core competencies in Technical Communication.

Table 1 Core Competency & Methodology Matrix

Core Competency	Methodology	Achieved
Writing & Speaking	Blog posts on MontanasLongestDrive.com, radio, television, and print interviews	95 total blog posts, dozens of newspaper articles, television stories, and radio interviews
Visual Design	Montana’s Longest Drive Logo	Apparel, Stickers, Car Magnets of Logo
Solution Design	User-friendly website & functional media packet	Over 18,000 total visitors to Montanaslongestdrive.com
Organizational Design	Design of social media platforms and website interconnectivity	750 Facebook “likes” and 772 followers, 442 Instagram followers, 685 Twitter followers
Project Development & Execution	Database design, correspondence, planning, organization, and public relations work	Created a database of every golf course in Montana for correspondence, executed an itinerary and travel plan
Content Development, Management, and Production	Social Media posts, blog post publishing, radio, television, and print interviews	148 Instagram posts, 95 blog posts written, 100+ Facebook posts

Advocacy	Became the sole representative and advocate for Montana's Longest Drive	Played 113 public and private courses across Montana in 87 days
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3. Communication and Public Relations Methods

3.1. Logo Design

Designing the logo for Montana's Longest Drive was the most important first step in the process of making this project into a reality. A visually appealing and easily distinguishable logo for Montana's Longest Drive was a primary focus at the start of the process. This logo would be affixed to every piece of information being sent out from Montana's Longest Drive and would stand for the brand.

In the earliest attempt at creating a logo for Montana's Longest Drive the common theme was that the logo had to have a green background to tie in with the game of golf's hidden themes of using the word and color green (green grass, putting greens etc.) Additionally, it was clear that the logo had to feature a flagstick like you see on golf courses to make Montana's Longest Drive's intention of being about the game of golf clear to those who looked at the logo.

In the final version of the logo (see in Figure 1 Montana's Longest Drive Logo) using the distinct outline shape of the state of Montana as the green background made the logo tie in uniquely with the state. Even before the word "Montana's" is read by the reader, they will have recognized the shape of the state and attributed the project to be connected with Montana.



Figure 1 Montana's Longest Drive Logo

After the logo was designed and I had received feedback from peers in the Technical Communication Department, I added the logo to every material that would be disseminated from Montana's Longest Drive, along with clothing that I would be wearing during the trip. Having a logo affixed to everything I wore when I went to a golf course communicated with shop staff and other golfers that Montana's Longest Drive was at their golf course today.

Another important consideration for the logo design of Montana's Longest Drive was for it to be easily embroidered on clothing that I would be wearing while on the trip. Sticking to three primary colors of green, white, and black, the Montana's Longest Drive logo would be affordable and easy for embroidery shops to stitch into the polos, jackets, and hats I wore throughout the duration of the summer and distributed for promotional purposes.



Figure 2 Montana's Longest Drive Hat

3.2. Planning

The planning of the trip was an intense exercise in organizational and time management skills. With such a high number of golf courses stretching all over the state, and hundreds of miles in between some stops, the task of trying to map out a path and itinerary throughout the state was a confusing and exciting adventure.

My intention for the trip was to start and finish in my hometown of Great Falls, Montana. With the beginning and end of my trip in one location, the trip would bring the story full circle around the state of Montana.

The organization of the itinerary first started with creating a list of course names, locations, address, phone number, and that course's golf professional's name. This list was compiled using the PGA's online database of golf course professionals and course listings, the Montana State Golf Association's listing of courses subscribing to the MSGA's handicap calculator and database, google maps searches, and prior knowledge of courses otherwise not

listed. In addition to these resources, a friend of mine named Gerry Veis who has been attempting to play every golf course in Montana since 1993 had a very complete listing of courses with which I was able to cross reference with my own.

While planning out the itinerary for the trip, I had to calculate the time required to get to the destination, time it would take to play the golf course, the number of miles between each golf course, as well as the weather patterns for the state.

It was my intention to begin my trip in Great Falls and then attempt to cover the eastern side of the state first before the summer temperatures and infamously vicious mosquitoes of northeastern Montana would make golfing unbearable. Flooding around the state of Montana also presented challenges with the scheduling because certain courses that would have been played earlier in the trip while I was driving across the Hi-Line had to be skipped and were played near the end of my trip because they were under water.

Another concern when it came to the trip schedule were tournaments that were being hosted around the state. I had to cross reference between my initial schedule and the schedule of tournaments and events the MSGA publishes to their website so no conflicts would prevent me from playing a course on the intended day.

The method I used for scheduling and planning the travel around Montana was creating a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in conjunction with plotting the points of the trip on a large map of Montana. The process of plotting the golf courses of Montana was an important step in the visual process of itinerary planning. Using the map as a visual tool, I created my excel spreadsheet and calculated the driving distance and times between golf courses around the state as a preliminary attempt to find the most effective route to play all the courses. The creation of this itinerary was a key component in the project's development and execution. The itinerary was eventually

uploaded to the Montana's Longest Drive website and continuously updated as weather, travel, and various other conflicts popped up. This itinerary which can be seen in Appendix A: Travel Itinerary was the second most visited site page, garnering over 1,800 hits on its own.

3.3. Query Letter

The letter to the courses across the state of Montana was the first point of contact between Montana's Longest Drive and the golf courses. It was the project's initial introduction to the courses about the intention and purpose of the project. Critical components of the letter were an introduction of myself as the creator of Montana's Longest Drive, the intention and purpose of Montana's Longest Drive, links to the MontanasLongestDrive.com website, and the request for accommodations from the golf course.

After writing a draft of the letter, I consulted with the Head Golf Professional at the Butte Country Club, Josh Walsh PGA, a future recipient of the letter, as to what elements he would expect in the letter. Some of his recommendations that were included in the final version of the letter were detailing my own collegiate golf career, the intention of this project to promote the game of golf across Montana, and to highlight the courses that I played throughout the summer by writing detailed stories about them and publishing them on my website and on social media. Rhetorically, the query letter for Montana's Longest Drive wanted to convey and sell this project from the first impression. An important part of having a strong first impression with the letter was having the letter printed and mailed using high quality paper and envelopes that included the Montana's Longest Drive logo in the return address area of the envelope. In the initial paragraph of the letter, I felt it was important to introduce myself as the creator of Montana's Longest Drive and explain my own golfing and educational background. After that opening paragraph the next step was to sell the main ideas and concepts behind this project and explain what the driving

force behind Montana's Longest Drive was. The final paragraph of this query letter was the selling section. After explaining who I was and the purpose of the project the last paragraph introduced the idea of a partnership between Montana's Longest Drive and the asked for access to the course, help with booking a tee time and making a connection with someone to play golf with, and a discounted or comped greens fee while I played that golf course.

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Recipient Name

Street Address, City, ST ZIP Code

Dear Recipient,

My name is Sean Ryan and I am the creator and author of Montana's Longest Drive. I am currently working on getting my Master of Science in Technical Communications at Montana Tech in Butte. I played collegiate golf for the [Oreadiggers](https://www.oreadiggers.com) as an undergraduate while earning my Bachelor's Degree in Professional and Technical Communication with a concentration in Public Relations from Montana Tech and was a four-time All-State selection in high school. Born and raised in Great Falls, Montana I learned to love the Treasure State and most importantly the people of Montana.

Montana's Longest Drive's mission is to write a book that promotes golf in Montana by telling the stories of the people who play golf in Montana. Montana's Longest Drive started with the question: "Is it possible to play every golf course in Montana in one summer?" and snowballed from there. The idea grew into a plan to visit every golf course in the Treasure State, play golf with a local, and write about the experience. So, starting May 10th, I will play every golf course in Montana with new playing partners at every stop telling the stories of the people I play with, where to get a good burger and beer at every stop, and what a full summer of living on the road playing golf in Montana is like. All the while sharing the stories and photos from every golf course through social media and on the Montana's Longest Drive website.

I'm reaching out to you to inform you of this project, seek the opportunity to play your golf course, visit with the people who make your course unique, and promote the golf community you have in your area. Access to courses and green fees are two key parts that will determine the success of this project. Would you consider partnering with me and Montana's Longest Drive by providing access, referral of who to play with at your club, and a discounted or comped green fee? I look forward to hearing back from you and walking into your clubhouse one day with the opportunity to add the next chapter to Montana's Longest Drive.

Sincerely,

Sean Ryan

Figure 3 Montana's Longest Drive Letter

In addition to drafting the letter, another important step in the process was to research and create a database in Microsoft Access with the names of course managers and the mailing address for the courses. The building of this database required a vast amount of research with some of the smaller courses in the state having very little online profiles or listed mailing addresses. Using the listing of the courses on the Montana State Golf Association website, the PGA of Montana's listing of golf professionals around the state, and a variety of other resources, I created the most comprehensive mailing database for the golf courses of Montana.

3.4. Website

One of the first steps of creating a website for Montana's Longest Drive was securing the url: www.MontanasLongestDrive.com.

The website added validity and became a one-stop shop for people to check the itinerary, learn about me, learn about the project, read blog posts, and contact me. The website was important because it would be the main resource and communication component of the project. With the website design skills that I had garnered in the Technical Communication program, I began by designing the layout and functionality of the Montana's Longest Drive website through the WordPress content management system. WordPress, a blogging and website design software, was a platform that I had previous experience and success with in other web design projects.

Included in the process of designing the website was the theme of having the menu bar located along the top of the website's main page that would allow for easy navigation between the different pages of the site. WordPress provided a variety of templates that had various nuances in terms of the architectural design, layout, and navigation of the website. In addition to the main navigation menu, I felt it was important to include links to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram along the right side of the content on the website. WordPress's plugin features allowed

for these links and sidebars to work seamlessly between social media and the website. These links would help drive traffic, increase followers, and link the different components of the project together as a complete unit related back to the project of telling the story of golf in Montana.

Additional benefits of using the WordPress platform for the Montana's Longest Drive website were the website analytics and mobile app that WordPress provides its users. WordPress analytics for Montana's Longest Drive were a valuable tool in the process of gaining readership, viewers, and having information more readily available for those interested in learning more about the project. WordPress was able to instantly analyze and update me when website traffic was increasing, which articles were being read the most, what search terms were being used to find the Montana's Longest Drive website, how website traffic was being directed and referred from Facebook, search engines, Twitter, Instagram, and various media outlets linking to the website in news stories about the project. Another benefit of WordPress analytics was the ability to see the amount of website traffic coming from other countries. Thanks to WordPress analytics, I was able to see that the website was read in 41 other countries like (Romania, Ireland, South Africa, China, and India). WordPress also provided a mobile app that enabled me to examine analytics, make website updates and corrections, and interact with readers easily from my mobile phone. The mobile app for WordPress was convenient and useful while working on the project on the road.

With the logo as the header logo for the website the website navigation was divided into different pages such as: Itinerary, Media Packet, About the Author, Contact, About Montana's Longest Drive, and Help Fund the Drive.

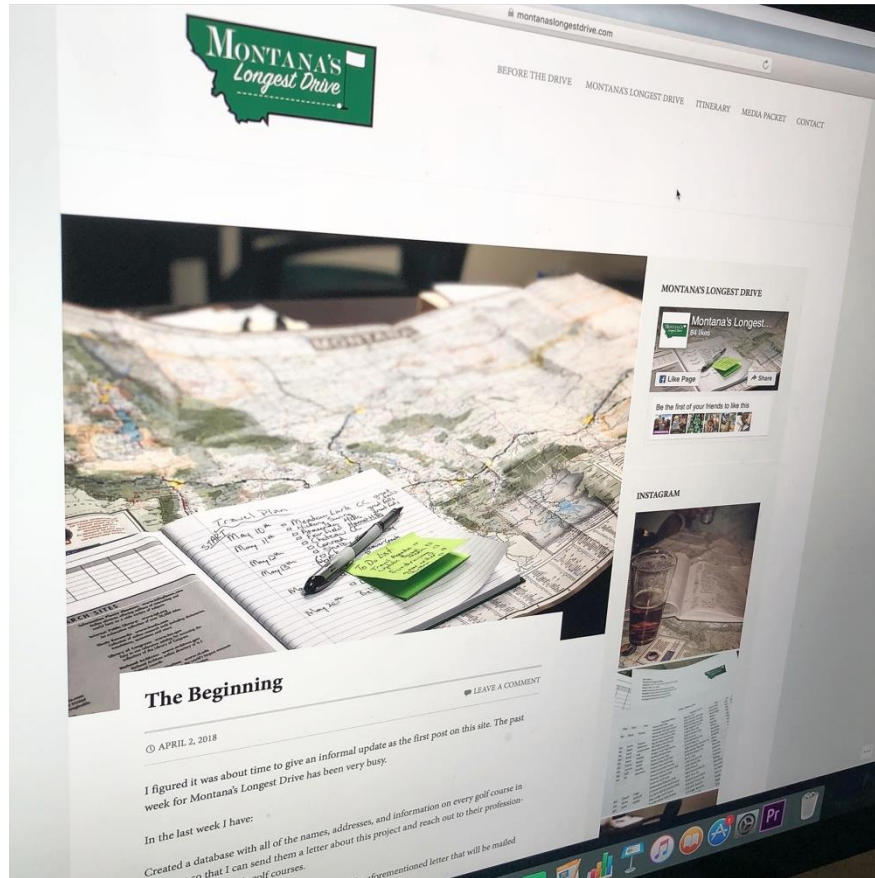


Figure 4 Montana's Longest Drive Website

3.5. Social Media

Social Media was a critical tool for Montana's Longest Drive from the beginning of the project. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provided unique opportunities to grow the brand and reputation of the project along the way. Having an active profile on each of these very different platforms provided outlets to publish, share, post, and tag different locations throughout the trip that would keep followers informed and reading blog posts along the way. Additionally, social media was a way to interact with both the hosting golf courses, playing partners, and the media. Using social media as both a publishing platform and as a public relations tool to spread the message and brand of Montana's Longest Drive played a large part in the success of the project and its positive reception around the state.

3.5.1. Facebook

The Montana's Longest Drive Facebook page was an important component in the social media profile of the project. The Facebook page was one of the primary publishing outlets for the blog posts, photos, and website updates of Montana's Longest Drive. The Facebook page was a live link to the website's content as well as an easy way for people to follow along with the continual updates of the project.

Facebook also provided a messaging and communication platform that allowed followers of the project to ask questions about Montana's Longest Drive, provide feedback, and reach me immediately with ideas or input.

The Montana's Longest Drive Facebook page featured the project logo, a link to the website, my personal contact information, an About section detailing the project, as well as photos, posts, and videos that were posted from on the road. In all, Montana's Longest Drive received 750 Facebook likes and was followed by 772 people on the social media platform.

3.5.2. Twitter

Twitter was another important social media tool for Montana's Longest Drive. Using the hashtag #MontanasLongestDrive after tweeting information or photos on the project, people were able to follow the hashtag to other platforms like Facebook and Instagram and get a comprehensive look at the project. Using my personal Twitter profile (@Mr_SeanRyan) that has 685 followers, including members of the media in the state of Montana, which included the following short bio, "Just a guy playing every golf course in Montana & writing about the number of miles walked, miles driven, golf balls lost, and beers drank #MontanasLongestDrive", Twitter provided an excellent platform to publish facts and observations from the trip.

One of the most successful uses of Twitter for Montana’s Longest Drive was the weekly posts that updated followers on the statistics I had kept track of during the project. The last tweet updating followers on the statistics for Montana’s Longest Drive Figure 5 Twitter Statistics for Montana's Longest Drive was retweeted 5 times, received 98 likes, made 14,213 impressions, and was engaged with 567 total times.



Figure 5 Twitter Statistics for Montana's Longest Drive

In addition to the tweets that updated followers on the statistics I was tracking while on Montana’s Longest Drive that gained tremendous traction, other tweets from my Twitter profile also received a large amount of interaction and likes along the way. An example of this and one of my favorite photos from Montana’s Longest Drive was of four-time Montana State Special Olympics Champion Robbie Hayes, 8-year-old Max Milton, and myself after playing golf at Polson Bay Golf Course on July 19, 2018. This tweet received 26 likes, made 1,493 impressions, and was engaged with 201 total times.



Figure 6 Tweet with Robbie Hayes and Max Milton

Another example of a tweet with Montana's Longest Drive that helped expand the project's profile around the state was from @406mtsports, a collection of sports stories from the major newspapers around Montana, which profiled Montana's Longest Drive. This tweet and the

story that was written by Luke Shelton of the Montana Standard described the trip of Montana's Longest Drive and provided great press on the project. This tweet received eight retweets and 17 likes.



Figure 7 406 Sports Tweet

Twitter as a social media tool was invaluable to the Montana's Longest Drive project, especially when it came to public relations and marketing. By using Twitter to engage with the public, post stories, and share photos from the road Twitter was extremely vital to connecting and engaging with people all across Montana and around the world.



Figure 8 MSGA Congratulations Tweet

3.5.3. Instagram

Instagram was another valuable asset in the social media component of Montana's Longest Drive. Instagram provided a great opportunity to share some of the photographs I had been taking at every stop along Montana's Longest Drive. For Instagram, I created an account named @MontanasLongestDrive where I shared photos from every golf course on the journey.

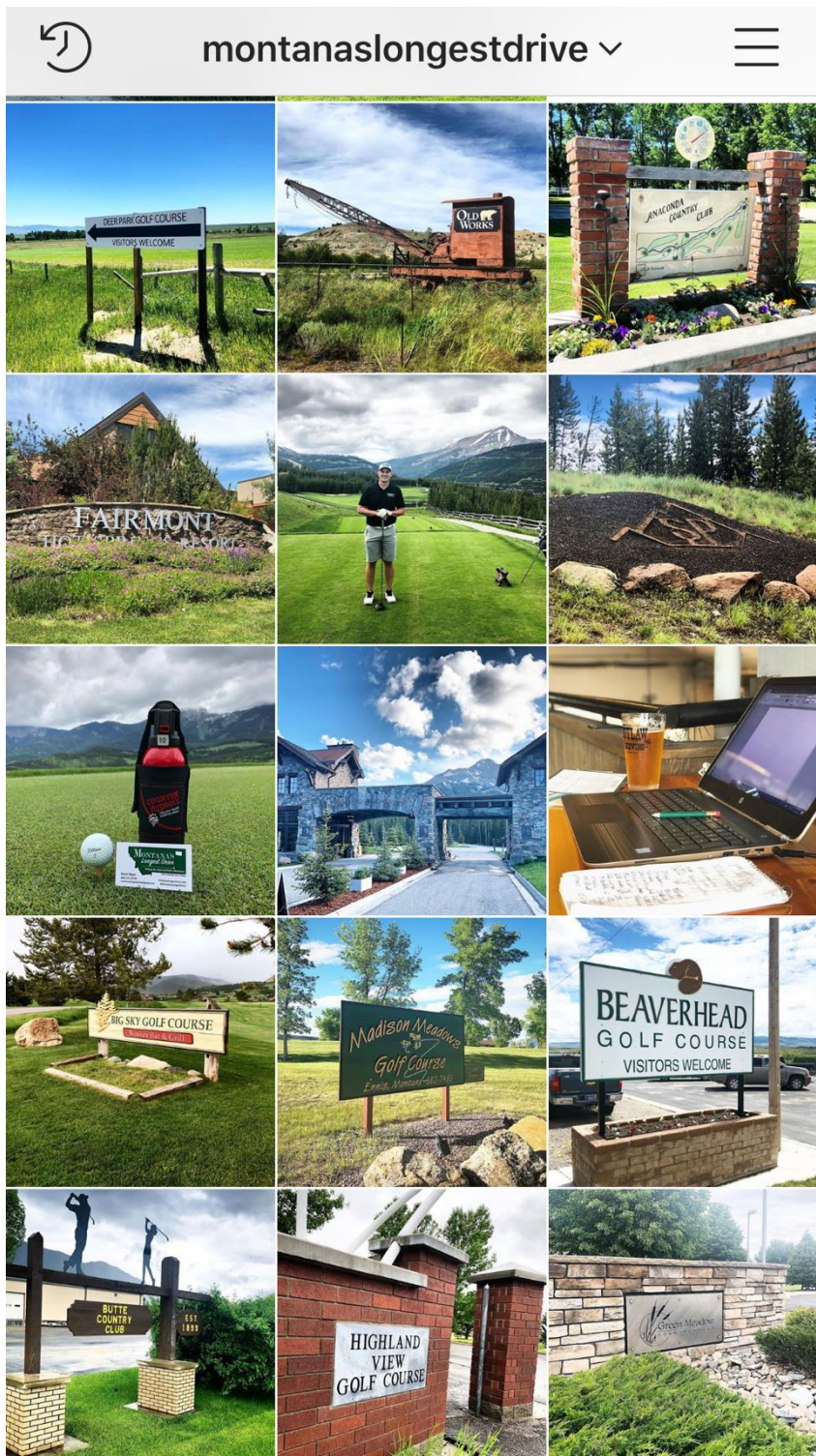


Figure 9 Instagram Feed

In all, Montana’s Longest Drive’s Instagram account featured 148 original posts and 448 followers. The Instagram feed from the account especially focused on sharing a photo of the

sign, signature hole, or logo from every golf course that was visited on the trip. An important component to posting each photo was tagging the location of the golf course and linking that photo with the social media accounts of the hosting golf course. This location tag helped to drive traffic to not only the Instagram feed but also the Montana's Longest Drive website.

3.6. Media Packet

The media packet that was published on MontanasLongestDrive.com was an important component and resource for the promotion of the project through mass media. As a technical document, the media packet included several critical elements like contact information for the project and myself, the logo for the project, taglines used to promote the project on social media and online, an about the author section, an about the project section that included key facts in a bulleted list that was easy to read and pull information from, and an itinerary for the project.

The intention of the media packet was to act as a frequently asked questions section of the website for the members of the mass media. Media members could use this media packet as a resource to find information on the project, on the author, and where the next stop on the trip would be. This enabled different media outlets in TV, radio, and print media to document the project at critical junctures like the beginning of the trip, the 50th course of the trip, the $\frac{3}{4}$ mark of the trip, and the culmination of the trip. This resource was used by multiple TV stations, radio stations, and newspapers to write factually accurate stories to promote Montana's Longest Drive around the state of Montana and beyond.

4. Results

Montana's Longest Drive as a comprehensive project met and exceeded my wildest expectations and demonstrated a mastery of Technical Communication skills laid out as core competencies defined by Rainey, Turner and Dayton (2005) and Baehr. (2015).

As a project, Montana's Longest Drive was a demonstration of the mastery of the critical skills essential to Technical Communication. Beginning as early on as the naming of the project and the designing of the Montana's Longest Drive logo, this project tapped into a variety of different areas of expertise in communication. As an exercise in Technical Communication, Montana's Longest Drive required daily work in the fields of Writing & Speaking, Visual Design, Solution Design, Organizational Design, Project Development & Execution, Content Development, Management, and Production, and Advocacy.

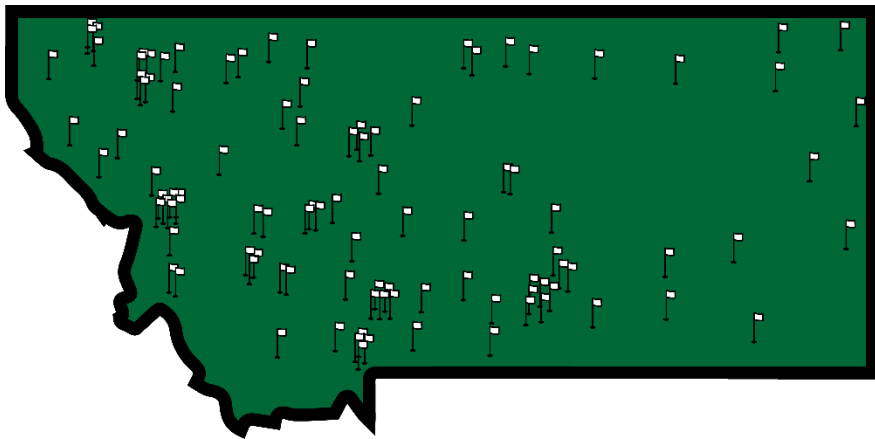


Figure 10 Montana's Longest Drive Map

The results of Montana's Longest Drive are expansive and cross a variety of different platforms. The first outcome of Montana's Longest Drive was the successful creation and development of a visually appealing logo for print and online publishing, marketing, apparel, and brand development. The Montana's Longest Drive logo became an icon for the project that was displayed whenever a news story was written or published about the project.



Figure 11- Montana's Longest Drive Logo on Hardhat

The second accomplishment of Montana's Longest drive was the successful creation, design, and dissemination of a media packet that included the details about Montana's Longest Drive for the members of the radio, print, and television media for use as a reference for news stories and interviews. The media packet for Montana's Longest Drive helped ensure the key facts and information of the project was accurately shared by the news media.

The third accomplishment of Montana's Longest Drive was the design, publishing, and upkeep of the Montana's Longest Drive website. The website was a proverbial one stop shop for information and stories from the project. The user-friendly website, supported and preliminarily designed by WordPress, housed the itinerary, contact information, media packet, and was home for the blog posts of the trip. The website additionally provided important links and snapshots of the social media profiles of the project.

The fourth accomplishment of Montana's Longest Drive was the designing and printing of business cards for the project. The business cards, which incorporated the logo, my contact information, and the address for the website. This business card was an important piece of the project that helped me to introduce the project to new people I met on the journey. Using the business card as a tool to break the ice with new people at new golf courses I hadn't previously played became almost second nature. Additionally, handing out this business card enabled people to stay connected with the project through the website and social media accounts.

The fifth accomplishment of Montana's Longest Drive was the query letter that was sent to every golf course and golf professional in the state. Along with this accomplishment came the creation of a database of the golf courses in Montana, golf professionals, and their contact information. This query letter generated a high response rate which was the beginning of the relationship building between this project and the golf courses of Montana. In addition to the responses from the query letter, a benefit of the correspondence with the courses was the high rate at which courses comped or discounted the greens fees for my round.

The sixth accomplishment of Montana's Longest Drive was the design and implementation of a social media presence that was used to promote Montana's Longest Drive around the state of Montana. The social media accounts for Montana's Longest Drive (Facebook, Twitter & Instagram) became continual advertisements for the project. People who were already following the project on social media could like, share, and retweet the daily posts of photos, stories, and statistics with their followers and friends and in turn those would turn into more likes and followers for the project. Social media became a very valuable tool for the Montana's Longest Drive project and its publicity.

The seventh accomplishment of Montana's Longest Drive was the successful documentation of the journey of playing every golf course in Montana in one summer through blog posts, photography, and a social media presence. Montana's Longest Drive earned a great amount of distinction around the state because the people following the project would read and see the daily updates from the road. The project was documented not only through blog posts, but also the photos and post updates from the social media accounts. Additionally, the itinerary for the project was continually updated online so that followers could see an accurate listing of the courses and when they would be played.

The most important accomplishment of Montana's Longest Drive was the achievement of playing 113 courses in 87 days across 8,507 miles of highways and dirt roads across Montana. Without the Technical Communication skillset, Montana's Longest Drive would not have been possible. It was through a continuous determination to spread the message about Montana's Longest Drive, both in person and through multimedia, that this project really found its footing and gained traction. In all, Montana's Longest Drive took me on the most amazing summer golf trip of my life. It took me to Scobey, Montana, where I played 9 holes with Phil Audet and Jerry Raaum, and to the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana where I hit a tee shot over a bear, and eventually back to Great Falls where it had all begun. Montana's Longest Drive was a testament to using communication skills as the tools necessary to turn a dream into a reality.

The lasting conclusion of Montana's Longest Drive is that that the project is not complete. A consistent theme of Montana's Longest Drive was the storytelling of the trip and trying to capture the spirit of the 87-day and 8,507-mile experience. The next step for Montana's Longest Drive is to write a novel describing the experiences, telling the stories, and sharing with the public the best times and the most trying times of the trip. This project was dedicated to a

family friend who passed away from Pancreatic Cancer in October of 2017 who had always wanted to go on a golf adventure of his own. Every round and mile that was logged in the summer of 2018 was with Jay Baumberger's obituary and photo in my golf bag. So, the next step and pursuit for Montana's Longest Drive is going to be writing the book to tell all the stories from what I will always consider the best summer of my life.

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6. Appendix A: Travel Itinerary

Date	Town	Golf Course	Playing Partner	Holes
Wednesday, May 9, 2018	Great Falls	Hickory Swing Golf Course	Kelly Gilligan	18
Thursday, May 10, 2018	Great Falls	Meadowlark Country Club	Taylor Kuntz	18
Friday, May 11, 2018	Great Falls	Anaconda Hills Golf Course	Hans Fehres, Steve Whisler	18
Saturday, May 12, 2018	Fairfield	Harvest Hills	Jon Schenk	9
	Choteau	Choteau Country Club	Reid Flemming, Josh Larson	9
	Conrad	Pondera Golf Course	Patrick Heinen	9
Sunday, May 13, 2018	Shelby	Marias Valley	Sean Gilligan	18
Monday, May 14, 2018	Malta	Marian Hills Golf Course	Roger Amundson,	9
	Glasgow	Sunnyside Country Club	The Swansons	9
Tuesday, May 15, 2018	Wolf Point	Airport Golf Club	Brock Copenhaver, Troy Halverson	9
Wednesday, May 16, 2018	Scobey	Scobey Golf & Country Club	The Audets	9
Thursday, May 17, 2018	Plentywood	Plentywood Golf Club	The Ordahls	9
Friday, May 18, 2018	Sidney	Sidney Country Club	Benji Berg	18
Saturday, May 19, 2018	Travel Day			
Sunday, May 20, 2018	Fort Benton	Signal Point Golf Course	Scott Meissner, Stinsons	9
Monday, May 21, 2018	Lewistown	Judith Shadows	Keithon Walter	18
	Lewistown	Pine Meadows	Keithon Walter	9

Tuesday, May 22, 2018	Weather Day*			
Wednesday, May 23, 2018	Glendive	Cottonwood Country Club	The McPhersons	9
Thursday, May 24, 2018	Baker	Lakeview Country Club		9
Friday, May 25, 2018	Miles City	Miles City Town & Country Club	Chase Tait	9
Saturday, May 26, 2018	Broadus	Rolling Hills Golf Course		9
	Colstrip	Ponderosa Butte Golf Course		9
Sunday, May 27, 2018	Forsyth	Forsyth Country Club	Kevin Hoover	9
	Hardin	Fort Custer Golf Course	Chris Seder	9
Monday, May 28, 2018	Weather Day*	Weather Day		0
Tuesday, May 29, 2018	Billings	Briarwood Golf Club	Sean Benson	18
	Billings	Exchange City Par 3		18
Wednesday, May 30, 2018	Billings	Yellowstone Country Club	Sean Ryan, Nate Royer	18
Wednesday, May 30, 2018	Billings	Hilands Golf Club	Sean Ryan, Nate Royer	9
Thursday, May 31, 2018	Billings	Lake Hills Golf Course	John Alberta	18
Friday, June 1, 2018	Billings	Eagle Rock Golf Course		18
Saturday, June 2, 2018	Billings	Yegen Golf Club		18
Sunday, June 3, 2018	Huntley Project	Pryor Creek Golf Club-Elmer Link	Clark Swan, Ryan Swan	18
	Huntley Project	Pryor Creek Golf Club-Johnny Walker	Todd & Dell-Kay	18

Monday, June 4, 2018	Laurel	Laurel Golf Club	Jeff Noble, Tayler Noble	18
Tuesday, June 5, 2018	Red Lodge	Red Lodge Mountain Resort	Scott Cain	18
	Columbus	Stillwater Golf Course	Blake Haug	9
Wednesday, June 6, 2018	Big Timber	Overland Golf Course	The Campbells	9
Thursday, June 7, 2018	Harlowton	Jawbone Creek Golf Course	Greg Wasson	9
	Roundup	Pine Ridge Golf Course	Tannar Cummings	9
Friday, June 8, 2018	Gardiner	Rising Sun Golf Course		18
	Livingston	Livingston Golf Course		9
Saturday, June 9, 2018	Bozeman	Black Bull Golf Club	Nick Obie, Marcus Geer	18
Sunday, June 10, 2018	Bozeman	Valley View Golf Club	Mark Houser	18
	Bozeman	Riverside Golf Course	Jeff & Caleb Bellach	18
Monday, June 11, 2018	Bozeman	Cottonwood Country Club	Jeff Bellach	18
Tuesday, June 12, 2018	Bozeman	Bridger Creek Golf Course	Laney Seymour	18
	Three Forks	Head Waters Golf Course	Tayler Noble	18
Wednesday, June 13, 2018	Townsend	Old Baldy Golf Course	Bakkums, Robischon, Demars	9
	White Sulphur Springs	Arrowhead Meadows Golf Course		9
Thursday, June 14, 2018	Smith River	Heaven on Earth	Vic Anderson	9
Friday, June 15, 2018	Helena	Fox Ridge Golf Course	The Hystads	36
Saturday, June 16, 2018	Helena	Bill Roberts Golf Course	Bennett MacIntyre	18
	Helena	Norweigan Wood	Jerek Wolcott	9

Sunday, June 17, 2018	Helena	Green Meadow Country Club	Nick Deitzen	18
Monday, June 18, 2018	Butte	Highland View Golf Course		18
Tuesday, June 19, 2018	Butte	Butte Country Club		18
Wednesday, June 20, 2018	Dillon	Beaverhead Country Club	Greg Fitzgerald, Kevin Engellant	18
	Ennis	Madison Meadows Golf Course	Steve Maxwell	9
Thursday, June 21, 2018	Big Sky	Big Sky Golf Club		18
Friday, June 22, 2018	Big Sky	The Reserve at Moonlight Basin		18
Saturday, June 23, 2018	Big Sky	Spanish Peaks Mountain Club		18
Sunday, June 24, 2018	Big Sky	Yellowstone Club	Les the Caddy	18
Monday, June 25, 2018	Anaconda	Fairmont Hot Springs Resort	Bob Green	18
Tuesday, June 26, 2018	Anaconda	Anaconda Country Club	Caleb Stetzner, Jackson Wagner	9
	Anaconda	Old Works Golf Course	Sparky McLean	18
Wednesday, June 27, 2018	Deer Lodge	Deer Lodge Golf Course		9
Thursday, June 28, 2018	Deer Lodge	Rock Creek Cattle Company	Scott Meissner, Calen Spencer	18
Friday, June 29, 2018	Hamilton	Hamilton Golf Club	Robbie Porch Jr.	18
Friday, June 29, 2018	Stevensville	Whitetail Golf Course		9
Saturday, June 30, 2018	Hamilton	Stock Farm	Chuck Shonkwiler, Harley Paugh, Dave Pyron	18
Sunday, July 1, 2018	Missoula	Missoula Country Club	Bryan Porch, Robbie Porch Jr.	18

Monday, July 2, 2018	Missoula	Canyon River Golf Club	Gary Chumrau, Bill Hall	18
Monday, July 2, 2018	Missoula	University of Montana GC	Taryn & Carlan Campbell	9
Wednesday, July 4, 2018	Missoula	Highlands Golf Club	Mike O'Connell	9
Thursday, July 5, 2018	Missoula	Ranch Club GC	Harley Paugh	18
Friday, July 6, 2018	Frenchtown	King Ranch GC	Troy & Derek Wolff	9
Saturday, July 7, 2018	Missoula	Larchmont GC	Justin Galliher	18
Sunday, July 8, 2018	Pablo	Silver Fox Golf Course	Dillon Delaney	9
Monday, July 9, 2018	Ronan	Mission Mountain GC	Dillon Delaney	18
	Plains	Wild Horse Golf Course		9
Tuesday, July 10, 2018	St. Regis	Trestle Creek Golf Club	Bill Ryan (Uncle), Jerry Hystad	9
Tuesday, July 10, 2018	Thompson Falls	Rivers Bend Golf Course		18
Wednesday, July 11, 2018	Missoula	Linda Vista GC	Charles Miller	18
Thursday, July 12, 2018	Eureka	Indian Springs Golf Course		18
Friday, July 13, 2018	Libby	Cabinet View Golf Club	Gary Peck, Wayne Haines	18
Friday, July 13, 2018	Eureka	Buckwood CC	Scott Meissner, Spencers	9
Saturday, July 14, 2018	Eureka	Wilderness Club	Scott Meissner, Spencers	18
	Fortine	Meadow Creek Golf Course		9
Sunday, July 15, 2018	Columbia Falls	Meadow Lake Golf Resort		18
Monday, July 16, 2018	Bigfork	Eagle Bend	Greg Barkus, Lon Hinkle, Jim Hann	27
Tuesday, July 17, 2018	Kalispell	Village Greens	Shay Smithwick-Hann	18

Wednesday, July 18, 2018	Kalispell	Northern Pines	Shay Smithwick-Hann	18
Thursday, July 19, 2018	Polson	Polson Bay Golf Course	Robbie Hayes, Cameron Milton?	27
Friday, July 20, 2018	Eureka	John's Golf Course	John & Steve Espinoza	9
Saturday, July 21, 2018	Whitefish	Whitefish Lake Golf Club North		18
Sunday, July 22, 2018	Seeley Lake	Double Arrow Golf Course	Jim Hann, Tee IT UP Crew	18
Monday, July 23, 2018	Whitefish	Whitefish Lake Golf Club South		18
Tuesday, July 24, 2018	Kalispell	Buffalo Hills Cameron 9	Jason Winkler & Crew	9
Wednesday, July 25, 2018				0
Thursday, July 26, 2018	Kalispell	Buffalo Hills	Jason Winkler	18
Friday, July 27, 2018	West Glacier	Glacier View Golf Course		18
Saturday, July 28, 2018	Cut Bank	Cut Bank Golf & Country Club	Jake Gustafson	9
Sunday, July 29, 2018	Harlem	Harlem Golf Course		9
	Chinook	Chinook Golf Club	Mike Seymour	9
Monday, July 30, 2018	Havre	Beaver Creek Golf Course	Gerry Veis	18
	Havre	Prairie Farms Golf Course	Gerry Veis	9
Tuesday, July 31, 2018	East Glacier	Glacier Park Lodge & Golf Course		9
	East Glacier	Glacier Park Lodge Pitch n' Putt		9
	East Glacier	Elk Meadows		9
	Columbia Falls	Frontier Crossroads		9

Friday, August 3, 2018	Great Falls	Eagle Falls Golf Course		18
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7. Appendix B: Media Packet

<p>Sean Ryan Creator/Author</p> <p>Phone 406-231-8765 Email MontanasLongestDrive@Gmail.com Website MontanasLongestDrive.com Facebook @MontanasLongestDrive Instagram @MontanasLongestDrive</p>		
<h3>MISSION OF MONTANA'S LONGEST DRIVE</h3>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aim of Montana's Longest Drive is to promote golf in the Treasure State by telling the stories of the people who play golf on every golf course in Montana • Playing every golf course in Montana with a new playing partner • Create a dynamic and engaging social media presence people will follow • Track the number of miles driven around Montana • Track the number of miles walked on every golf course • Capture the beauty of Montana's landscape with professional photography • Be the first person to play every golf course in one state in one summer 		
<h3>About the Author</h3> <p>Sean Ryan is a graduate student at Montana Tech working towards his Master of Science in Technical Communication. Ryan played collegiate golf for the Orediggers as an undergraduate and was a four-time All-State selection in high school. Ryan earned his Bachelor's Degree in Professional and Technical Communication from Montana Tech as well with a concentration in Public Relations.</p> <p>Ryan started a Blog in 2014 on basketball in Montana that has over 36,000 reads and has been read all over the globe. Ryan's articles have been published in newspapers around the state of Montana.</p> <p>In his free time Ryan enjoys golfing, telling stories, refereeing high school basketball, spending time with his family, and traveling around the Treasure State.</p>		
<p>104 Golf Courses</p>	<p>1500 Holes</p>	<p>One Summer</p>

8. Appendix C: Published Stories from Montana's Longest Drive

8.1. Hickory Swing

Kelly Gilligan made the move over to playing at Hickory Swing about six years ago and after watching him hit it to six feet on the first hole, I can understand why.

Gilligan, as a surname, is synonymous with golf around Montana. Kelly himself is a Montana State Golf Association Hall of Famer, a winner of three consecutive Montana State Amateur Championships, and was the AA State Champion his senior season at Great Falls High before heading off to Washington State to play PAC-10.

Hickory Swing is a par 60 executive golf course on the westside of Great Falls. It sits in the shadow of a hundred plus foot grain bin and crisscrosses its way around the railroad tracks that used to transport that grain.

It had been about ten years since I played Hickory Swing. Back then it was a nearly defunct goat track called Emerald Greens that had severe budget issues and even worse greens. With four other courses in Great Falls, Emerald Greens was in a difficult position.

Then Billy Thompson took over and got to work. As Kelly explained in his best golf version of Field of Dreams, "If you've got good greens people will come". And come they did.

As the greens have improved and the course has found its niche in the area's golf market. It's a short track with good greens that forces players to strengthen their iron game.

When it comes to the iron game, not many are better than my first round playing partner. Kelly Gilligan has been a well-known ball striker since his high school days.

"I grew up on the golf course, basically, it was my home from 8AM to 8PM and sometimes later."

On a summer day in his youth, Gilligan would be at Meadow Lark Country Club by 8 AM and hit a drawstring bag of balls. Then he'd go eat breakfast and play eighteen holes. Then he'd eat lunch, hit another bag of range ball, and head back out for the second eighteen. Then it was dinner, and maybe another nine holes if time allowed.

“It was the life, let me tell ya. I owe a lot to my parents for letting me grow up on the golf course like I did,” said Gilligan.

Gilligan would go on and play for Great Falls High and win an individual State AA Championship for the Bison before venturing out to Washington State to play in college.

For Gilligan, Washington State was an opportunity to get out of Montana without being too far away from home. After two years at Washington State, Gilligan came back to Great Falls and won three consecutive Montana State Amateur Championships at Green Meadow in Helena, Whitefish Lake Golf Course, and at his old stomping grounds Meadow Lark Country Club.

The question Gilligan admittedly still ponders is “what could have been” if he had tried to turn professional.

“I still think about that sometimes, the where would I be now, but I think it all worked out. I really considered it, but it takes a lot of money to try and do something like that. And I didn't want to borrow money from people and end up not making it and having to pay them all back,” remarked Gilligan.

Before we teed off I had mentioned how Kelly was five-for-five on his up-and-downs when we last played and he jokingly said, “If I miss five greens today I'm not going to be happy.”

Well, Kelly Gilligan didn't miss many greens as we made our way around the little course on the westside of Great Falls.

Gilligan has spent his life around the game that he loves both as a player and working on the grounds crew. He spent seven years on the grounds crew at Meadow Lark before completing a Turf Management Program at Rutgers University and becoming the Superintendent at his home course.

“The Turf Management at Rutgers really was something,” said Gilligan. “I learned so much out there from such impressive people. That experience back east was a great one for me and then coming back to Meadow Lark as the superintendent was great.”

As we made our way around the little executive course and talked about experiences and swing thoughts, the conversation and golf kept getting better and better. Gilligan is as crafty as ever with his irons and Hickory Swing compliments the strengths of his game.

After 18 holes with one of Great Falls’ best ball strikers, I can understand why my friend and MSGA Hall of Famer Kelly Gilligan likes to call Hickory Swing home.

8.2. Meadow Lark Country Club

There are few places in central Montana that I revere like Meadow Lark Country Club. It’s more than a golf course that winds its way through a gorgeous stretch of land along the mighty Missouri River.

I never had the opportunity to play Meadow Lark Country Club until I was fifteen years old and I still remember that day very vividly. I remember it because growing up as a muni-rat had taught me that playing “*The Club*” was a special opportunity. It was an opportunity to play a course that was a golfer’s golf course. One without blemish, or unraked bunker, or unfixed divot.

Today, I arrived at Meadow Lark Country Club on an overcast day, but the weather didn’t matter. It was another opportunity to play “*The Club*”.

I was fortunate enough to tee it up with my buddy Taylor Kuntz. Taylor is about two years younger than myself and played golf in high school for CMR before playing for the University of Great Falls which later became the University of Providence.

Playing golf with Taylor Kuntz is an experience. He's an undersized guy to say the least, weighing in at a generous 145lbs and standing about 5-foot-8, but he hits the ball as far as anyone around.

It's a give-it-all-you've-got kind of swing that Kuntz uses to move the ball around Meadow Lark Country Club. His swing was honed on many loops around Eagle Falls Golf Club where he and I both learned how to play.

As we walked and talked and sipped our beers on a beautiful Thursday afternoon in Great Falls, we talked about how great a track Meadow Lark is.

For Taylor his favorite hole is the par-3 4th hole that plays about 150 yards over a pond with a fountain. For myself, my favorite must be the par-5 3rd hole that offers the ultimate risk reward. A strong tee shot past a fairway bunker leaves the golfer with the opportunity to lay up to a flip wedge, or to hit a hybrid or long iron into an undulating green with water on it's right and bunkers on it's left.

And whenever I get ready to play my second on the third hole at Meadow Lark I remember the words of my friend and Country Club member Chad Eskro, "Kid, we didn't come here to see you lay up."

The thing that keeps everyone coming back to Meadow Lark are the greens. They are undulating, intimidating, and lightning quick.

In the heat of summer, the greens at “*The Club*” are absolute perfection. The type of fast paced perfection that demands respects on uphill puts so that they don’t quickly become the knee-knocking downhill kind.

After our round, and after I lost my first golf ball of this long journey on the 18th hole because my dependable draw decided to disappear, and I sent my ball somewhere into the mighty Missouri River, we sat on the porch and laughed about our round.

We enjoyed live music and some cold brews as we sat around a warm fire and talked about our day. And I couldn’t help but think, there aren’t many better places than Meadow Lark Country Club.

And I still relish any opportunity to play this great golf course.

8.3. Anaconda Hills

I woke up this morning with every intention of playing the historic Anaconda Hills in Black Eagle, Montana, my playing partner however were a little more hesitant.

Early this morning, one of the old-timers I had suckered into playing this morning called my phone and woke me up.

“Sean are we really playing *GOLF* today?” he asked.

“Absolutely, Hans. It’s going to be great.”

Minutes later, my other playing partner for the day and Hans’ best friend Steve Whisler called my phone as I was getting dressed in layers and layers of clothing.

“Are we really playing in this shit?” Steve asked. “I didn’t believe Hans when called me, so I figured I better call you.”

And I replied in the affirmative again.

You see the weather this morning wasn't exactly what you'd call golf weather. It was fluctuating from a light drizzle to a heavy downpour every few seconds with a sharp and biting westerly wind that would cut right through the most expensive windbreaker. But we, or at least I was dead set on playing golf at Anaconda Hills today, and I'm damn glad we did.

Hans Fehres and Steve Whisler are your everyday municipal golf course dew sweepers. I know this because for two summers I played golf with those characters every day. They would take turns calling me at 6:30 in the morning to make sure I was on my way to the golf course, so I wouldn't be late for the 7:07 AM tee time at Eagle Falls Golf Course.

Back in those days I used to work in the clubhouse in the afternoons and evenings, so I would play golf with Hans and Steve and a few other characters like Steve McAlpin, who we nicknamed "Happy" because he was always complaining about something new every day, and Jon Ulias who would quietly take three or four bucks off you by winning the carryover skins with an up-and-down par on the 18th hole.

After 18 holes with that crew, I would head home and eat breakfast, take a nap, and then head off to the golf shop around 12:30 until the course closed.

Then I'd do it all over again. Those were the days.

Well today was a chance to relive those days with two of my favorite people. Hans Fehres is a hard-of-hearing old man who's never faded a golf ball in his life. He likes to call his ball flight the "*Hansie Hook*" because it turns like left like a NARSCAR driver and just runs its way up near the green. Steve Whisler was one of my golf coaches my senior year of high school and is also somewhat hard-of-hearing which adds to the volume when he hits a bad shot and his displeasure echoes around the golf course.

So, at 8:26 AM the three of us were standing on the first tee box at Anaconda Hills Golf Course with the whole place to ourselves. I'm quite confident the guy working in the pro shop wanted to have us committed when we showed up for our tee time.

But the three of us traped around the historic front nine at Anaconda Hills and hit tee shots into fairways that didn't budge after they landed, chipped onto greens when we couldn't fully feel our hands, and may have putted a ball or two into cups that were filled with rainwater. And we laughed our way through the coldest nine holes of our lives.

They say a bad day of golf is better than a good day of work, and I'd like to think my retiree friends would agree with that statement even if they're golf shoes will never fully dry out.

Golf shoes can be replaced but another chance to play golf with Hans and Steve cannot. Even if it took some convincing to get them there.

8.4. Fairfield

I pulled into the parking lot in Harvest Hills just around 7:30 in the morning. The parking lot was empty as I hit a few practice putts on the dew covered putting green waiting for my playing partner to show up.

Jon Schenk is just one of those guys who can always make you laugh. The Fairfield native and I remarked about how much better the weather was when we were supposed to get together and play yesterday.

"I wasn't going to play in the snow, no matter how much you begged me." Jon laughed.

I was supposed to play golf with Jon on Friday evening, but the golf gods were against that seeing that it snowed three inches at Harvest Hills.

Today was a different story however, meadowlarks were chirping as we made our way down the fairways of Harvest Hills. Well, we made our ways down the rough too.

We could have hit it anywhere this morning, because we were the only souls on the golf course. The pro shop wasn't open, but the grass was green, and the sun was up. I'm sure there were some envious people driving by on the highway watching to guys with a whole golf course to themselves.

We laughed as we struggled with our early season swings and some extra long rough just off the fairways. Jon and I even laughed as we approached a few greens that had their flags laying on the greens instead of stuck in the cup.

"Where's the hole at?" Jon asked. "Actually, it doesn't matter with how we're hitting it today. I'm just going for the green."

When you can laugh and hack your way around a whole golf course as the only two people on it, you can deal with a flag being nowhere near the hole.

8.5. Choteau Country Club

The Choteau Country Club sits high atop the bluff overlooking the country seat of Teton County with a magnificent view of the Rocky Mountain Front in the backdrop.

It isn't very often you can play in Choteau without the wind blowing a million miles an hour. We just happened to luck out and play the CCC with just a slight breeze blowing.

My friend Reid Flemming joined me in Choteau for a quick trip around the hilltop track but before we went we met and shot the breeze with the course superintendent. He remarked at the work that goes into maintaining a course like Choteau's in the climate that we are in.

"It isn't easy, but it's a labor of love." he said.

You could really tell that as you played the nine-hole course in Choteau. The greens on the course were as healthy as I've ever seen and puttied extremely well.

The whole time Reid and I made our way around the Choteau Country Club we talked about everything from the good old days of the 8C Basketball Conference, where so-and-so was nowadays, and about refereeing basketball.

Reid spends his winters and a good deal of his time refereeing basketball around Montana. It's his way of staying engaged in the game he loves. Sure, people in the crowd might belly-ache about calls here and there but it's his favorite pastime and one of mine too.

It's funny how when you get basketball officials together they talk about the game no matter the time of year. So, as we read putts and lugged our clubs around the course it was nice to talk about something different for a change and take the focus off of that little white ball.

Because as it turns out, your brain can get in the way of a good golf shot more than a wall of willow trees.

Sometimes, you've got to just throw some beers in the golf bag, take a little stroll and shoot the breeze when you're on top of world at the Choteau Country Club.

8.6. Pondera Golf Club

After playing 9 holes in two different towns, I was a bit tired as I rolled in Conrad, Montana to play my last stop of the day.

I met up with my cousin Pat and we made the quick drive over to Pondera Golf Course just on the outside of town where my last nine holes of the day was to be played. On a Chamber of Commerce weather day, Pat and I lucked out.

"It isn't very often you get to play Conrad without any wind," Pat said. "I'm not used to this."

Pat's wife Meaghan and daughters Bethany and Avery also joined us. The three of them rode in Pat's baby blue three-wheeled golf cart he had bought just a few years ago off an older couple in town.

"I had my eyes on that cart for years and kept asking if they'd sell it to me. I'm happy I finally wore them down with my asking so often that they decided to give up and sell it to me." Pat said.

So down the first fairway we headed, two guys carrying their clubs on their shoulders with beers in their hands being slowly followed by a three-wheeled caravan of laughing kids. It was a treat.

It had been probably eight years since I'd last played Conrad, so I had to keep asking Pat where to aim on about every hole. He'd give me an idea of where I was supposed to hit it, and where if I was going to miss, where wouldn't be a bad spot to do so.

We bounced around through the holes at Pondera Golf Course and worked our way around the small-town track. Pat told me stories of finding a new greenskeeper after the *Carl Spackler* of Pondera retired just a few years ago.

"Yea, for a few years the old greenskeeper even lived in a trailer behind that old shed on number two," he laughed. "I always thought that was a little odd."

There was nothing odd about Pondera on this day however. It was in fine shape with receptive greens that made for some challenging downhill putts after your chip slid by the pin.

I don't think I'll wait so long to play Pondera again. But with my tired feet from 27 holes in three different towns, I'm hoping next time I can hitch a ride on Pat's baby blue three-wheeled golf cart.

8.7. Marias Valley

In the river bottom lined with hundred-year-old cottonwoods just south of Shelby sits a championship golf course named Marias Valley Golf Club.

As you descend the hillside toward the course and clubhouse, the whole valley opens to you and invites you in.

I was lucky enough to have played Marias Valley Golf Club more than a dozen times before I played it on Sunday morning, but I'd never played it without wind. The wind in the northcentral Montana whips its way across the plains and can make the shortest of par 5s unbearably long. If you haven't played golf in a gale-force wind, have you really played golf at all?

Today was different however, a chamber of commerce day with only a faint breeze. And I got to play golf with my friend and arguably the best golfer at Marias Valley, Sean Gilligan.

Gilligan is the nephew of MSGA Hall of Famer Kelly Gilligan and has an impressive game himself, especially on his home track.

There might not be a person who has played Marias Valley more often or played it as well as Sean.

He plays this unconventional pull hook golf shot around, over, and in between the cottonwoods of Marias Valley with precision.

"I just didn't ever want to miss right, so I started aiming more and more right knowing the ball would go left," said Gilligan. "Some people won't even watch me tee off anymore."

It isn't the most conventional of alignments of a golf swing, but it works for Sean and it worked today. Gilligan and I made our way around Marias Valley on this perfect day.

Perfect doesn't even begin to describe it. It was a round of golf along the river bottom amidst hundred-year-old cottonwoods on a championship golf course with a good friend. Life and golf don't get better than that.

8.8. Marian Hills

I never imagined I'd have this much fun in Malta, Montana. From the moment I arrived, Malta and Marian Hills Golf Course were a treat.

As I rolled into town, I called the Montana State Golf Association President Roger Amundson whom I'd be playing golf with and staying while in Malta.

"Why don't you come up to the clubhouse and have a drink with us?" Rodger asked.

That was only the beginning. Immediately as I walked in the door to the Tin Cup Bar and Restaurant at Marian Hills and bellied up to the bar, I felt at home.

That home feel continued as Roger and I made our way downtown to swap stories at the Lucky Bullet Bar and even into the next morning when we went for breakfast in a homey little café in the Great Northern.

The group Roger organized was himself, Cory Shelhamer the course superintendent, and Gary Howell. Howell himself has played more rounds at Marian Hills than anyone, in one year he played 635 nine-hole rounds at the course.

A morning round at Marian Hills does not get any better than yesterday's. Roger, who felt guilty that I was walking every golf course, also decided to hoof it around the two-loop course high on the hills above Malta.

As the four of us walked and talked our way around Marian Hills I was continually surprised at how great the greens were. I kept mentioning this to Cory while we played, and he would reluctantly accept my praise.

“Just wait until I get my seasonal help next week,” Cory remarked. “Then I’ll be really able to get these things rolling.”

I had to shake my head and laugh. They were plenty fast for me as my knees instinctively shook whenever I looked at a downhill par putt.

After our round wrapped up on the uphill ninth hole we all shook hands and again I had to compliment the Cory, Roger, and Gary on a great golf course and their tremendous hospitality. That hospitality didn’t end after the round because the owner of the Marian Hills, Jane Ereaux, had already bought us lunch before I had to head on down the road.

As I drove out of town I had to think, my time in Malta and at Marian Hills was something I won’t soon forget.

8.9. Sunnyside Country Club

In the heat of midday, I pulled into the gravel parking lot of Sunnyside Country Club in Glasgow, Montana. With barely a breath of wind and temperatures being north of 80 degrees for the first time of my trip I couldn’t help but think I had lucked out with weather in the Northeastern part of the state so far.

Thinking back on it, I had only been in Glasgow two times in my life and had only played Sunnyside one time. The first time I came to Glasgow it was because my high school football team was kicking off our first 6-man football game against the Fraser Bearcubs in Fraser. The second time I’d been to Glasgow and the first time I’d played Sunnyside was when my dad and I were the decoys for my Aunt Deb and Uncle Marc’s surprise anniversary party. My dad and I played the whole nine holes with them and when we came back to the clubhouse after finishing up on the ninth green the surprise was a hit.

I would be playing Sunnyside this time with my uncle Marc Swanson and two of his friends he'd lined up to play in the middle of a hot Monday afternoon. Rounding out the group on the first teebox was Ed Hopfauf and Scott "Hootie" Markle.

There was a local reporter taking pictures of us on the first tee which added pressure to an already unfamiliar tee shot on a par 4 with nothing but trouble on the right. All three of my playing partners got up and hit fairway splitting drives with the camera focused on them and then breathed a sigh of relief as the pressure was off.

When I got over the ball as the last one to tee off, my only swing thought was, *"This would be a terribly embarrassing time to hit one in the shit."*

Thankfully, despite my glass half empty swing thought, my drive was right where I wanted and left me a short wedge into the green. As we started our trek across the green country of Sunnyside, my uncle Marc, Ed, and Scott all talked about their golf course and community.

"It might not ever be the best golf course in Montana, but our goal is to have this as the greenest golf course in Montana." said Marc. "And every year we try and take on one big project to improve this course one hole at a time."

We continued our way to the first green I had been well warned about the small size and mounded shape of Sunnyside Country Club's putting surfaces. They weren't lying.

Sunnyside Country Club's greens are roughly the size of a Volkswagen van and have the large crowned centers that force you to bounce the ball into the greens rather than fly the ball on. It may have taken me a good three holes to figure this out.

The second fact I had to find out the hard way was that all the trouble on the golf course sits on the right side of the hole. For a guy playing a large draw, this means tempting fate on

every tee shot only to be let down a handful of times. Somewhere in the hazards of Sunnyside Country Club there are a couple of errant tee shots that I would very much like back.

I joked with the guys I was playing with after I knocked one out of bounds on the short risk reward par 4 seventh that back in college I was a *Second Ball All-American*. Which meant that if I knocked my first one too far to the right or left, I was going to hit my next shot right where I was aiming the last time.

The seventh was an intriguing hole, I wish I could go back and have another crack at. With Glasgow's characteristic trouble on the right-hand side, it dog-legs from left to right to a hidden green that hangs just barely over the hazard. The hazard itself sits behind and to the right of the green you can't fly a ball into because it will bound off the firm green and right into the crud.

Thinking about it, my favorite hole must be the dog-leg par 5 ninth. Measuring in at 460 yards and almost horseshoeing itself back towards the clubhouse, it presents the golfer with multiple opportunities to knock the ball out of bounds if they're not careful. It's a fantastic finishing hole that can destroy a round with a high number or provide an opportunity for a birdie or even eagle if you can trust yourself and your game.

Perhaps the best part about Sunnyside Country Club was the hospitality that Marc, Ed, and Scott showed me. We must have sat in the clubhouse swapping golf stories about Sunnyside and other courses we've played for two hours or so. I haven't a doubt that Sunnyside is the fun and challenging golf course it is, because of the people who care for it, play it, and make it their home track.

Sunnyside Country Club may have stolen a few of my golf balls during our nine-hole round but it definitely provided me with an afternoon and new friends I'd willingly trade golf balls for anytime.

8.10. Airport Golf Club

As if there weren't enough reasons to already hate the Federal Aviation Administration the Airport Golf Club in Wolf Point, Montana gave me one more.

Just past the small airport in Wolf Point there's a sign leading you down a dirt road toward a clubhouse with a high-pitched roof surrounded by lilac bushes. The drive itself down the dirt road is a bit mesmerizing as you suddenly turn off the open highway road and into the shade of age old trees that line both sides of the driveway.

It was at the Airport Golf Club that I met my playing partners and tour guides, Brock Copenhaver and Rodney Paulson. Brock and Rodney explained the layout of the course to me as we teed it up on the dogleg left first hole that is walled by the highest of cottonwood trees. These trees would prove to be more of a problem as the day went on for myself, but I'll get to that. Approaching the green at the end of the first hole I was pleasantly surprised by the quality and consistency of the putting surfaces. The greens at Airport GC have some big undulations, usually pitched from back to front, that make no two putts on the short grass the same.

Now let's get on to the trees and my distrust of the FAA.

The second hole at the Airport Golf Club is a dogleg right with a line of hundred-foot-tall cottonwoods suffocating your tee shot and any chance of cutting the corner. However, on the other side of the fairway is the fence the FAA placed not ten paces off the left-hand side of the fairway that marks the out of bounds.

It is the type of fence that if you hit your ball over it, it will never be seen again. The approximately nine-foot-high fence constricts your tee shot to find a narrow sliver of fairway on the long par 4 so you can at least have a long iron into the green.

As for my tee shot, I sent it crashing into the cottonwoods for fear of getting too close to that fence. As I trudged along in search of where my Titleist may have scattered off too, Rodney joked, "I blame the damn terrorists."

We laughed as I made a mess of the hardest hole on the golf course in Wolf Point and walked away with my first eight of this long trip. Looking back on hole number 2, I'm still bamboozled as to how I should have play it.

Brock and Rodney agreed the hole played much easier without the fence there, and it was about eight years ago that the government came in and wanted to infringe on the golf course property.

"We had some people who fought them because they were originally supposed to put the fence another 50 feet onto the golf course," said Rodney. "And they weren't going to have that."

Another hole that caught my attention was the unique par 3 fourth hole that played at only 119 yards that day. It was 119 yards uphill to an elevated green protected by a large tree on the left and a harsh hill that would send your ball back to your feet if you ended up short. It also played into the teeth of the wind. Not every hole has to be long to be challenging, and the fourth at Airport Golf Club proves that.

Brock's favorite hole was number 5, because of the changes that have been made to it.

"I helped build out this green when we expanded it" said Brock. "That was really a cool to get your hands dirty and improve the golf course yourself."

The fifth is a straightforward par 4 playing around 390 yards with a cutting wind from left to right, but it is the expanded green that gives it character. What used to be a mounded and crowned green now has two tears thanks to the expanded right-hand side that Brock and others worked on. The green has character and the potential to give you a scare if you're on top of the hill putting down towards the bottom.

After the round at Airport Golf Club with Brock and Rodney, we sat around and talked a little bit about the history of the course and golf in the area. They told me about a spot called Harry's Nite Club just on the other side of the Missouri River where I could get a great burger, and they weren't lying.

Harry's was a quaint little bar with an old screen door in the front with a few bodies sitting at the corner of the bar talking about who they knew that knew each other. I ordered the double-bacon cheeseburger and grabbed a beer while I sat at the counter and watched a nondescript sporting event on the old TV hanging on the wall. Adorning the walls were old photos of bar patrons, area landmarks, and the fliers for community fundraising efforts that were upcoming.

The double-bacon cheeseburger arrived with a mound of fries accompanying it and I fell into a cholesterol driven food coma for awhile after I finished it. After Harry's I ventured into town to visit with a Duane "Punky" Kurokawa who was the president of Western Bank of Wolf Point and an avid golfer himself. We visited for an hour in his office as he told me how his father and his friends helped build and start Airport Golf Club a half century ago.

"You ever played sand greens?" Duane asked. "Because that's what we had. Back in the day the guys working on the course would meet up and bring their push lawnmowers and stand side-by-side walking down the holes to cut a fairway."

After that visit, I stopped in to a brewery my distant cousin's have in Wolf Point called *Doc 'z* and sampled their IPA on the back atrium. I sat in the shade and swapped stories with relatives who I hadn't seen in years and fell in love with the community of Wolf Point.

I leaned back my chair, with a cold beer in my hand, surrounded by family and friends who welcomed me in, and couldn't help but think about how today would've been a perfect day if it weren't for that fence put up by the damn FAA.

8.11. Scobey Golf Course

I made a phone call last night as I turned north just a couple miles east of Wolf Point. The phone rang as I bobbed along on the highway until finally I heard my friend say, "I hear you're heading up to my neck of the woods."

His neck of the woods, to be more specific is Scobey, Montana, population 1,032. Scobey might have the record for being the smallest town I happen to know the most people from, and I added to that list today.

Cruising up the narrow two-lane highway towards Scobey I crested a hill and saw an expanse of farmland as far as you could see with Scobey's water tower in the distance. Driving through Scobey I took a few turns and wound up at Phil Audet's house.

Phil is the oldest brother to my friend Dana Audet who lives and plays golf in Great Falls. Phil said, "Dana called me and said I had to play golf with you and take care of you while you're in town."

Phil did more than that. In the late evening we drove a few blocks down a gravel road to the Scobey Golf Course and sat in the clubhouse to swap stories and talk about the history of the golf course in Scobey with the course's Superintendent. It was a gorgeous evening in the hilltop clubhouse that used to be a U.S. Air Force Radar Base that sat a couple of miles west of Opheim.

“I’m sure the guys who moved it over here had something like 30 flat tires on the trip over, the damn building was so heavy,” the superintendent laughed.

So, there we sat with the sun dropping lower toward the horizon and ate dinner while throwing back a few beers as I looked over the nine-hole expanse that is called the Scobey Golf Course.

Phil and Jerry Raaum play golf every day they can at Scobey. “We usually walk the front nine, and then get a cart for the back,” said Phil. I was thankful they let me join them today.

Also joining us and walking along on my first trip around Scobey’s links was Mike Stebleton, the sports editor for the Daniels Country Leader.

Phil and Jerry gave directions while we trekked our way along on a hot May day that reached about 84 degrees by the time we were done. They’d point out the green and the trouble on each hole and helped guide me around the course on my maiden voyage.

The first hole at Scobey Golf Course is a downhill blind dogleg right par 5 that includes a blind tee shot over some trees and bushes if you hit a draw like I do and wanted to cut the corner. We moseyed our way down the fairway on one to an elevated green where I chipped up close and started with a birdie.

We talked about the history of club, like it’s sand greens for it’s first 57 years of existence before the greens were turned into grass putting surfaces in 1984. The course draws its water for the pond that comes into play and provides a soothing backdrop for the second, third, and fourth holes from the Poplar River that flows in the field next to the course.

My favorite hole on course would have to be the par 5 third hole. A slight dogleg to the left, it perfectly suited my draw but has grass bunkers in the right rough if you miss that fairway that will swallow up your golf ball.

The second shot must be wary of the pond that juts out into the left fairway less than one hundred yards short of the green provided the golfer with an opportunity to lay up or go for it in two. As for myself, with Mike, Jerry, and Phil all watching I decided to not lay up and ended up finding the elevated green and giving myself a 12-foot putt for eagle that I lipped in just at the last moment. No wonder it was my favorite hole.

Scobey Golf Course provides its players with a magnificent backdrop of the expansive farmland on many of the tee boxes and greens.

As we finished the round and meandered back up to the clubhouse in the heat of the midday sun, I had to laugh at my first round in Scobey. A bogey free 33 (-3) with one birdie, one eagle, and seven pars. It made for quite the experience at Scobey Golf Club. That and the fantastic hospitality by everyone in town has me confidently saying it won't be so long before I venture back up into this neck of the woods again.

8.12. Plentywood Golf Club

There's a confidence you acquire while holding a shotgun in your hands. The combination of the ringing in my ears, the kick of the 12 gauge, and the shot of adrenaline that was coursing through my veins was enough to have me hooked and eager to join the Plentywood, Montana Trap Club.

The trip to the farthest reaches of Northeast Montana was one of firsts for me so I blindly agreed when Doug Selvig asked if I wanted to tag along with him and shoot trap on Wednesday evening.

While riding shotgun in his truck we pulled into the parking lot near the fairgrounds on the edge of Plentywood as he looked over and asked, “Have you ever shot trap before?”

I replied quickly, “No, I never have.”

Doug smiled and casually said, “Well, we’ll change that.”

So on a hot Northeastern Montana evening, I found myself standing in the middle station having not fired a shotgun in years getting ready to shoot at moving targets. It took all my might not let my eyes get wide as the first shooter called, “PULL” and knocked the first clay pigeon out of the sky in a flash.

All I could think was, “*What in the hell have I gotten myself into?*”

Then the second shooter’s turn came and after barking out the command they also knocked the orange target out of the sky.

Suddenly it was my turn. I drew my shotgun to my shoulder and tried my best to look like I was doing as I yelled out, “PULL” with a small crack in my voice that sometimes happens when I’m trying not to mess my drawers.

The target flew up and I did my best to lock on to it as I’d seen the other shooters do and pulled the triggers. As the shotgun kicked into my shoulder, I reluctantly saw the pigeon continue on its original course unscathed by my pathetic first attempt.

The shooting wasn’t all bad on my part as the rounds went on and I got more comfortable with shotgun. After successfully doing my best impression of *Kid Shelleen* and knocking four consecutive targets out of the sky, I glanced to my left and down the line a few stations to see Doug looking at me one hand on his hip laughing and shaking his head. He could see by the oversized grin on my face that the new guy was having a ball.

I wish that newfound confidence and warm summer weather had translated to the next day's round of golf at Plentywood Golf Club, but we had fun anyway.

With colder weather and a tough wind barreling in from the east Plentywood Golf Club presented its fair share of challenges on my first trip around these links.

Doug Selvig obliged to take me around the golf course because my poor trip planning prevented me from playing with the Ordahl family as I originally intended. Kevin Ordahl even holds the course record at Plentywood Golf Club but couldn't play because he was out on the farm seeding. I laughed and had to apologize for my lack of understanding of the agrarian calendar preventing us from playing his home course.

The first hole at Plentywood Golf Club is a blind downhill par 4 that slightly doglegs left past a pair of pine trees that sit on the corner above the green. I found myself standing underneath one of these trees after hitting my drive a tad bit left of where I would have like. After being warned about how hard the greens were early in the season here I played a little bump-n-run 7 iron down the embankment and onto the green.

They weren't lying when warning me about the difficulty of holding the greens. It made for one of the most exciting tests of your golf game having to hit the ball in different ways and play the bounces of to just try and hold the ball on the putting surface.

The layout of Plentywood Golf Club is a unique one, I'd never seen before. The course features three par 3's, three par 4's, and three par 5's.

My two favorite holes on the course were the par 3 second and the par 5 third. The par 3 second hole is a daunting little tee shot from an elevated tee box to a back-to-front sloping green protected by a left greenside bunker that measures in at only 140 yards.

The par 5 third hole, is a dogleg left that provides you the opportunity to cut the corner over the top of some trees and a large hillside or to play it safe along the righthand side of the fairway. Being too far wayward on either side of the fairway will place you in a tough spot for your third into a slightly elevated green with a bunker on the right.

My time in Plentywood has been an absolute treat and the Plentywood Golf Club didn't disappoint. It was a trip of firsts for myself up in Northeastern Montana.

I just wish I had as much confidence with a putter in my hands as I did with that 12 gauge.

8.13. Sidney Country Club

Driving down to Sidney Friday morning, I was wishing I had an ark. Nothing too big, maybe something in the 15 cubits by 10 cubits range. I was in the midst of an absolute downpour.

With raindrops growing larger and larger by the minute, I pulled into the parking lot of the Sidney Country Club and had to time my escape from my car to run inside the clubhouse. In between the heavier waves of heavy rain, I made break for it only to be partially soaked by the time I got inside the door.

In the pro shop, I visited with Sidney's Head Golf Professional Ryan Troxell before grabbing a bite to eat at the bar. Saddled up to the bar and eating my club sandwich, the bartender at the club said, "You can't be thinking about playing in this, can you?"

As another heavy band of rain pelted the windows and water pooled on the deck I had to say, "Yep. It's on the list and I'm set to go out in about an hour. I sure hope it lightens up."

As we visited about the crummy weather she asked if I had heard about the guy traveling around playing every golf course in Montana.

I had to smirk as I took off my rain jacket revealing my *Montana's Longest Drive* polo and said, "Yea, that's me."

As I ate my lunch and visited with those around me at the bar, I kept getting asked if I really was going to play in this downpour?

"Absolutely."

After lunch I meandered back to the pro shop and pulled the trigger on a new pair of Skechers golf shoes that had a waterproof guarantee. "*We'll put that to the test, won't we?*" I thought as my playing partner Benji Berg showed up.

Benji is the golf coach of the Sidney Eagles and stick on his home track. Adorned in our rain gear we took off on a tour of the Sidney Country Club in weather Benji was a little skeptical about playing in.

Over one of my putts on the front nine I had to watch a steady stream of drops fall from the brim of my hat onto my golf ball. And I couldn't have had more fun in the rain with Benji. On every tee box he would give me an idea of where to hit it and what shots to play.

Even though I wasn't hitting many of the shots he was helping me decide to hit, it was nice to have a caddy imparting knowledge about the course to me.

As we hacked it around and each made our fair share of bogeys, I was struck by the beauty of the lone 18-hole golf course in Eastern Montana.

The seventh hole is a downhill par 4 measuring in at around 400 yards that weaves its between two hills and past a couple of banks of tall cottonwood trees that can swallow up an errant tee shot. With a crested green and protected by a bunker in the front right.

Another one of the holes that I loved was the par 3 ninth hole that played at 184 yards back towards the clubhouse. With walls of trees on the right and left and the restaurant's patio in

the backdrop it provides the opportunity to make a birdie if your tee shot doesn't find the front left bunker, the back right bunker, the left greenside bunker, and the pond to the right. Simple right?

At the end of our round Benji and I stood at the 18th tee box and looked at the closing hole of Sidney's gem of a golf course. It's a 600-yard downhill par 5 with a narrow fairway lined by even more long cottonwoods that finishes back within vision of the clubhouse. The green is large and inviting if you find yourself in the tight fairway and want to go for it in two.

After our round, Benji and I stopped into the restaurant bar for a post round drink and to dry off. As we sat there commiserating about our golf game but bragging up the golf course I was tapped on the shoulder by the bartender who was gathered around a table with her husband and friends.

She turned and announced to the group, "This is that guy who's playing every golf course in Montana in one summer. He just got done playing our course."

Again, I introduced myself to some new friends in Sidney and told them about my project and how much I loved their golf course.

Even if I wished I would've had an ark.

8.14. Signal Point Golf Club

In territorial Montana, Fort Benton was the region's last trading post along the mighty Missouri River. Steamboats would power their way against the current from St. Louis to bring supplies and people to the West. It was where cowboys and cavalries would walk the same streets and where supplies heading for the mining camps in Helena and Virginia City would be loaded on stagecoaches for the rest of their journey.

Fort Benton is the birthplace of Montana.

High above this birthplace sits Signal Point Golf Club, a beautiful nine-hole golf course with an even more spectacular view of the one-time frontier town. Named for the landmark directly adjacent to the golf course where lookouts could first spot the next steamboat due for Fort Benton. Signal Point Golf Club was built in 1967, one-hundred years after the town's post office was established.

My Sunday morning foursome at Signal Point read like a bad joke. I was playing golf with a doctor, a bar owner, and an engineer. Scott Meissner, Thad Stinson, his daughter Josie Stinson, and myself were the first to tee off at Signal Point on a sunny windless day high above Fort Benton.

With a foursome that sounded like the lead in of a bad joke there were plenty of laughs to be had that morning. I couldn't keep track of number of times I doubled over in laughter from one of Scott or Thad's one-liners during the round.

The first hole at Signal Point is a straightforward 400-yard par 4 with trees lining both sides of the fairway and an elevated green protected by a pair of large bunkers on the right and left.

The greens at Signal Point Golf Club are consistently some of the best in the state. Elevated, undulating, and hard to hold without a wedge in your hand the greens are always remarkable in Fort Benton.

The fourth hole is the first par 3 you run across at Signal Point, at 152-yards long with a crystal clear blue pond to your right and a pair of bunkers in front of the green. Your tee shot has to get up quickly to clear the pine tree on the edge of the pond that blocks out the front of the green from your vision.

The closing hole at Signal Point is the dogleg left par 5 ninth that offers spectacular views of the whole Missouri River valley and the Little Belt Mountains on the horizon. A tee shot too far left will leave you blocked out by trees and a tee shot too far right leaves you an impossibly long second shot. The tiered green on the ninth sits in the shade of the cottonwoods with bunkers in the front left and front right.

The historic town of Fort Benton is home to not just any nine-hole golf course, it's home to Signal Point Golf Club. It is home to hundreds of cottonwoods, perfect greens, and views that transport you back to territorial Montana.

When a steamboat would fight the current of the mighty Missouri River to get to Fort Benton, the birth place of Montana.

8.15. Judith Shadows Golf Course

Just outside Lewistown, Montana sits an 18-hole course in its early adolescence called Judith Shadows Golf Course.

With tall fescue roughs and undulating greens, Judith Shadows can bear its teeth if you aren't hitting the ball in the right spots. A wayward tee shot or two and you will be hunting for your golf ball with little hope of finding it in British Open type fescue.

My playing partner and golf ball hunting partner for yesterday morning's round just happened to have the course record at Judith Shadows and after the first few holes I could see why. Lewistown's Keithon Walters found fairway after fairway during our trip around the links at Judith Shadows, while I did not.

One of the most gorgeous views of my trip so far was on the par 4 fourth hole at Judith Shadows. A 390-yard hole requiring the golfer to lay up with a long iron or hybrid before taking aim at a difficult to hold island green. The fourth hole is not only spectacularly beautiful with

Western Meadowlarks landing on the cattails surrounding the island but also the most difficult hole on the golf course.

Another hole requiring a precise tee shot is the par 3 13th hole that plays 160 at it's longest. With water short and to the right of the green the only miss is to the left and long on this dangerously short hole. As we walked around the water and towards the hole I was again stunned by the beauty of this golf course and scenic Lewistown area.

In this area, Jeff and Maria Whitcraft decided to build a golf course twenty years ago that features genuine Montana hazards like untreated rough and natural water features that complement the backdrop of the region.

The finishing hole at Judith Shadows is an uphill par 5 that requires the tee shot to carry over a small creek running across the fairway some 250-yards from the tee box. The second shot presents the opportunity to finish the round with a birdie or better if your long iron can be precise and find the small green that sits underneath the eye of the Judith Shadows Golf Course clubhouse.

My trip around the 18-hole Judith Shadows Golf Course in Lewistown, Montana was an enjoyable one despite the golf balls claimed by the long fescue. One thing the round at Judith Shadows confirmed was that I will never be a betting favorite in the British Open.

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8.16. Pine Meadows Golf Course

Walking in the shade of the pine trees and up the rolling hills of Pine Meadows Golf Course in Lewistown, Montana I had a thought, *"This wouldn't be a bad place to make my first hole-in-one."*

Standing on the sixth tee of Pine Meadows on a perfect afternoon with just a slight breeze at our backs, Pine Meadows Course Manager Keithon Walters even started talking about it.

“I’ve always wanted to get my first hole-in-one on this hole,” said Keithon. “It’s just perfect.”

The 153-yard par 3 sixth is pretty much perfect and I thought my shot on the hole was as well, until it didn’t clear the tall pine tree protecting the right-hand side of the green.

“I wonder how many holes-in-one that tree has ruined over the years” Keithon joked.

The sixth works its way from an elevated tee box across a small canyon bathed in the shadows of the pine trees for which Pine Meadows is named. An undulating green on the sixth funnels tee shots from the left and back of the green toward the pin located right behind the world’s most infuriating evergreen.

That evergreen didn’t ruin Dale Huffine’s tee shot a few groups ahead of us on Monday afternoon as he recorded his first ever ace on the par 3 sixth and was celebrating in the Elks Bar when we moseyed our way into the clubhouse. Graciously accepting a free drink Keithon and I congratulated Dale on his monumental feat and had to laugh.

“No wonder mine didn’t go in,” I remarked.

I found out while drinking my Bent Nail IPA compliments of Dale Huffine, that the sixth at Pine Meadows has surrendered its fair share of aces including two in the same day a few years back.

It was a couple of years ago that Jim “JR” Rutherford and his son Tyler were playing in the Pine Meadows Club Championship when they both had holes-in-one on number six.

JR recalled, “Mine was a terrible swing, a really ugly worm-burner that just kept going towards the green. But the tree blocked it out, so I didn’t get to see it go in. Tyler’s on the other hand, he actually hit a really nice golf shot and it ended up going in.”

As we swapped golf stories and those of us without a hole-in-one sat back dreamt of the day we might be lucky enough to get one, the thought became clear to me, “*I’ve got to play the sixth at Pine Meadows more often.*”

Pine Meadows is a fantastic nine-hole golf course I would put at the top of any list to play in Montana. With a variety of holes that will challenge your golf game and a majestic beauty that is hard to parallel, this unique course that was built in 1948 is a gem to say the least.

The fifth hole at Pine Meadows is a dogleg right par 4 from which you tee off in the shade of the evergreens from an elevated tee box with a very distinctive aiming point called the Huffine tree. Sitting about 150 yards out on the 384-yard hole is an evergreen the same Dale Huffine who hit a hole-in-one the day I was playing the course, planted some 50 years ago. The shot of choice on the fifth is a high fade and a tee shot just past the Huffine tree will leave you with a short wedge into a green that dramatically slopes from back-to-front.

The greens at Pine Meadows Golf Course were simply remarkable. Soft, receptive, undulating, and dangerous if you were located above the hole they rolled as true as any greens I’ve played on this trip so far.

Pine Meadows Golf Course is a truly remarkable nine-hole golf course with tremendous hospitality and gorgeous views of the many mountain ranges surrounding Lewistown.

I just wish I could have been lucky enough to make my first hole-in-one at Pine Meadows, because I know some folks at the Elks Bar who I owe a drink to.

A tremendous thanks to the Keithon Walters and the staff at Pine Meadows Golf Course in Lewistown for an awesome afternoon of golf and hospitality. I'll definitely be back.

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8.17. Cottonwood Country Club

In the seemingly endless landscape of eastern Montana's rolling hills sits an oasis of sorts. Bordering the badlands of Makoshika State Park sits Glendive, Montana, the home of Cottonwood Country Club.

The cottonwoods for which Glendive's nine-hole golf course is named tower over the valley floor and present consistent challenges to any golfer who looking to take aim at the tiny greens at Cottonwood Country Club. The wide trunked ancient trees hang their long limbs over the fairways blocking out shots golfers would routinely play.

My tour guides for today's afternoon round in the sweltering and humid heat of Eastern Montana were my friend Gavin McPherson, his father Scott McPherson, and Jay Morasko. Scott was the manager at Cottonwood for a good many years and both he and Gavin have been crowned the club champion.

Cottonwood presents a number of gorgeous holes that weave their way among the cottonwoods to small undulating greens that can leave you perplexed. The first hole of Cottonwood Country Club is a par 4 playing 380-yards down from the elevated tee sitting underneath the eye of the clubhouse. The opening hole doglegs a hair to the left and fits the eye of the draw-ball hitter leaving just a short wedge from the fairway to a crowned green.

All the greens at Cottonwood seem to have some crown to them presenting a difficult challenge to hold with the simplest of chips or even full shots. You can't take much for granted while playing a short shot at CCC.

The dogleg right third hole at Cottonwood plays as a par 5 on the front measuring 497-yards while playing as a par 4 measuring in at 400 yards on the back nine. Playing the hole from the blue tees and as a par 4, the third demands a cutting tee shot to move right-to-left because of the out of bounds on the left-hand side of the hole and the wall of cottonwoods on the right that prevent a draw from being played. A long second shot into the third green is hard to hold on the small putting surface.

It is a fact that almost all the trouble on Cottonwood Country Club sits on the left side of the course, making it a draw ball hitter's nightmare. Out of bounds stakes sit on the left-hand side of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6, with the lone danger on the right side of the course being on number 9's tee shot.

The dogleg right closing hole at Cottonwood also can play as a par 4 or par 5 depending on the tees you play. Today it measured in at 477-yards from the blue tees and leaves the opportunity for birdie if your tee shot finds the left side of the fairway just short of the creek that runs the base of the hill. The ninth green is protected by a bunker in the front right and the dangers of cottonwood limbs that hang over the back and sides of the green.

As our round concluded and Gavin, Scott, Jay, and myself visited about the shots we played and putts we didn't make in the clubhouse I had to remark, "This really is a challenging little golf course with tiny challenging greens."

Those tiny challenging greens made for a tough putting day down in that cottonwood filled valley at Cottonwood Country Club. It just happened to make my day that in the oasis of

Eastern Montana there happens to be a downtown watering hole named the Oasis Bar where I could belly up to the bar and complain about my short game with the best of them.

8.18. Lakeview Country Club

In the flatlands of Eastern Montana sits a town surrounded by oil pumpjacks still slowly nudging their heads toward the earth extracting crude oil from below the sandstone surface with each motion. The rhythm of the pumpjacks is a mesmerizing sight to behold as you roll down the highway closer to Baker, Montana. These pumpjacks stand out against the horizon as old working relics of a booming oil town that still has oil under its feet.

Baker is home to the Lakeview Country Club which sits on the southeastern edge of town near the airport and offers a view of Lake Baker which sits in the middle of this 1,700-resident town. Even the golf course at Lakeview Country Club has two pumpjacks on the property with one sitting near the clubhouse and one between the tee boxes of the fifth and ninth holes.

Lakeview Country Club starts off with a near 500-yard par 5 that runs parallel to some caragana bushes on the left that border the out of bounds fence along Airport Road. A reachable par 5, the first hole has a small creek running through the fairway inside of a hundred yards and a strongly sloping back-to-front green where you don't want to be long.

As the breeze picked up out of the West, Lakeview Country Club started to show its teeth. In course out of bounds stakes made routine tee shots more intimidating while large igneous boulders line the rough and can carve a golf ball with one errant swing.

The third hole at Lakeview is an over water par 3 that can play 194 yards or 150 yards depending on where the tee markers are placed. With the wind fighting the ball from left-to-right the tee shot into this sloping green can be quite challenging.

I was having a well enough round in the wind at Baker until I came to the par 5 sixth hole that was playing downwind. The dogleg right hole features out of bounds stakes along the right-hand side until you get past the driving range and my drive had cut the corner giving me only a mid-iron into the uphill green.

That's when it happened. That's when they happened.

That's when I got the shanks. Those god-damn shanks.

I was expecting my mid-iron to place me on the green with a good look at an eagle putt when the next thing I know I was trapesing through the long grass looking for my Titleist and trying to salvage a par.

Once you have one shank you can't seem to shake the fear they instill in you. It's there as you decide which club to hit, when you tee up your ball, when you take the club back, and it's even there after you've successfully hit the ball without using the hosel.

If making a birdie can give a golfer confidence, shanking a ball can shatter that confidence worse than getting dumped by the girl of your dreams.

As I trudged up the hill towards the clubhouse after finishing my round with only one more shank to my credit I looked around at the land surrounding Baker. Looking into the expanse of farmland and seeing the nudging heads of the pumpjacks in the distance I had to laugh as I walked in the clubhouse to get a beer.

I know I'll never forget the time I got the shanks in Baker, Montana at Lakeview Country Club.

8.19. Town & Country Club

My story in Miles City begins in the lounge at the Town & Country Club. After wandering into town and finding where I was staying I decided to mosey on over to check out the golf course.

I followed the hooting and hollering of what could only be a bunch of golfers fresh off their league night down the hallway and found my way to the lounge. The lounge at the clubhouse is the heartbeat of the golf course. More than half the crowd at the lounge was gathered around the round dining tables with lounge chairs watching the basketball game on the tv hanging on the wall.

Drinking my beer and watching the basketball game, I was perfectly content for a quiet first night in Miles City. That did not happen.

I ran into my playing partner for today's round, Chase Tait who was fresh off finishing up his league match and was sitting with some of his buddies at a table. They invited me to join them, so I pulled up a chair and introduced myself.

Fast forward to a couple of hours later when the rest of the bar had cleared out and there was still a half a dozen of us sitting around that same table laughing and telling old golf stories with each one being better than the last. There were stories about playing in tournaments in Miles City like the member-guest, stories about the characters who play golf at the Town & Country Club, and stories I wish I would've written down.

Jeff Bush dubbed himself my social host while in Miles City while ordering another round promised, "You might not play great golf here with all of these cottonwood trees, but you're going to have a hell of a good time."

And he wasn't lying.

The next morning the group Chase had rounded up for my first trip around Miles City's golf course found themselves on the first tee with a few members still feeling the effects of the "hell of a good time" we had the night before.

In the group was Chase, Jim Zimmerman, Stacie Klippenstein, Jeff Bush and myself. Jeff had originally passed on playing with the group but had to call Chase after we were a couple of rounds into the evening last night and invite himself because we were having so much fun.

The fun continued during the round as I was walking along one of the best nine-hole courses in the state for the first time. The first hole at the Town & Country Club is a 360-yard par 4 that immediately confirms that you'll be having to work shots around cottonwood trees all day long. Midway down the fairway on the right-hand side is a towering cottonwood with long limbs that stretch over the fairway that can eat up a tee shot that isn't played up the left of the fairway. The first green at Miles City is protected by a pair of bunkers on the right front of the putting surface and features some subtle breaks that make for exciting putts to begin the round.

The second hole plays as a long par 4 on the front nine before becoming a par 5 on the back. It measures in at 435-yards through a narrow corridor of tall cottonwoods that jut out and force you get creative with your second shot into the back-to-front sloping green.

My favorite hole on the course was the 135-yard par 3 third hole that plays over a beautiful lake with a fountain that sprays water high into the air. A simple short-iron is all that is required on this treasure of a golf hole that leaves little room for error with a bunker on the left side of the green. The green itself is a dangerous one with a shelf that runs a few paces from the front of the putting surface that can leave you walking back for your wedge if you're not careful and get too frisky with your birdie attempt.

As we continued our trek around the Town & Country Club and the money match we were playing was getting more and more unfavorable for myself I was still having a ball of a time. When we sat in the lounge I had previously shut down not too many hours before and handed dollar bills around the table and swapped stories with my playing partners I had to think to myself.

I didn't play very well but I did have one hell of a good time in Miles City.

A great big thank you to my playing partners and social hosts in Miles City for a fantastic time. I'll definitely be back sometime soon to win my money back.

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8.20. Rolling Hills Golf Course

There's two sides to every story. That happens to be the case at Rolling Hills Golf Course in Broadus where I played on Saturday morning.

One headline for the story might read that upon walking to the eighth tee box I was confronted by a 5-foot bull snake coiled around one of the tee markers and remarkably hit a fairway splitting tee shot on the 376-yard dogleg right par 4 with a mounded green that forces a biting wedge shot to give you an uphill putt at birdie.

The other headline for the eighth hole would be that an innocent bull snake was minding his businesses sunning himself in the heat of midday when a 24-year-old golfer with an unfathomable fear of snakes happened to cross his path and screamed. Thankfully I was alone

during my round in Broadus, so the shriek only echoed off the cottonwoods that line the ponds and fairways and didn't cause anyone to run to my rescue.

Besides the bull snake, my round in Broadus was a great leisurely round in the heat of Southeastern Montana. Rolling Hills Golf Course is aptly named for the golf that bends and winds its way over hills and around little bluffs that provide several elevation changes for tee shots and irons from the fairway.

When I first arrived at Rolling Hills, I pulled on the door to the clubhouse only to find it locked. A sign hanging on the glass of the door said they would be opening around noon. Deciding not to wait for them to open, I walked down to the first tee and teed up my ball. The first hole at Rolling Hills Golf Course is an uphill par 4 measuring in at 374-yards to an elevated and crowned green. You work your tee shot through a gap in the cottonwoods that sit near the ponds some 100-yards from the tee box. This first green sits high enough on the hill to deliver a wonderful vantage point of the open farmland that borders the golf course in all directions and a clear blue sky.

The second hole at Rolling Hills is a 333-yard downhill par 4 that is reachable with a long tee shot if it avoids the small pond sitting just in the right-front of the green. The green at the second is again crowned and provides a tough chip if you're on either side of the green complex and in the rough.

After the very reachable par 5 third hole that doglegs right and requires an uphill second shot to an elevated green, is the par 3 fourth hole. The fourth is a downhill tee shot to a small green with that requires a club less than you would normally play. From atop this tee box it isn't hard to notice the barbed-wire out-of-bounds fence that borders the hole on the right and behind the green.

As I hoseled an 8-iron over that barbed wire fence, I had to think, *“That’s one way to keep you from going after a lost ball. I wonder how many Titleists that farmer has found over the years?”*

Down a ball and after the eighth tee box down a little bit of dignity after the bull snake incident, the par 5 ninth was a confidence booster. A slight dogleg left at a little over 500-yards this par five plays downhill back toward the clubhouse. If your drive can negotiate the cottonwood trees lining the fairway on the right and the pond on the left a good look at getting on in two is a real possibility with a large green to aim at for the uphill final hole.

As I trudged back up the hill and towards the Rolling Hills clubhouse in the 98-degree heat of Southeastern Montana in late May, I decided I better go in and pay for my round. It was the least I could do for bothering that bull snake.

8.21. Ponderosa Butte Golf Course

High above the rocky outcroppings of Southeastern Montana loom the towers of the four Colstrip Power Plants. Seeing those towers over the horizon on my drive into Colstrip reminded me of when I was a kid going to visit my grandparents. With my face pressed against the glass of the minivan windows I would try so hard to see the towers because it meant we were getting closer to seeing grandpa and grandma.

When I got to Colstrip I decided to take a trip down memory lane and try and find their old house and some other familiar sights. Driving through the streets of Colstrip, I came upon their old house. It was painted a different color than it used to be but still had the same large shop my Grandpa Richard used to go work in for hours and hours on end. It made sense why he was always working on projects out there, so he could be out of earshot of my Grandma Marilyn.

As I pulled over and got out of my car to see the old Boese house, I could faintly hear my Grandma's patented line, "God damnit Richard" just like the good old days. His pranks and teasing of Grandma always got a reaction like that out of her and a big smile out of us grandkids.

I even stopped by the Colstrip Volunteer Fire Department's Richard Boese Training Center to walk around and think. It's been about a half-dozen years now since he passed away, and seeing an American Flag flying in the wind in front a building bearing his name sure made me miss the old handyman more than ever.

On a perfect may evening I decided to head out to Ponderosa Butte Golf Course and play it for the first time. Still within eyeshot of the four plant towers, Ponderosa Butte was built by the taxpayers of Colstrip to provide recreational opportunities for the citizens of the strip mining town. As a citizen of Colstrip you are a member of Ponderosa Butte and can play the course for free as much as you want. What a great deal!

The first hole at Ponderosa Butte Golf Course is a 144-yard par 3 that has water to the left and in front of the green. I can't think of another non-executive course I've ever played that started with a par 3 right off the bat. The greens at Ponderosa Butte are soft and receptive with some slight undulations that can make for hair raising putts when the greens firm up and quicken up later in the summer.

Ponderosa Butte consists of two different loops you take, one below the clubhouse that weaves its way around small frog ponds and creeks and the second one playing up and around the small mountain behind the clubhouse.

On the mountain side of the nine-hole track, after your uphill tee shot into a narrow fairway you begin a steady climb that leaves your heart thumping against the wall of your chest

when you finally reach the sixth green. The 380-yard sixth hole provides an opportunity for birdie with a well-placed drive and a second shot into a small green.

After your long ascent up the hill you come to the seventh tee box that inspires a level of fear as you stare at a 187-yard downhill par 3, with little to no room for error. Cut out of the mountain face the green is protected by a steep hill running away from the putting surface on the left and a wall of native grasses on the right. Any shot long will spell disaster as well.

After playing the seventh and eighth, I ventured to the dogleg right par 5 ninth that measures 560-yards with a pond to the right of the fairway. The creeks you came to dread on the front nine have reappeared exactly where you would traditionally like to lay up to and remove any thought of going from it if you happen to spray your woods. The green on the ninth is a tricky undulating surface that is compounded by the fact you are being watched by everyone sitting on the back deck of the clubhouse.

Talking with the father and son two-some of John and Travis Smith, whom I joined up with mid-round, I had to remark that Ponderosa Butte is a fantastic golf course. It's a challenging and trying nine-hole track that makes you hit the smart golf shot if you want to score well.

After bidding John and Travis farewell as they ventured back to the first tee to play another nine, I visited with Glenn Godfrey the course pro at Ponderosa Butte and his wife Candice. We talked about the history of the course and all the little trouble spot you can find yourself in if you're not careful. I admittedly had found a few but survived to tell the tale with some solid comeback shots.

Ponderosa Butte Golf Course is a gem of a track in Rosebud County. Under the eye of those high up towers it's a treasure the community of Colstrip should be very proud of.

I know it had been awhile since I'd been back to visit Colstrip, but this trip down memory lane made it very much worthwhile. I just wish it could have been nearly 20 years ago and I knew I'd be visiting my Grandma and Grampa when I saw those towers in the distance.

8.22. Forsyth Country Club

100 miles east of Billings sits the Forsyth Country Club. A nine-hole track that isn't too far from the Yellowstone River and is visible from the Interstate it's a perfect place to stop on a drive through the area.

I walked into the Forsyth Country Club clubhouse on a perfect 75-degree Sunday morning and met Kevin Hoover and his grandson. They had graciously offered up to show me around the golf course on what turned out to be a wonderful day for golf.

The first hole at Forsyth Country Club is a 319-yard straightforward par 4 with out of bounds stakes on the right and trees lining the fairway. The tee box sits just a few feet from the clubhouse entrance and immediately under the American flag that blows in the cool early summer breeze. A small mounded green is protected by a large bunker just a few paces in front of the right-hand side of the green.

The short length of Forsyth Country Club provides the longball hitter with countless birdie opportunities throughout the nine-hole course that measures in at just under 3,000 yards on the par 35 front nine white tees and just over 3,000 yards on the par 36 back nine blue tees.

The fourth hole plays as a drive-able par 4 on the front nine at just 271-yards but becomes a par 3 on the back nine measuring 168-yards. With O.B. stakes to the right and a pond that comes into play on the left the hole could surrender birdies or an eagle but can also force big numbers with a poor tee shot.

The blind uphill seventh hole is a short 124-yards but is protected by a pair of bunkers in front of the green. This short of a tee shot makes for an exciting trip up the hill to see how close you are to the pin.

The closing hole at the Forsyth Country Club is another hole that plays as either a par 3 or a par 4 depending on if it's your ninth hole or eighteenth. The ninth is an overwater tee shot to the green that sits right in front of the clubhouse. It plays 148-yards with a smaller pond located just off the front right of the green.

As Kevin and I finished our round on this perfect morning in Forsyth we had to laugh at all the help we had from his grandson who loved to pull the pin for us on every green. It was among a list of his duties like finding the right club for his grandpa to hit, cleaning golf balls in the ball washer, and getting to drive the golf cart.

That's one of my favorite things about the game of golf. It's family friendly and the perfect way to get young kids involved in the game is to get them out with you. It's quality family time in the great Montana outdoors, what could be better?

If you would have asked Kevin's grandson, just getting to drive the golf cart one more time.

8.23. Briarwood Golf Club

Going into my senior year of college at Montana Tech I wasn't expecting to be labeled old, but that's what happened when Sean Benson showed up to play golf for the Diggers. All the sudden, Sean Benson was being referred to as "Good Sean" and I was being called "Old Sean" by our teammates.

It seemed only fitting that I paired up with “Good Sean” to play his home course of Briarwood Golf Club in Billings.

In the beautiful hills outside southern Billings sits a golf course that will give you the best test of golf along with scenic views. Across rolling green hills, over the open range, and under a beautiful blue sky, Briarwood weaves its way around Montana’s southeastern wilderness.

Sean and I started in the late morning at Briarwood under some slight cloud cover on the first tee at Briarwood Golf Club. The first hole of Briarwood offers you a glimpse into the next four hours of precision and placement golf as you tee off from an elevated box down a steep hill laying up before Blue Creek that meanders its way across the course. A slight dogleg left after the initial creek promotes a layup shot before attacking the pin that is protected by a pair of black sand bunkers with a wedge in your hand.

Briarwood’s holes slowly work their ways up hillsides until dramatic elevation changes are wreaking havoc on your tee shots. The third hole at Briarwood is one such hole that features a near 100-foot drop from the tee box to a green protected by a bunker in the back left on the 145-yard hole. This is not the most dramatic of elevation changes however as the par 3 sixteenth hole features a monumental drop from an elevated tee box to a wide green protected by three black sand bunkers. The hole measures in at 190-yards but plays to only 140-yards from the high elevation.

As “Good Sean” and I made our way around Briarwood and talked a bit about the course he has grown up playing we reminisced about the good old days of playing college golf together. We talked about how things had changed since we were both teammates and all the trips and courses we had played.

On the back nine, Sean wisely got a cart as most members at Briarwood do, but I kept on huffing it up the winding trails and fairways. I scoffed as the first three holes on the front nine weren't too difficult to walk and thought, *"I'm not so sure what everyone was warning me about. This course's hills aren't too bad."*

Boy was I wrong. The 13th, 14th, and 15th holes at Briarwood are affectionally called the B\$%#@es and for good reason. These three par 4s feel as if they are played straight up a mountain to small landing areas and brutally tough greens that slope in several different directions. Just as I would catch my breath and hit my shot I would have to do my best impression on someone summitting mount Everest and haul my clubs up another couple hundred yards of steady incline.

Greeting you by the green of one of these holes is a wooden bear carved out of an old tree that used to protect the 14th green. It stands tall and ever watching your second shot in from its post between the cart path and the undulating green.

After the round at Briarwood, "Good Sean" and I ventured inside for lunch at the Black Bunker Bar & Grill named after the black sand protects Briarwood's greens. Inside the spacious bar that offers view of the expansive course and practice areas we visited about our round and tallied up our scores.

As I looked down at our scorecard and I came to a realization that has been some time in the works: I am never going to be "Good Sean" as long as I'm friends with Sean Benson.

8.24. Exchange City Par 3

Lost in the hubbub of all the fancy golf courses around the world is the role of the par 3 course. A place to refine the mid-iron and short game for players of all skill level, for beginners

to fall in love with the game, and for old timers to bet their dimes and quarters on closest-to-the-pin contests on every single hole.

In the late evening of a warm cloudless day, I walked into the pro shop of the Exchange City Par 3 course in Billings and asked if I could get out for a quick 18 and quickly joined up with a pair of retirees named Dave and Lionel on the first tee. Dave was the more experienced golfer, but Lionel provided more entertainment as we took our best shots at each and every pin at the short course.

A par 54 layout the par 3 course plays extremely well with great greens, a fast pace of play, and several challenging tee shots over water, around trees, and up and down hillsides. With the amount of play the greens at Exchange City get they didn't show much wear and tear at all. They were receptive, green, and putted true.

The first hole at Exchange City plays at 212 yards from the back tees and works away from the clubhouse and through a line of pine trees to an elevated green pitched back-to-front. Only one hole plays longer than the first at Exchange City and that is the eighteenth that measures in at 218 yards along a wall of pine trees on the left and some small deciduous trees behind the green.

The shortest hole at Exchange City is the 16th that plays at a little less than 110 yards back and allows you to take dead aim at the pin or play a shot to spin back down the sloping green and towards the hole if enough spin is applied.

As Dave, Lionel, and myself ventured our way along this short course and tried our best to make an ace, we visited about what brought them out to the Par 3.

“For me, I just love this golf course. It’s perfect for my game and not too long for a duffer like me” said Dave. “And it doesn’t take too long to play your way around here in the evening. It’s perfect.”

After our round, I had to agree with Dave’s sentiments about the Par 3. It is a perfect little place to work on your golf game and meet new people. Without the hubbub of needing a driver.

8.25. Yellowstone Country Club

About a year ago I drove the long driveway up to Yellowstone Country Club in Billings for the first time. I walked onto the perfectly manicured driving range and began to warm up before the Pro-Am I was supposed to be competing in on a beautiful May day. After hitting practice balls on the range, I grabbed my bag and walked back toward the clubhouse to put some putts down on the notoriously fast and firm greens at YCC. Stopping by the golf cart with a sign with my name on it, I was surprised to see a set of golf clubs on the cart that weren’t mine.

Confused, I walked into the pro shop and said, “Hey, my name is Sean Ryan and I think you’ve got clubs on the cart I was assigned that aren’t mine. I just want to make sure I don’t take the wrong cart.”

The two gentlemen working behind the counter in the pro shop looked at one another and said, “Oh, you’re not our Sean Ryan.”

I laughed, “Nope, I’m not. You guys have a Sean Ryan?”

Playing in the Pro-Am with my Aunt Deb and her friends, the running joke whenever I missed a putt was, “The other Sean Ryan probably would have made that one.”

After finishing the Pro-Am my Aunt and I were waiting for the scores to come in and sitting around laughing about our enjoyable day of golf when I figured I better ask someone who this other Sean Ryan character was.

The gentleman behind the counter pointed out the window of the pro shop and said, “Well, he’s actually on the putting green out there if you want to meet him.”

Not wanting to miss out on this opportunity I walked up to the other Sean Ryan on the putting green and asked, “Are you Sean Ryan?”

“Yea, who wants to know?” replied Sean.

I shook the other Sean’s hand and said, “Sean Ryan, pleasure to meet you.”

From that moment on, I knew when I played Yellowstone Country Club for Montana’s Longest Drive, I had to play with Sean Ryan.

So, Wednesday morning when I stood on the first tee at Yellowstone Country Club I heard the loudspeaker announce, “Next on the number one tee, Mr. Sean Ryan, Mr. Sean Ryan, and Mr. Nate Royer.”

Sean had organized a fantastic morning of golf at Yellowstone for my second trip around the famed golf course that sits underneath the Rimrocks on the eastern edge of Billings. He had convinced one of his best friends Nate Royer to join us and I’m so thankful he did.

Nate, Sean, and I made our way around the impeccable golf course that plays roughly 6,800 yards from the blue tees. The first at Yellowstone is a difficult starting hole that measures in at 433-yards and features two fairway bunkers on each side of the fairway. Lined with skyscraping cottonwoods and dense pine trees, if you get too far off the fairway anywhere on the course, you’ll be in for a number of punch shots back to the fairway. The greens at Yellowstone are firm and fast and feature some big breaks and slight undulations that make every putt daunting.

Throughout the front nine our group was tested and challenged by the greens and tight fairways of Yellowstone. We finally seemed to find our groove near the middle of the front nine. One of my favorite holes on the course is number six. It’s a dogleg left par 4, that plays around

345-yards over a trio of bunkers that jut out from the left rough around 250-yards from the tee box. The slightly elevated green sits in the shadows of some high cottonwoods and is protected by two bunkers in front and one bunker in the back.

Sean was quick to say, “This course sets up for a guy hitting a draw. It really does.”

And he wasn't lying as most tee shots rewarded a drawing ball flight and that seemed to fit my eye. Tee shots like the one on the par 4 ninth hole, that plays 436-yards and turns left after a couple of sets of bunkers that sit 250-yards off the tee. The green at the ninth is a crowned surface with a large false front that will quickly send any golf ball zipping back off the front of the green if it doesn't carry far enough.

Nate, Sean, and I worked our way around Yellowstone's gorgeous layout and up some of the rolling hillsides we continually told stories and remarked about people we knew, how confusing it was having two Sean M. Ryans in the group (Sean's middle name is Miller and mine is Michael), and how funny it would be to play a member-guest golf tournament with two Sean Ryans.

After casting my drive into the left rough and among the trees on the dogleg left par 4 closing hole it took me a few strokes to get onto the fringe. Needing to chip in to save par I looked at Nate and Sean and joked, “Well I'm just going to make this if that's ok.”

I clipped the ball with the grooves of my wedge and landed it on the green left of the pin and it slowly turned its way right into the cup.

We hooted and hollered and high-fived at my first chip in of this long golf trip and laughed about how I had called my shot. After our round we went to get a bite to eat in the temporary clubhouse that YCC has set up while they are building a brand-new venue for their clubhouse and pro shop that is set to open next summer right before their member-guest tournament.

As I sipped on a cold beer and had a burger with my two new buddies Sean and Nate, I had to think back about how the golf gods had made this happen. It all started with golf clubs being put on the back of the wrong golf cart. I might never be the Yellowstone Country Club's Sean Ryan but being the Sean Ryan who is friends with Yellowstone's Sean Ryan and Nate Royer is more than enough for me.

8.26. Hilands Golf Club

Nestled in the middle of a residential section of Billings is an immaculate nine-hole golf course called Hilands Golf Club. This private course was constructed in 1922 on a plot of land selected by golf's legendary Walter Hagen.

This parkland style course features narrow fairways lined by the tallest of pine trees that demand precision tee shots. Walking around the course of Hilands has you thinking that the Garden of Eden must look a lot like this. Green grass, a gorgeous blue sky, and small ponds and creeks that meander throughout the nine-hole track make you forget you're in the heart of Billings.

Continuing my day of golf with Sean Ryan and Nate Royer from our morning round at Yellowstone, I stood in awe at some of the beautiful holes that Hilands hosts.

Holes like the par 4 second, that can play as a drive-able par 4 if you're willing to risk hitting it into a pair of small ponds that protect the front of the green that sits in front of the patio of the clubhouse. Measuring in at 275-yards from the back tees this shot is less about power and more about accuracy. Laying up with a long iron or hybrid will give you a short wedge shot in to the small green that features small undulations that can sometimes go unnoticed until after you've missed your putt.

The fourth hole at Hilands plays as a par 4 on the front nine and a par 5 on the back measuring in at 469-yards. The tee box sits in between a pair of little ponds where small ducks sit and quack without a care in the world. A tee shot that finds the large inviting fairway allows you to go for the sloping and undulating green in two if you're careful not to hit it out of bounds on the left.

The most exciting hole at Hilands is the par 4 fifteenth hole that is 290-yards long and doglegs right near the green. A high fading tee shot can find the green in one with a good chance at eagle if you can negotiate the tall cottonwood trees that drape over the left-hand side of the fairway and protect the putting surface.

As we finished our round at Hilands and put our clubs in our cars we eventually ended up in the clubhouse bar telling stories to one another and to a large group that had formed around our table. I even ran into my old high school buddy and teammate Gabe Gaudreau working in the pro shop at Hilands. Montana really is such a small world.

Hilands Golf Club is a masterpiece of a nine-hole golf course that knows exactly what makes people want to golf. It provides a gorgeous experience in a parkland setting with tall pine trees and receptively soft greens and a great atmosphere around the entire acreage.

No wonder Walter Hagan picked this plot of land to build a little golfing Garden of Eden.

A special thank you to Eddie Kavran and the staff at Hilands Golf Club for letting me experience this magnificent golf course on my trip.

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@MontanasLongestDrive

8.27. Lake Hills Golf Course

My guide around Lake Hills Golf Course was a one of a kind gentleman named John Alberta. The former football and golf coach at Billings Senior High School volunteers his time at Lake Hills and generously offered to show me around the property during Thursday morning.

Dressed in a bright orange shirt and proudly sporting an orange Lake Hills hat, John was the ultimate ambassador of the course he works and plays at. Throughout the round he showed me the antelope that call Lake Hills home, introduced me to everyone we came across, and even invited me inside to eat lunch with the Senior Home & Home tournament participants. There was just no saying no to Mr. Alberta.

It had to be quite the sight to behold as a 24-year-old walked step-by-step with a golf cart manned by the 86-year-old “Mayor” of Lake Hills. John and I visited about his football teams, his golf teams, and discussed every sport story imaginable during the round.

Lake Hills Golf Course is a wonderful track that can play as long as 6,802-yards from the back tees. When it was built in 1957 it was one of the longest courses in the state of Montana.

Because of a tournament the senior tournament that was being played, John and I started our journey on the back nine. The 10th hole at Lake Hills is a 536-yard par 5, that allows you to get off to the right start if your drive is in the fairway. Stray too far to the left or right and your second shot into this slightly undulating green could be over before it even gets started. A number of antelope can most likely be found to the right of this hole in the long fescue rough.

John Alberta was quick to point out when we got to the 11th hole that this was the hole where he got the first of his six holes-in-one. The 11th is a 165-yard par 3 that is protected by a tree on the left and deep bunkers behind the green and to the right of the green.

When I asked John when he got his first hole-in-one he responded, “Oh, I’m 86-years old, I can’t remember that far back. I just remember it happened right here. It’s all about luck.”

Another challenging and fun hole on the back nine at Lake Hills is the par 5 13th. From an elevated tee this hole slightly doglegs right after a large bunker that sits 280-yards from the tee box and occupies the right side of the fairway landing area. A small stream runs the length of the hole on the left-hand side of the fairway while the green is protected by a large pond inside of a hundred yards of the green. The elevated green slopes away from the center in all directions and can tempting to go for in two if your drive finds the fairway.

On the front nine, John and I joined four other golfers on the downhill 3rd hole. At only 356-yards and downhill a big drive can put you squarely in birdie range. Out of bounds to the right and water on the left makes for a daunting tee shot. The large green on the third slopes away from the fairway midway through the putting surface and can make holding this green without a wedge in your hand very difficult.

As it turns out, John had coached two of the guys we joined up with at Senior High School. As we concluded the round and John introduced me to everyone he could inside the dining room at Lake Hills I had to be very thankful.

I get to call myself a friend of the “Mayor” of Lake Hills.

8.28. Eagle Rock Golf Club

With how far I’d come, I wasn’t going to let a little rain stop me. But this was more than a little rain.

Playing in a heavy drizzle for a majority of my last nine at EagleRock Golf Course outside of Billings, Montana, I had grown accustomed to traipsing through the deep puddles and suddenly apparent rivers that were running down the fairways.

The rumble of distant thunder was suddenly upon me as I hit a 4-iron to a narrow stretch of fairway on the 9th hole that wasn’t under water. I threw my club back into my bag and began

to run with my golf bag slung over my right shoulder through the now underwater fairway and rough as rain began to pelt my back. First the drops were small, then larger, then gigantic and falling by the thousands. With the rain came small chunks of hail. Golf carts from all over front nine were speeding toward the clubhouse to escape the torrential downpour and storm as I continued my frantic rush to finish what I had started.

After essentially crossing the Delaware to get to my tee shot and being completely soaked from the pouring rain I instinctively reached for my rangefinder to figure my yardage into the green. Looking through the eyepiece of the rangefinder I realized that it had been ruined by the heavy downpour. So, with a rough guess at the yardage I hit my ball up near the green. My path to the green grew even more difficult as I jumped over small rivers and trudged through endlessly long puddles that pushed water clear up past my ankles.

As painful bits of hail flew almost sideways and hit me, I pulled my hat down to protect my eyes and chipped up near the pin. A four-foot putt stood between me and the most waterlogged par of my life. So I took my time and carefully read it to break a smidge to the left. With wind, and rain, and hail, and my whole body soaked, I calmly knocked the ball into the rainwater filled cup.

Walking toward the clubhouse I had to be quite the sight for the folks holed up in under the awning. One of them asked, “What in the hell were you doing out there?”

“Finishing out. I wasn’t gonna let a little bit of moisture stop me,” I replied.

Mother Nature wasn’t going to win today, not with all the work I had done to get to this point.

When I first got to EagleRock, I was told I was only going to be able to play the back nine. With the front nine really soaked the staff at EagleRock wasn't going to allow carts or anything of the like on the lower nine holes.

I started off on the 10th tee and made my way around the back nine with relative ease. Sure, I had to find alternative routes to some of the greens and had to take the long way around a couple of puddles, but it was worth it.

The 16th and 17th holes at EagleRock are fantastic golf holes. Both playing around 330-yards from the blue tee boxes they are back-to-back dogleg lefts that force the players to weigh the option of cutting the corner or playing safe and smart by finding the fairway with a long iron. The 16th features a pond on the left of the fairway and in front of the tee that you must clear. A crowned green awaits a short wedge shot if you can find the sloping fairway with your tee shot. The 17th has a stream with tall cattails on the left-hand side of the fairway and is protected by a deep bunker in the front left of the green. This large green slopes back-to-front and requires you to be below the hole to be aggressive on a birdie putt.

Nearing the end of my first nine I played down the middle of the fairway of the 18th hole and decided to lay up short of the green to give myself the best chance at birdie. Unfortunately, where I layed up to was a twenty-foot-long and twenty-foot-wide puddle of rainwater that had accumulated from the storms the previous evening. There was my ball, a lonely Titleist sitting submerged just out of reach in the middle of the fairway, waiting for the next golfer to come up the 18th hole on a day that is a little less damp.

After the front nine, I had to beg and plead with the staff to get permission to play the front. After about a half hour of watching me pace outside the shop window they decided to let me go out with one of their members who was only going to play a few holes.

So, I caught up with a man with long gray hair named Dale who was originally going to hit the driving range only to find it closed. We played and visited for the first four or five holes before Dale wisely said, “I think this storm is moving in, I’m going to get out of here before it hits. Are you going to come in?”

“No, I think I’ll stick it out,” I joked and quoted the line from *Caddyshack*. “I don’t think the heavy stuff is gonna come down for quite a while.”

Four holes later, I was soaked to the bone and carrying a golf bag that was dripping with rainwater as I walked back to my car. I threw my bag in the back and laid a towel over the seat before driving back into Billings. As I started my car, I caught a glimpse of myself in the rear-view mirror and busted out laughing.

Staring back at me was a windburned face with drops of rain still running down my forehead and a large “*that was great fun wasn’t it?*” grin. It was great fun and a little bit of a torrential downpour wasn’t going to stop me.

Carl Spackler would’ve been proud.

8.29. Yegen Golf Club

The small world of golf in Montana got even smaller when I got a phone call from the Head Golf Pro at Yegen Golf Club in late April. As soon as I heard the name Jared Strickland I was instantly transported some six years back in time to the Butte Country Club.

My freshman season at Montana Tech my first college tournament was at the Butte Country Club. Intimidated was an understatement as I stood on the 6th tee and introduced myself to the other college golfers I would be playing with. One of the golfers playing for Rocky Mountain College was Jared Strickland.

He was a senior and I was a freshman, but he was kind and friendly as I navigated my first college tournament. We walked and talked about what I could expect from college golf and many other things.

So, it was a neat thing to have Jared invite me to play Yegen along my trip. He set me up with a couple of playing partners and a morning tee time at Yegen for Saturday.

I've always enjoyed playing Yegen. A par 71 course in the heart of Billings, Yegen can cater to any type of player. Playing at 6,600 yards from the tips and 5,000 yards from the forward tees it can present a challenge to anyone with a set of clubs. Narrow fairways and fast greens make Yegen a great place to get a round in.

Walking along with the twosome Jared had paired me up with, I remembered why I love this golf course so much. For myself, it's a course you hit a lot of drivers and wedges at hoping you'll shoot a low number.

The 4th hole at Yegen is a dogleg left par 5 with mounds on both sides of the fairway and a wall of tall trees on the left. Playing at 528-yards it can be reachable in two if your drive is in the fairway or has a clear shot from the rough on the right. The elevated green is protected by a bunker in the front left and slopes back-to-front.

The 308-yard 14th hole is a drive-able par 4 that requires a tee shot that can carry the large pond on the left of the fairway while also not finding the pond to the right of the green. This dogleg left hole is protected by a bunker on each side of the green and can easily give golfers an easy birdie with a good tee shot but also can undo a round with a poor first shot.

The second to last hole at Yegen is the long and challenging 194-yard par 3 17th. Almost always playing into the wind this tee shot must clear a large pond that juts out in front of the

green with the danger of O.B. on the left of the hole. Always playing a club or two longer than anticipated, this hole is one where walking away with a par is victory.

Yegen Golf Club in Billings is a great golf course. With challenging risk-reward golf holes and many opportunities for birdies it's a real fun one to play.

Just make sure when you're there to say hello to Jared Strickland for me. That will make the small world of golf in Montana even smaller.

Elmer Link Course at Pryor Creek

They say golf is a game you can play your whole life and one of my playing partners on Sunday at Pryor Creek Golf Course proved that.

Clark Swan's story about returning to college golf almost 40 years after he started is a unique one I was lucky enough to hear firsthand as he and his son Ryan hosted me for a beautiful morning round on the Elmer Link Course at Pryor Creek Golf Club.

With dew still on the putting green and the sun starting to climb itself over the tall trees, I introduced myself to Clark and Ryan. Clark started at Eastern Montana College in 1967 and was a member of the football and golf teams his first go around.

"I was a just a young guy playing football against all these Vietnam Vets who had returned to go school after the war," Clark said. "I really found my niche on the golf team and played with some really great guys and lifetime friends. Golf was my love and I guess it still is."

Life came calling however as Clark got married in 1970 and dropped out of school to move to Denver and take a sales job.

"I got married and started a family. In the long run, that's what I will always be most proud of," said Clark.

The love of family was clear from the get-go as Clark, Ryan, and I made our way along the course at Pryor Creek walking and talking. On Elmer Link's par 4 326-yard 4th hole that weaves its way along the creek bottom underneath sky scraping cottonwood trees I chatted with Ryan about what seeing his dad play college golf four decades after he started was like.

On the undulating green protected by a large bunker on the front right, Ryan said, "It was amazing. I was really lucky to get to watch my dad play almost every tournament when he went back. Not a lot of people get to see their dad compete at the college level like he did. I was and am really proud of him."

Clark Swan explained the story of what made him go back to school, "I was walking around the Alterowitz Gymnasium at MSUB and was looking at some of the old trophies when an old coach came up to me and we started talking. He said that I might have a little eligibility left so I did some research and worked with the compliance office and found out I had three semesters left. So I went back to school and decided to try to walk on to the golf team."

At 62-years old Clark went back to school. Ryan and I joked that it hopefully wasn't like Rodney Dangerfield in *Back to School*. There were no triple-lindies for Clark when he went back to get his history degree. He began practicing, lifting weights, and competing for the Yellowjacket golf team at tournaments.

"The team really embraced me and made me feel welcome. They were some great kids and I loved it," said Clark.

"The look on some of the young kids' faces at tournaments was really something to see when they realized my dad wasn't a coach, but was competing against them," laughed Ryan.

We played the par 4 7th hole that measures in 374-yards. This difficult driving hole doglegs a hair to the right but cutting the corner is protected by massive cottonwoods running the

length of the right rough. If your tee shot carries too far, you'll find yourself under the cottonwoods that shade the left rough. The crowned 7th green is protected in front by a large deep bunker that will swallow up any shots left short.

The Swans and I made our way around the gorgeous private side of Pryor Creek and had a barrel of laughs. We chatted and told stories about our lives and families. It was a perfect morning with new friends as the sun climbed higher into the sky and burned the dew off the greens.

After holing out on the 18th green to complete the dogleg right par 5 finishing hole that plays 560-yards and is protected by two bunkers in front of the putting surface, Clark, Ryan, and I shook hands.

At lunch I mentioned to Clark how much fun it was to play golf with he and his son. It was really one of the best days of this trip so far because father and son got to spend time doing what they both love and I got to be a part of it.

Over a burger we told more stories and Clark entertained us with tales of his career and life before returning to college golf and school.

As we parted ways and I got set to play my second 18 holes of the day, I had a thought, *“Playing golf with Clark and Ryan Swan was way better than any Triple-Lindy.”*

Thank you to the staff at Pryor Creek Golf Club and to Clark and Ryan Swan for a fantastic day of golf and memories.

“Like” Montana’s Longest Drive on Facebook and follow along on Instagram @MontanasLongestDrive

8.30. Johnny Walker Course at Pryor Creek

After walking 18 holes and having lunch in the clubhouse at Pryor Creek, I walked across the road to the 1st tee of the Johnny Walker Course. Originally supposed to join another twosome, I must have just missed them teeing off while I was applying another coat of sunscreen on a hot and sunny day. Standing on the tee, I saw a twosome in a cart waiting in the shade a hundred yards or so back from the tee, so I waved them up to join me.

That was how I met my playing partners for my 19th through 36th holes of the day, Todd and Dell Kay. Introducing myself to them, I had to explain what had me out in the heat of the day packing my clubs on the back and in search of a game.

Todd, Dell Kay, and I teed off on the 488-yard par 5 1st hole and made our way down a steep hill toward a tight treelined fairway that is hard to find off the tee. After hitting down the hillside, you're second and third shots have to be wary of the sand that protects the front side of the elevated green.

We visited about golf, our hobbies, and the Johnny Walker Course at Pryor Creek that was built in 2005. A young course this track has great greens and a spectacular layout that will only improve as the course matures over time. Having never played here before, I was consistently asking where to hit the ball, where I could miss, and which direction the next tee was.

Standing atop a high hillside on the 4th tee, you could see the whole Pryor Creek valley unfold before you. Farmland touched the horizon as dirt roads crisscrossed the agricultural landscape. With a cattail lined pond in the backdrop the 4th green sits a good 60-70 feet below the tee ground. Measuring in at 149-yards the shot plays a club or two less depending on the breeze.

The Johnny Walker Course is a true out-and-in style golf layout that doesn't come back to the clubhouse while you play. Once you leave the clubhouse, you don't return after nine holes. A snack shack sits at the intersection of the tees and greens of holes 6, 7, 9, 10, 14, and 15.

This course features a number of holes that are of the risk-reward type like the driveable 7th hole that has three bunkers in front of the green right where driver would land for the average hitter. The 16th hole is a similar setup with a slight dogleg left through the trees from an uphill tee. With cottonwoods on both sides of the fairway, a tee shot must be struck just right with a driver to give you a short wedge into the crowned green with a bunker protecting it on the right. A long iron or hybrid off the tee has a much better chance of finding the fairway but will leave a longer iron into a tough to hold green.

Wrapping up my longest day so far of this trip with Todd and Dell Kay, I couldn't have had a better time. Under the hot sun we putted out and said our goodbyes on the 18th green. I figured I got pretty lucky to join up with such fun people as Todd and Dell Kay on my adventure.

You just never know who you'll become friends with when you miss your intended twosome because you were too busy applying more sunscreen.

Thanks to the staff for at Pryor Creek for a wonderful day of golf at a couple of fine courses. Pryor Creek is a great 36 hole facility just outside of Billings, Montana.

8.31. Laurel Golf Club

Do you ever wonder how long it took you so long to meet someone when you've been going to all the same events and know quite a few of the same people? That's what Jeff Noble, his son Tayler Noble, and I were wondering during our round at Laurel Golf Club on Monday.

On one of the best courses of Montana and one of my personal favorites, I got to play with some of my favorite people.

I first met Jeff and Tayler Noble during the twilight of my college career while playing my last round of the Lewis-Clark State Invitational in Lewiston, Idaho. Tayler and I both started playing golf at the same time, Tayler playing for Rocky Mountain College, and I playing for Montana Tech. Through all of the events and tournaments our two teams were at, Tayler and I never met. Of course, we knew of each other as Tayler was a standout for the Battlin' Bears, but we never knew each other.

That is until we met on the first tee of the Lewiston Country Club as seniors for our respective schools. Following along with Tayler was his mom Kyme and his dad Jeff. Jeff and I immediately hit it off, walking and talking as we hiked the hills of the Lewiston Country Club, Jeff and I swapped jokes as Tayler and I played our first round together. One-liners flew about, and many laughs were had.

I left Lewiston thinking, *"How did I not meet the Nobles before today?"*

Well it wasn't more than a week later that Jeff and Kyme were staying at the same hotel as my team during the Frontier Conference Championships down in Phoenix. All ready to enjoy the nearly one hundred degree heat of the Arizona desert, I walked down to the outdoor hotel pool to take a dip. Minutes after jumping into the water, Jeff Noble comes out the door of the hotel with a cooler of beer to sit by the pool. Jeff and I must've sat by that pool for two hours BS-ing under the sun.

With that backstory, you'll understand why I was so eager to play a round at Laurel with Jeff and Tayler Noble when they invited me out to play. We met for breakfast in the lounge at Laurel Golf Club about an hour before the round and eventually found our way laughing and swapping stories on one of the most gorgeous and challenging layouts in the Treasure State.

Laurel Golf Club opens with a 392-yard dogleg right par 4. Walls of cottonwoods overhand the right side of the fairway and your tee shot must scoot past a pine tree that sits on the corner of the fairway. Through the fairway are more trees and a pond that will swallow up any shot that carries too far off the tee. An elevated green with a back-to-front slope is protected by a deep bunker on the left and a mound on the right.

The motto to playing golf at Laurel is “stay below the hole” and for good reason. The lightning quick and firm greens at Laurel Golf Club can make a birdie putt from above the hole quickly turn into a 20-foot par putt from almost off the green.

The 380-yard dogleg right 5th hole at Laurel is another risk-reward golf hole. The opportunity to layup to the top of the hill will give you a mid-iron into another severely sloping green with a bunker in the front left, but cottonwoods require a very high fading ball flight with a driver or wood to cut the corner.

Making our way around this course, it was a fantastic opportunity to catch up with Tayler. The same age and with the same passion for people and golf as myself, Tayler recently took the Pro Shop Manager position at Headwaters Golf Course in Three Forks, Montana. We talked about the days of playing 36 holes straight for college tournaments, the awful weather days we had to play through, and all the people we had met along the way playing college golf. We especially talked about how strange it was we didn't meet each other until it was almost over.

The 13th hole at Laurel is a difficult par 3 that plays almost 200-yards uphill. Protected by a pair of bunkers in the front right and front left this hole demands the right club selection and for the golfer to keep an eye on the wind. It's a spectacular looking view as the shadows of the cottonwoods are cast all the way from tee to green protecting the golfer from the hot sun.

The finishing hole at Laurel is a long par 5 that plays just over 500-yards back towards the clubhouse. A bunker sits about 280-yards off the tee on the left of the fairway and cottonwoods jut out on the right of the fairway inside of 200 yards of the green. From an elevated fairway landing area even with the fairway bunker a long second shot is possible to find the elevated green as long as it clears the three bunkers that surround the putting surface. This long deep green features a number of undulations and tiers that can make birdies difficult if you find the wrong location with your third shot.

After our round, Jeff, Tayler, and I sat in the clubhouse and had a round. We laughed about the shots we wished we had back and bragged about how great a golf course Laurel is to play.

It might have taken me a long time to meet the Nobles, but the wait was definitely worth it.

8.32. Red Lodge Mountain Golf Course

In the shadows of the Beartooth Mountains is the little resort town of Red Lodge, Montana, one of my favorite places in the world. With a beautiful and historic main street full of shops, boutiques, and fun little bars Red Lodge has everything a town with a ski resort needs.

When the snow eventually melts off of the ski hill in May another opportunity for recreation comes to life in Red Lodge at Red Lodge Mountain Golf Course. The golf course overlooks the valley that houses the little ski town that hustles and bustles every day of the summer thanks to the many festivals and activities the town puts on.

Besides the golf, the other reason I love Red Lodge is because my Sister, Brother-in-Law, and Nieces and Nephew live there. Visiting these hilarious kids each with their own wild and

funny personality is something that I never grow tired of. Whether it's jumping on the trampoline or listening to their jokes and stories these kids are always a hoot.

The night I made it to Red Lodge, my sister Annie and I took the kids down to the Red Box Car. This little ice cream shop housed in an old red railroad car along the roaring Rock Creek. With swirl cones for the youngest two and sundaes for the rest of the family, the hilarious jibber-jabber from the back of the car quickly subsided as we drove home. I'm quite sure the 7-year-old nephew got more of his swirl cone on his face than in it.

The next morning, I drove to the golf course to meet up with PGA Master Professional Scott Cain who my brother-in-law had recruited to join me for my round at Red Lodge Mountain Golf Course. Cain retired to Red Lodge a few years back to ski the mountain in the winter and golf in the summer.

On a gorgeous day for golf, Scott and I ventured out onto links and talked all about the game of golf and how it has positively affected both our lives.

"The game of golf has given me so much," said Scott. "Sometimes I think back to how lucky I've been to have so much fun with a life in this game. It really isn't work if you love what you're doing every day you get up."

Scott Cain's career was tremendous to hear about. He has been a member of the National PGA Rules of Golf Committee for the last 30 years, worked as a PGA Tournament Administrator, worked on Ryder Cups, and worked NCAA Golf Championships.

I picked his brain as we walked Red Lodge's course and Scott instructed me on where to hit it on this winding and difficult golf course. The 8th hole at Red Lodge Mountain Golf Course is a dogleg right with a creek that runs in front of the green. A thick row of trees will swallow up

any tee shots too far to the right of the fairway and thick rough along the left of the fairway will make second shots into this elevated green protected by twin front bunkers even more difficult.

The streams that crisscross the property of the golf course can surprise you off the tee if you aren't careful and send your ball rushing along the streambed never to be seen again.

The 15th is the signature hole at Red Lodge Mountain Golf Course is a severely downhill par 3 that measures in at 185 yards. The hole plays two clubs shorter because of the elevation change. The island green of this hole can be seen from the highway as you drive in to town. One of the largest greens on the course, it demands a confident tee shot and club selection to this sloping green you must cross a bridge to get to.

After playing the island green hole, the par 5 16th, and the uphill par 3 17th, Scott and I began our summit of the trail that leads up the valley wall to the 18th tee box. Weaving its way up the steep hill the path is a long arduous walk that leaves you gasping for air when you reach the top.

After we finally hit the top of the hill and were on our way to the 18th tee, I noticed a white sign and a cooler sitting in the yard of a house not more than a hundred yards to our left. The sign read:

SEAN RYAN

MONTANA'S LONGEST DRIVE

Scott got a kick out of seeing the sign that my friend Paul Hart had put out for us, and we enjoyed the Red Lodge Ales that were in the cooler. We laughed and cheers to our host who wasn't home, and Scott joked, "You've got to tell this guy that I play league on Wednesday nights."

Finishing our round refreshed from the cold craft beer Paul had generously provided, we shook hands as Scott stuck the flag back into the cup on the last hole.

With my new friend and golf partner in Red Lodge, I found another reason that Red Lodge is one of my favorite places in the world.

8.33. Stillwater Golf Course

Driving along the two-lane road between Joliet and Columbus, I bobbed up and down the winding highway on my way across the roaring Yellowstone River to Stillwater Golf Course during a hot afternoon. Tonight, I was going to going play alongside the men's league at Stillwater Golf Course while completing my tour of golf courses in Montana.

My connection to join the league at Columbus for one night, was Blake Haug, who is my brother-in-law's brother-in-law. Suddenly I feel like I'm quoting Spaceballs here in this story when trying to describe how I'm not really related to Blake.

To make things simpler, Blake introduced me to everyone around the course as his brother-in-law and it was as simple as that as I hopped onto the back of his cart to get a ride out to the 8th tee where we would be starting and eventually finishing our league round. Blake's partner was the two-time club champion at Stillwater Chris Rasmussen and the showed me around their home track.

Starting on the 8th hole that plays now as a par 4 on the back nine, we had to be wary of the ditch that runs across the fairway right where a driver would land. With a pond and trouble to your right the tee shot needs to find the fairway before you travel up a slight hill to an undulating green that is protected by water behind it and to the right.

As an honorary member of the men's league on a beautiful night in Stillwater County, a setting sun provided picturesque views of the golf course as we stood on the number one tee. The

1st hole at Stillwater is a dogleg right par 4 that plays about 330-yards if you decide to cut the corner over the driving range that is out-of-bounds. Thick cottonwoods cast shade over the green and hang their long limbs over tee shots that don't get past the corner pine trees on the drive. This green on the first hole is protected by a bunker on the front left and features an undulating surface that can house many difficult pins depending on the greenskeeper's mood that day.

As the league night went on and I walked alongside Blake and Chris as they maneuvered their way around the course, we shot the breeze about everything golf and sports. Thankfully they instructed me on the safe play to take on some of the more difficult holes at Stillwater that can really chew you up if you aren't laying up to the right spots.

One of those risk-reward holes is the dogleg right par 4 5th hole that measures 395-yards from tee to green but has a large pond running the length of the left rough. A good drive can carry this water but as I found out, the risk wasn't worth the reward. Through the fairway a straight drive that runs too far will find water as well as the best option is to lay up with a long iron to ensure a mid-iron approach into an elevated back-to-front sloping green protected by bunkers.

After we finished our round, I was treated to what Blake called, "The best meal every week when I was a single guy." The post round feed of pasta salads, potato salads, and the like was put on by one of the league teams as they all rotate nights and the golfers bring their own steaks, burgers, or what have you, to grill on the barbecue after their done golfing.

Blake and I and some other golfers sat outside for about an hour as the sun crept down closer to the horizon on a beautiful early summer night. Stories were swapped about everything you could think of with golf being the most popular genre and a great night was had by all.

Sitting on that patio with the cool air of a summer night, I figured I could get used to a league night like this. I'd just to have to remember to pack a couple of steaks for after the round to pay back my not quite brother-in-law Blake.

8.34. Overland Golf Course

A spectacular mountain range emerges from the rolling hills of northern Sweetgrass County and scrapes the deep blue sky with its snow-covered peaks called the Crazy Mountains. The town with one of the best views of these mountains is Big Timber, Montana the home to the nine-hole Overland Golf Course.

With the Crazy Mountains as a backdrop, the clubhouse at Overland overlooks a small valley that houses the golf course. Small creeks rush the length of most fairways and ponds of all sizes dot the acreage.

My guides and hosts while in Big Timber were the Campbell family. Dan, Sheri, Taryn, Tanna, and I ventured our way out along their home course for my maiden voyage around Overland.

I've known the Campbells for some time now as Taryn and I were teammates at Montana Tech for my final two seasons of college golf. I even caddied for Taryn at the Montana State Women's Amateur two years back when it was at Green Meadow Country Club in Helena. I'm still not sure how one golf bag could be so damn heavy. I remember around the 13th or 14th hole while looping for Taryn, I started unzipping all the pockets and digging through her bag looking for the bricks I was sure she had hidden in there. I never found any bricks, but I did find every essential item you would need if you were deserted on some sort of desert island or frozen tundra.

The 1st hole at Overland is a 516-yard par 5, that doglegs slightly right from an elevated tee above the valley floor. A large and inviting fairway gives way to a small pond on the right of the fairway 50-yards short of the green past some trees that jut out into the right fairway. A creek runs across the fairway from the pond the width of the fairway. The large back-to-front sloping green has a pair of bunkers in front that protect it.

The water at Overland is a consistent theme. Smart shots are rewarded while throwing caution to the wind, in windy Big Timber, will leave you scrounging for golf balls in the bottom of your golf bag. By my count eight of the nine holes at Overland feature some sort of creek or pond that you absolutely must avoid.

The 7th hole at Overland provides a spectacular view of the Crazies as you take aim at the undulating green. With the mountains touching the highest of clouds in the distance, the 211-yard par 3 is protected not only by the deep bunker right of the green but also by another creek running across the fairway just short of the putting surface. If you find the green you've got to be wary of the tremendously large crown in the middle of the green that will seem to affect every putt no matter the length.

The closing hole at Overland is the par 5 9th hole that books at 524-yards and back up toward the clubhouse. A large pond along the right is carry-able for the long hitter if they take the correct line but hitting it too far right or left can result in a high number as the creek runs down the left rough. An elevated green sits on the hill underneath the eye of the clubhouse deck and is protected by the creek to the short left.

As the Campbells and I finished our round at Overland Golf Course, and I was relieved to have lost only one golf ball on this creek and pond filled track. Standing by the clubhouse and

overlooking Overland Golf Course with the Campbells, I was enthralled by this gorgeous and challenging nine-hole golf course.

It might have been my first time playing Overland, but it most certainly won't be my last.

8.35. Jawbone Creek Country Club

A thunderstorm raced across the farmland of central Montana as I headed north toward Harlowton. Thunder cracked, and lightning lit up the early morning sky. Rain pelted down on my windshield as I pulled into the parking lot of Jawbone Creek Country Club.

As the rain continued but the horizon behind me started to show bits of promising sunlight, I was joined in the parking lot by Gregg Wasson who coaches basketball and golf at Harlowton High School. Gregg invited me inside and we waited out the worst parts of the storm before we ventured out to play Jawbone in the waning elements.

With the wind continuing to howl we teed off on the 491-yard par 5 1st hole that doglegs left and back up a steep hill. A landing area sits at the base of the hill with a ditch running down the left side that your second shot must clear. As you walk up the fairway after the first shot to your left is a deep pond you must avoid but that isn't what catches your attention as you aim at the elevated green.

To the left of the green and a slight way down the hill is are little uniform rows of headstones that sit behind a white picket fence. Above the entrance is a sign that reads JAWBONE CEMETERY.

I've seen courses near cemeteries before, I've read signs that say, "PLEASE DON'T HUNT FOR GOLF BALLS IN THE CEMETERY", and I've even sent a few golf balls bouncing around among the granite monuments at some courses. But I had never seen a golf course with a cemetery in the middle of the property.

As the holes of Jawbone Creek Country Club worked their ways across the landscape and up hills Gregg guided me around the course telling me where to hit and where not to hit it.

The par 3 4th hole plays shorter than the 146-yards on the card as you tee off from an elevated tee toward a small back-to-front sloping green with twin grass bunkers in front. The wind at Jawbone can be treacherous as it hails from the west and forces shots to be played way out over edges of the greens with a hope that they work their way back and find the putting surface.

The long par 4 5th hole at Jawbone played even longer into the prevailing wind than the 339-yards listed. Troubling long grass past the left rough and an out-of-bounds fence along the right narrow the fairway past the hilltop. A small pond also sits at the bottom of the hill and will swallow a tee shot that tries too hard to avoid the OB fence. Another elevated green from the highest vantage point on the course offers a fantastic view of Harlowton and the Crazy Mountains in the distance.

Jawbone Creek is an excellent golf course that demands good shots, a great wind ball, and the ability to place tee shots in the correct spots. As Gregg and I wrapped up our round and he showed me around the clubhouse and the splendid views it provides of the whole property I was drawn again to the cemetery in the middle of the course.

I know I wouldn't mind my final resting place being in the middle a golf course.

8.36. Pine Ridge Golf Course

I was lucky I wasn't in Roundup last week. Last Thursday a hailstorm of epic proportions hit the central Montana town doing millions of dollars in damage to vehicles, homes, and even the golf course.

The storm was all anyone could talk about in Grand Bar where I grabbed lunch. People were answering calls from insurance companies, asking about adjusters and when they would see them next, and telling stories of how big of hailstones they found in their yards after the storm.

Driving through Roundup on my way to Pine Ridge Golf Course, I wasn't sure what shape the golf course would be in after suffering such a beating last Thursday. Cars had broken windows and windshields, deep pock marks could be seen on the hoods and fenders of every car in town, and broken windows sat in the panes of nearly every home. However, the course was in great shape considering what I was expecting.

As my playing partner, Tannar Cummings, who is originally from Belt but teaches and coaches in Roundup, made our way down the fairways I was amazed at the shape the greens were in. Talking with the course owner later in the day, I was told the grounds crew had recently punched and sanded the greens in hopes of saving them. It worked.

The opening hole at Pine Ridge is a slight dogleg left with out-of-bounds left and trees down past the landing area of the fairway on right. An elevated green sits with on top of a hill that is slightly protected by a lone tree that juts out some thirty yards short of the green from the right hand rough.

The 4th hole is a dogleg right par 5 that plays 430-yards and has out-of-bounds on the left. The rolling hill is a prime target for your drive and if the tee shot is hit well enough a mid-iron into the elevated green can set up a tremendous opportunity for an eagle or birdie.

The most interesting hole on the course at Pine Ridge is the 9th. This par 4 plays about 340-yards but has a hazard running down the left side of the fairway that cuts across about 100-yards in front of the green. A blind tee shot, this fairway suits a slight draw and will give golfers a mid-iron in to a slightly elevated green that can be seen from the clubhouse deck.

What the crew at Roundup's Pine Ridge Golf Course did in the last week is nothing short of amazing. If you hadn't been told that a hailstorm had blown through town last Thursday, you would never have known by the shape the course was in.

Roundup is resilient just like the greens at Pine Ridge Golf Course. It says a lot about a community and a golf course to take a couple of hard blows like a doozy of a hailstorm will dish out and you keep on rolling along.

It says a lot to be picking up lemon sized hailstones in the your yard one day and be playing golf so shortly after.

8.37. Rising Sun

In the Paradise Valley sits a golf course unlike any other. With the 12,807-foot-high Granite Peak casting an ever-watchful eye on every tee shot and small creeks rush their way through the wide fairways. Cottonwoods line the creek bottoms where the only sound you hear is the rushing of water past rocks that dot the streambed.

The place I'm talking about is Rising Sun Golf Course at Mountain Sky Guest Ranch near Emigrant, Montana.

Earlier in the week, I had made a phone call to Mike Peterson the course's Superintendent. While visiting on the phone we worked out a plan where I might be able to get on the course later in the week. Mike said he would call me later in the week to confirm everything. As the days went on, I played phone tag with Mike and had pretty much given up hope of playing Rising Sun when the night before playing, Mike called me to ask if I wanted to play that next morning.

Arriving near the property, I called Mike to get directions to the clubhouse through the back entrance. I embarked down a gravel road and past a couple of cattleguards until I finally

spotted a flagstick over a small hillside to my left. Turning one final corner I had arrived at the Rising Sun clubhouse.

With a dark barnwood exterior, the clubhouse for Rising Sun is as beautiful as the landscape it is set in. The driving range sits stocked with golf balls just past the entryway to the clubhouse. Inside the clubhouse are memorabilia from golf's biggest names like Johnny Miller and Annika Sorenstam along with brand new Callaway sets that guests can use when they come to play.

Mike gave me a tour of the clubhouse and showed me the way to the first tee. He wished me well and said, "Well, you're the only one on the course today. So, enjoy it my friend."

And enjoy it, I did. I enjoyed every moment of the time I was fortunate enough to spend time on Rising Sun.

There's a serene feeling that overtakes you when standing on a tee box and gazing in wonder at your surroundings. Where nature and a championship golf course blend together in perfect unity. Where you suddenly feel so insignificant when looking up at a nearly 13,000-foot-high mountain peak when you tee up your ball.

The goosebumps that I found on my arms never subsided throughout my round at Rising Sun. From the 442-yard par 4 1st hole, that doglegs slowly to the right past the high fescue that lines the edges of the rough to an undulating green protected by a deep bunker in the front left, I never lost that sense of wonder the entire round.

The 393-yard par 4 5th hole provided another wonder as I hit my tee shot across a small creek into the right fairway. The 5th hole features two fairways as it is split by the rushing creek and tall cattails down the center. Crossing an old wooden walking bridge to hit my second shot into the large green, something caught my eye high on the hillside. Perched there, watching me

walk this 7,130-yard stretch of heaven from the highest vantage point on a boulder being shaded by a small tree, was a bald eagle.

This eagle watched me play a few more holes before spreading its wings and gliding down the slight breeze in search of prey along the creek bed.

After the front, I turned my attention to the recently finished back that just opened. I hiked my way up another gravel path and found another set of holes that would delight any golfer. This course was designed by Golf Hall of Famer Johnny Miller and features a variety of holes that challenge, excite, and simultaneously intimidate even the best of player.

As I climbed my way further up the mountain playing the back nine, the heat of the early June day began to weigh on me. This course was no easy feat to walk.

The 18th hole was no short walk either. After teeing off from 200 feet above a rolling fairway that doglegs left one hundred yards past the landing area. With such a steep hillside in front of the tee, the only path is to walk down the cart path that works its way another couple hundred yards down the hill behind the tee. If your tee shot finds the left fairway your path to the green is blocked out by a valley wall forcing you to lay up over the fescue grass and waste area that juts out from the left rough 200-yards from the green. A large bunker in the front left protects the green that offers a spectacular view of the mountains in Yellowstone National Park and the clubhouse in the foreground.

Like the bald eagle who soared above the course, Rising Sun was a majestic sight to witness. From the tee shots from high on the mountainside to the creek rushing water past the cottonwood trees, I'll never forget the majesty of Rising Sun.

8.38. Livingston Golf Course

After a long day of golf, I made my way in to Livingston, Montana to play the Livingston Golf Course. While driving through the bustling downtown of this community in the Paradise Valley, I stopped off in the Murray Bar for lunch.

The décor was rustic and distinctly Montana made with old road signs and ski trail markers hanging along the walls. Beer signs were pinned to the ceiling and a wall decorated with wine corks was behind the stage as I saddle up to the bar and ordered myself some lunch.

The gateway to Yellowstone, Livingston is a happening place on one of the first really nice days of the summer. Sitting in the cool bar and eating my Murray Burger alongside some local fishing guides I watched as droves of people walked their way past the glass windows of the Murray in search of their next adventure on their way to Yellowstone.

My adventure was taking me to the Livingston Golf Course, where I wandered in without a tee time and asked if I could get on. While a couple of women were hanging decorations for an upcoming party the clubhouse was hosting, I talked with some folks in the clubhouse and joined up with a couple of younger golfers named Lane and Winston.

The nine hole course at Livingston is a wonderful little track that sits along the Yellowstone River near the community fairgrounds. The 1st hole at Livingston is a dogleg left par 4 with trouble to the left of the fairway that a longball can cut the corner over. A small green with humps and hills that make holding the putting surface difficult if you don't attack the heart of the green.

Late in the afternoon the temperature and humidity continued to climb as thunderstorms started to build over the mountains that surround Paradise Valley. Lane and Winston showed me around their home course and offered tips and tricks on where to hit the ball on this course.

One of my favorite holes at the Livingston Golf Course was the 8th hole, a short par 3 that measures in at 130-yards from the blue tees. A small green sloping back to front invites tee shots to attack the pin with the shade of cottonwood trees draping over the flagstick.

As we finished our round at Livingston Golf Course and I said goodbye to Lane and Winston as they headed back out to play another nine I was quite happy I decided to stop in the Paradise Valley. With a bustling downtown at the gateway of Yellowstone, Livingston is a fantastic place to stop and play golf as well.

8.39. Black Bull Golf Club

Golf doesn't get much better than it is in the Gallatin Valley. With a vista that is equal parts blue sky, mountain ranges, and green rolling hills, the greatest game is at its best. Black Bull Golf Club is the pinnacle of golf in an already fantastic Gallatin Valley.

As the sun rose over the mountains and illuminated the green rolling hills, I walked on to the putting green at Black Bull Golf Club. It was there that I met my host for my first trip around Black Bull, Nick Obie. A gracious host and even better stick, Nick who works as a wealth manager in the Bozeman area, had invited me to play Black Bull after hearing of my journey the night before we played. We visited about the courses I had played around the state so far and Nick assured me that I would love my first round at Black Bull.

He wasn't lying.

The friendly game Nick had organized for Saturday morning included the Assistant Pro at Spanish Peaks and older brother to one of my former teammates Marcus Geer. We teed it up from the tips at Black Bull and embarked on what would be my longest course of the trip so far. From the aptly named Back 40 tees the course measures in at 7,239 yards.

The 1st hole at Black Bull is a 444-yard par 4 with water left immediately off the tee box that gives way to a long and winding bunker in the left rough. The fairway slightly turns to the left and gives way to a large green that slopes off near the sides and has a pair of bunkers to the right.

After the opening hole at Black Bull this challenging course showed its real teeth when we made it to the par 3 2nd. The par 3s at Black Bull are a brutally long to say the least with three of the four measuring in at over 200-yards from the tips. Plans are in place to lengthen the shortest par 3 so all the par 3s can be over 200-yards long.

The 2nd at Black Bull is a 215-yard par 3 that is protected by four bunkers. Requiring a towering long iron tee shot into an undulating green, walking off with a par on this par 3 or any par 3 at Black Bull is an accomplishment.

As Nick, Marcus, and I made our way around Black Bull's rolling green fairways, doing our best to dodge the deep pot bunkers and long fescue rough with our tee shots, we visited about golf and especially golf at Black Bull. This golf course demanded the best of our games especially off the tee.

One of the most intimidating tee shots I have ever come across was the one I faced on the par 4 6th hole. At 468 yards, this monster of a par 4, has a tee box where you tee off from the far side of the lake and have to carry your ball over 250 yards in the air to find the fairway on this hole that doglegs left. The farther you attempt to cut the corner the more danger you are in of losing your golf ball to the depths of the large pond that stretches near the horizon. A pair of fairway bunkers sit in the right rough past the pond ready to swallow up any tee shots that aren't daring enough. Adding to the challenge are the trio of bunkers blanket the area around this crowned green on this challenging hole.

On the back nine, one of the best holes in my opinion was the par 4 14th. Finding the Back 40 tees that are a small hike back from the cart path was almost as difficult as the tee shot that must avoid the long fescue along the left rough and the deep bunkers on the right of the fairway 270 yards from the tee box. This uphill green sits protected by a pair of bunkers and features a small ridge that will make putting for birdie difficult if you are on the incorrect side of it.

As Nick, Marcus, and myself wrapped up our round in perfect weather at Black Bull I had to thank Nick again for the great round of golf. Sitting around after our round, the three of us enjoyed talking about this course almost as much as we did playing it.

Black Bull is one of the best golf courses I have ever had the privilege of playing. There aren't many places where 7,239 yards can be simultaneously daunting and absolutely wonderful. Golf in the Gallatin Valley is as fantastic as it gets, and my day at Black Bull was about as good as it is ever going to get.

I can confidently say Nick Obie was right. I did love Black Bull.

8.40. Valley View Golf Club

Some people are fair weather golfers. They only play when the sun is shining, and the temperatures are high enough that you won't need a jacket. Then there are those like Mark Houser and myself.

"Sometimes, I wonder if I'm crazy going out to play on days like these, but then I get here and see just one other car in the parking lot and it invigorates me" Mark said as we played in below 40-degree temperatures.

The weather on Sunday at Valley View Golf Club scared away a number of people from playing golf, but not the group Mark had on the putting green when I showed up. Seeing a couple of other guys putting on the practice green gave me confidence that these were some of my people, these guys were die-hards.

The die-hards Mark had assembled were his friends Bruce and Fred. We paired up in teams and played a little high-low game throughout our round that added a little competitive fire to a cold round to keep us warm.

The first thing to stand out to me at Valley View were the greens at this golf course. The bent grass putting surfaces rolled so pure and provided many challenges as we trekked our way across this par 70 course. Steep hillsides and undulations throughout these greens made for a day of challenging and breaking putts made even more difficult by the pin positions.

Valley View was fresh off of hosting an Ironman style tournament on their back nine holes the day before and the pins were kept the same for Sunday. These pin placements had the four of us scratching our heads and laughing throughout our round.

We were faced with downhill putts that we had no chance of stopping and breaking putts that would almost do an about face near the hole before speeding past the cup. There wasn't a 4-footer that any of us took for granted throughout the round.

As I played Valley View for the first time I found a few holes that really caught my eye. The first such hole was the par 5 5th hole that plays 508 yards. With a pond to the left of the tee and a bank of trees in the left rough the most dangerous play is to get too far right off the tee and end up having to hit your second shot over the pond that sits in front of the green. A slow meandering turn of the fairway to the right past this pond brings you to the green that is protected by three bunkers.

As we approached the 5th green the pond nearby was a place of excitement as an osprey circled high above the water. As rain drops began to fall and we read our putts in hopes of making a birdie, the osprey had found its prey. Swooping down and dropping its claws into the water, the predator plucked a 10-inch trout from the pond and carried it away to its nest.

“You don’t see that every day” Mark said. “How amazing was that?”

Turning our attention to the treacherous pins on the back nine at Valley View, I suddenly felt like the fish in the talons of the osprey. These difficult pins made for a great time for our foursome. We laughed at our misfortune as we’d lip out short downhill putts and end up with a near 10-footer coming back up the hill.

The 18th at Valley View is a challenging par 5 to finish the round. From the back tees, the tee shot has to carry a small creek that runs across the fairway 250 yards from the tee. Walls of trees on the right and left of the fairway near the 150-yard marker tightens the fairway before a large bunker on the right near the 100-yard plate. The green on the 18th is an undulating small green with bunkers on each side of it narrowing the landing area for your third shot.

As we concluded our round in the cold weather at Valley View, Mark, Bruce, Fred and myself wandered inside the clubhouse to warm up with lunch. Digging in to our meals, we kept talking about the terrifically challenging pins we got to play on the back nine and where we should have attacked them from. Then we talked about the awesome sight the osprey fishing in the pond was to see.

Look at all the fun the fair weather golfers missed out on at Valley View in the below 40-degree temperatures.

8.41. Riverside Country Club

Under cloudy skies, I arrived for the first time at Riverside Country Club. Walking past the beautiful and expansive clubhouse I made my way toward the two tallest men warming up on the driving range. It was obvious that while playing golf with Jeff and his son Caleb Bellach, I would be the least athletic and shortest guy in this threesome.

I've known Jeff and Caleb for a couple of years now through basketball. Jeff is the basketball and golf coach at Manhattan Christian and was recently inducted into the Montana Tech Athletics Hall of Fame for his fantastic career as an Oredigger where he set all of the school's three-point shooting records. Standing a couple of inches taller than Jeff and with a long and lanky build is his son Caleb who is going to be a senior at Manhattan Christian this fall and has been turning heads with his highlight reel dunks the past couple of seasons. In the past school year, this father and son combo recently took second place at the Class C State Basketball Tournament and won a State Golf Championship this past May.

Riverside is a beautiful parkland style golf course that weaves its way through beautiful homes and past the East Gallatin River. Pine trees along the edges of the fairway force tee shots to be shaped both right-to-left and left-to-right to find the fairways throughout the round. The mountain ranges around Bozeman create an immersive effect that makes golfers feel as if this parkland wonderland will never end.

The second hole at Riverside Country Club is an exciting 392-yard par 4 that slightly doglegs to the right. With a long drive golfers can find themselves in birdie range if they can clear the grouping of pine trees in the right rough 100-yards from the green. This back-to-front sloping green forces second shots to stay below the hole for birdie putts to be realistically makeable.

Riverside is a golf course that is full of slight doglegs that allow players different options off the tee. Shorter hitters can aim for the widest areas of the fairway while long hitters can attempt to cut the corners and bite off large chunks of yardage in hopes of making birdie.

On the back nine, Riverside presents the day's best opportunity for birdie on the par 5 10th hole. This straightaway par 5 is protected by a tight fairway lined with pine trees. Reachable for most players the second shot on this hole must negotiate the bunker to the left of this tiered green and the pond that sits in the front right of this putting surface. A hard-sloping left-to-right green can quickly make eagle or birdie putts the kind of putts you only want to get close enough to the hole that you can walk away without a three putt.

We wrapped up our round at Riverside on the long 467-yard par 4 that doglegs right back toward the clubhouse and past a crop of tall pine trees on the right. This tee shot is made even more difficult by the dangers of losing a golf ball that awaits on the left side of the rough. Requiring a fade off the tee this long par 4 will give you at best a mid-iron into a crowned green with a bunker on the left.

After the round Jeff and I talked about how great of shape Riverside Country Club was in. There wasn't a spot on the course where a blade of grass was out of place and the greens putted with a consistency that is hard to obtain in Montana.

I could see why Riverside is held in such high regard around Bozeman for its facilities and golf course. Sitting in the bar after our round, Jeff and I visited about everything from golf and basketball and his team's chances going in to the next basketball season.

I'm going to say Jeff and Caleb Bellach will have a good shot at state titles in both basketball and golf next season. If they keep playing the spectacular Riverside course, golf will be a cinch.

And being the tallest and most athletic guys I've teed it up with won't hurt your chances on the court either.

8.42. Cottonwood Hills Golf Club

With a strong wind sweeping frigid air across the expansive farmland west of Bozeman, I teed off on the first hole at Cottonwood Hills. This wind was a cutting wind, a down to your core freezing your bones kind of wind that wouldn't stop.

Suffering alongside me once again was my friend Jeff Bellach, who used to work on the grounds crew in the summers at Cottonwood Hills. He explained this wind in the early morning was something he couldn't ever forget.

"I remember, when the wind would blow like this, you couldn't wear enough layers to stay warm" said Jeff.

In this cutting and cold wind, Jeff and I made our way through an early morning round at Cottonwood. Starting on the 510-yard 1st hole, we began our round straight in to the wind on this par 5. A water hazard right off the tee obscures your view of the fairway on the left-hand side. A large bunker sits in the landing area on the right of the fairway midway to the green. This green is protected by a large deep bunker in front and a bunker to the left of the putting surface.

Playing our way along as the first tee time at Cottonwood after teeing off at 7:00 AM that morning, Jeff and I worked our way across the little winding creek that runs throughout the course.

Along with the dangerous creek, in course out-of-bounds can result in big numbers around this course on the 7th hole. This dogleg right par 5 features out-of-bounds on the right as your tee shot is hit down a rolling hill toward the corner of this daunting hole. If your drive is

long enough, it can result in a mid to long iron into this right-to-left sloping green that is protected in front by the creek and a pair of bunkers behind the green.

After completing the front nine at Cottonwood, we made our way to the back nine where we again were challenged by the tough wind. Facing the par 4 10th hole that plays longer than the 410-yards listed on the card when the wind is blowing. Tee shots on this hole have to sit short of the pond and creek that is 250-yards off the tee. The second shot for this hole is in to a dangerously undulating kidney bean shaped green.

As the cold wind continued to press against us as we finished our round, I decided that while at Cottonwood I had better play the executive course as well. So as Jeff loaded his clubs into his vehicle, I lugged mine over to the short track to test my wedge game. Measuring in at 1,157-yards for nine holes, the executive course at Cottonwood Hills makes golfers wonder just how few greens they can hit with a wedge in their hand on every tee box. This executive course features tiny and near perfect greens that make the imagination work when creating ways to get the tee shots to dodge or ride the wind to end up close to the pin.

This 27-hole day at Cottonwood was an absolute delight even despite the cold and brutal wind. I'm decided I'll blame my lack of scoring on both the Cottonwood Hills course and the executive course on the wind.

It isn't easy hitting golf shots in weather where you can barely feel your hands.

8.43. Bridger Creek Golf Course

My last course to play in Bozeman would have to wait a little longer.

In the early morning a thick layer of frost blanketed Bridger Creek Golf Course and the rest of the Gallatin Valley. The temperature on the display in my car read somewhere in the low-30s as I made my way across town to meet up with an old buddy of mine.

I first met Lane Seymour at a high school golf tournament in Fort Benton. Lane was just a freshman then for Chinook High School and I was a senior at Great Falls Central when we were paired to play golf together. Lane's dad, Mike was the golf coach at Chinook and was our marker for our group that day.

Fast forward to the other day when I met back up with Lane, who will graduate next spring from MSU, in the Pro Shop at Bridger Creek and we waited out the frost delay telling old stories of high school golf tournaments. We talked about the old rivalries we had with different golfers around the state and the different courses we played back in the day.

It didn't seem like that much time had passed since we'd teed it up together as we made our way to the first hole at Bridger Creek about an hour after our original tee time was set for. Our twosome was paired up with another twosome of young guys named Fritz and Ryan.

In the chilly air of an early morning, Lane, Fritz, Ryan, and myself navigated our way around Bridger Creek as the first golfers of the day. Playing hastily to get out of the way of the soon to begin senior men's league we walked and talked about all things golf and Bozeman throughout the round.

The 1st hole at Bridger Creek is a tricky start to a course with plenty of tricks up its sleeve. A 429-yard par 4, the 1st is a dogleg left par 4 with water all along the right side and high cottonwoods that prevent you from attacking an undulating green if your tee shot is too far to the right.

When I say undulating greens at Bridger Creek Golf Course, I mean these greens have character. Large mounds dot a majority of the putting surfaces and hard sloping ridges create dangerous putts and chips throughout the round. One of the greens with the most undulation is

the par 4, 4th hole. This 175-yard hole features a tremendously two-tiered green with a mountainous right side that is hard to find off the tee shot if the pin is up there.

On the back nine Bridger Creek features a number of spectacular view on the first few holes. One of the best views is from the green of the par 4, 12th hole that doglegs slightly left toward an elevated green protected by a bunker on the left. From this green and the next tee you can see the whole Gallatin Valley.

With all the water and treacherous greens on Bridger Creek, the course can play much tougher than the par 71 listed on the scored. But this golf course is a very fun and challenging test of anyone's game.

As Lane, Ryan, Fritz, and I finished our round and headed up the hill toward the clubhouse, I had to promise Lane it wouldn't be another couple of years before we teed it up again. It's always great catching up but being caught up with an old buddy is even better.

Thanks to Mark Holiday and the staff at Bridger Creek for the hospitality while I played Bridger Creek for the first time

8.44. Headwaters Golf Course

On July 27, 1805, the Corps of Discovery arrived at the birthplace of the Missouri River. With three separate forks feeding equally into the Missouri, Lewis and Clark decided to name these forks after Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury; James Madison, Secretary of State; and Thomas Jefferson, the President of the United States.

It was at these headwaters that a member of the party remarked in his journal, "This is a very handsome place, with fine bottoms of timber abound."

Handsome is a good way to describe Headwaters Golf Course in Three Forks, Montana. With tremendous views of the surrounding mountains and a great deal of water surrounding the golf course it is a spectacular place.

At Three Forks, I would have a familiar partner for my first round at Headwaters Golf Course. My friend Tayler Noble is the Pro Shop Manager at Headwaters and joined me for nine holes on a beautiful Tuesday afternoon.

A warm breeze greeted us on the 1st tee as we stared down an opening par 5 along West Three Forks Pond. A slight dogleg right the opening shot must be careful not to fall victim to the water along the right or the westerly wind that pushes tee shots that way. A slightly crowned green sits at the end of this long hole and can be receptive to a long second shot in if it is landed in the front of the green.

Battling the wind on the par 3 2nd hole that plays 206-yards, and the par 4 3rd hole that measures 385-yards into the breeze, Tayler and I were both relieved when we turned around and had the wind at our backs for the 525-yard par 5 4th hole. With out of bounds left and a large pond on the right the tee shot for this hole needs to balance both length off the tee with control as to not hit it too far offline. Reachable in two with the wind being at our backs, we both hit shots onto the large and undulating green from 200-yards out. This green slopes back-to-front and can present a dangerously slick putt back down the hill if your shot into the green runs past the hole.

After the challenging 375-yard dogleg right par 4 5th hole that features a large pond in front of the green that long hitters can fly over but must be careful of the greenside bunkers that protects the elevated green, we turned our attention and our tee shots back into the wind for a few more holes.

On the short par 4 7th, that features water along the left and a row of trees near the green on the right things got more interesting. After hitting up near the hole and giving myself a good look at birdie on this back-to-front sloping green I settled for par. While putting the flagstick back in the cup, a hornet who was being bounced around by the rising wind hit me in the hand and stung me on my left thumb.

I held in a majority of the sailor's vocabulary that came to mind as my hand swelled up and I had to pull the stinger out, but this presented an interesting predicament later on. With my hand slowly swelling up, I put my golf glove back on before teeing off on the next hole. When I got to the green on the dogleg left 8th hole, my hand had swelled up so much that I couldn't get my glove off.

As I whined my way through the last few holes complaining about my significant injury I had suffered, my golf game actually improved to which Tayler Noble joked, "Maybe you should get stung by bees more often" as I rolled in my birdie putt on the 9th hole.

After our round, Tayler and I, and my girlfriend who tagged along on such a beautiful afternoon sampled a couple of beverages from Madison River Brewing Company on the deck of Headwaters Golf Course. As we swapped stories and caught up on a gorgeous late afternoon, I looked out on the horizon to see a Blue Heron walking along in the shallow water just off the 1st tee.

I thought about what a beautiful area of Montana this golf course is on and how great the weather had turned out for our round at Headwaters Golf Course.

It's too bad Lewis and Clark didn't bring their clubs with them in 1805.

8.45. Old Baldy Golf Course

With the Missouri River running through the valley floor and the Big Belt Mountains touching the sky Townsend sits in a beautiful spot of Montana. Tucked among the farmland of this rich valley is Old Baldy Golf Course.

At the entrance to the golf course sits a cattle guard underneath a wooden post crossbar. Hanging from the top of this entry way is a wooden board that reads OLD BALDY in weathered black paint letters. After crossing the cattleguard and entering the property of Old Baldy Golf Course you see another sign that says HONORARY GREENS FEES PAYMENT REQUIRED.

You see at Old Baldy, they operate on the honor system. If you go out to play golf at Old Baldy you're expected to place your money into an envelope and slip it into a slot in the pay shed near the 1st hole before you begin your round.

When I pulled up to Old Baldy my playing partners and hosts were waiting for me. The first of which was Kory Bakkum the course's Greenskeeper, his son John, Townsend's high school golf coach Pete Robischon, and Jeff Demars. After the introductions our golf group wasted no time making our way to the tee at Old Baldy.

We began with the 460-yard par 5 that doglegs right past a row of trees. A chance to split the rows of trees to the right of the tee box gives big hitters a chance to cut off quite a chunk of the yardage if they can thread the needle. The 1st green at Old Baldy was like the rest of the putting surfaces on the course, fast, hard to hold, and crowned. Throughout the day the greens at Old Baldy didn't disappoint and often left players with difficult chips after missing the small greens.

"You end up bringing your wedge with you a lot when you play this course" said Kory. "I think that's the first thing people notice about this course is how small and tricky these greens are."

Chipping was a common theme throughout the round at Old Baldy as these small and crowned greens made even the most routine of wedge shots extremely challenging. Often it felt like I was trying to land my golf ball on a dinner plate and would have to carry a couple of clubs with me as I walked to the green.

After we had finished a few holes in our round, the owner of Old Baldy drove out in his golf cart to visit with us and follow our group. Mr. Hilton told me about the history of Old Baldy and how the greens were sand until 1988 when grass greens were put in. He talked about his favorite holes on the course and some of his favorite courses across Montana.

As we neared the end of our round we made it to the 8th hole. This challenging par 3 is 185-yards long and features a small bunker on the right of the smallest green I think I've come across.

Mr. Hilton joked, "We'll see if any of you guys can hit this green. It doesn't happen very often. I've got a friend who says this is the toughest par 3 in the state."

Just missing the green on my tee shot on the 8th hole, I had to agree with Mr. Hilton and the rest of the group that with a green just larger than a large area rug this par 3 was quite the challenge.

After our round, Kory fired up the grill next to the clubhouse and grilled cheeseburgers for our group. Sitting in the early afternoon sun eating a burger and talking golf with my new friends in Townsend was the perfect way to start a day.

It's something I'd definitely be willing to slip a few bucks into an envelope to do again.

8.46. Arrowhead Meadows Golf Course

Driving into White Sulphur Springs, Montana there's a large sign that reads GOLF W.S.S. along the highway near the entrance to Arrowhead Meadows Golf Course. After seeing the sign, I pulled into the parking lot to play my first round in White Sulphur.

Walking up the stairs and onto the deck overlooking the course, I slung my golf bag off my shoulder and walked through the screen door and into the quaint little clubhouse. Greeting me inside was a lovely woman named JoAnn who volunteers at the course one day a week.

It was JoAnn who explained to me that the course operates because of the volunteers in the community who pick up the slack. A small operation, Arrowhead Meadows has three paid employees. One to run the shop and the other two on the grounds crew in the summer, with the rest of the community helping as much as they can.

After visiting with JoAnn and getting some tips on where to eat dinner later that night, I headed out to the tee. With a strong wind out of the west, I immediately faced a dangerous tee shot on the 1st hole with out of bounds on the left of this 375-yard uphill par 4. Slowly doglegging to the left, this hole has an elevated green that can be difficult to hold with an iron shot that has to fight the wind while in the air.

Making my way across the open course at Arrowhead Meadows, I was continually playing holes into the wind and then turning around to play the next hole with the wind at my back. The wind definitely added to the difficulty of this course but also helped to shorten some of the shots into greens on the wind-aided holes.

One of my favorite holes at Arrowhead Meadows was the par 4 5th hole. This short hole is drive-able even into the wind and plays less than 300-yards to an elevated green. A large fairway bunker protects the left side of the fairway and can catch balls destined to roll up near the green if they stray too far to the side.

With the wind whipping across the course and not too many other golfers on the links during the middle of the day, I finished my round on the par 4 9th hole that plays 450-yards or so back toward the clubhouse. Out of bounds lingers on the left of the fairway and trees line the right so the tee shot can be tricky. This undulating green on the 9th features some small mounds that makes hitting the green in the center important as to not bounce the ball off in a wild direction if you miss left or right.

After the round, I decided to head into town a little further and stopped in at 2 Bassett Brewery on Main Street. Owned and operated by the Hedrick Family, I had to stop in and sample a craft beer or two. Barry Hedrick was the football coach of the White Sulphur Springs Hornets for many years and coached in an All-Star Football Game I played in back in the day.

So, you'd have to say I was surprised to see my friend Cy's mother Debbie Williams tending bar at 2 Bassett Brewery. It worked out perfectly as I was planning on staying the night with the Williams later that evening. As I had some great craft beer in a beautiful little brewery and recovered from the harsh wind I had been playing golf in all day, I couldn't have asked for a better afternoon in White Sulphur Springs.

Sometimes you just need a sign, and I'm glad White Sulphur Springs has got one.

8.47. Heaven on Earth

Many people have claimed to have been to Heaven on Earth. They'll say, "This place is like Heaven on Earth" or "It was Heaven on Earth" when describing any location with a bit of beauty.

But I've been to the real Heaven on Earth and I know it because it has a golf course.

As expected, getting to Heaven on Earth isn't as easy as you'd think. It took me nearly an hour-and-a-half on rutted and washboard dirt roads through gorgeous northern Meagher County I will reflectively call Purgatory Trail.

As I made my way up Purgatory Trail in my small ford focus, I bounced around on the washboard roads and dogged large boulders that would have undoubtedly stranded me in the middle of nowhere with only cattle as company. The cows on this road were another obstacle as black heifers stood in the middle of the dirt road and stared down my car as I approached. Knowing my place in the hierarchy of the farmland I had to maneuver around these soon to be hunks of hamburger or wait for them to get bored with staring down the Montana's Longest Drive Mobile and cross the road. The next obstacle for me was the number of gates I had to wrestle with and open-up every half mile on my way down into the Smith River valley.

Continuing to rattle my way down the rutted dirt road and through a thick blanket of timber I finally came over a high rising hill and saw a yellow golf flag flapping in the wind down by the river. It was a relief to know I had made it to Heaven on Earth.

The property owner Vic Anderson cut off his mower and walked up a steep hill to greet me. Then he looked a little bewilderedly at my vehicle and laughed, "You made it here in that?! I'm impressed."

Normally, the way to access Heaven on Earth is to float down the Smith River for two-and-a-half days. The Heaven on Earth Ranch is at the halfway mark of the remarkable float trips down the Smith. Vic Anderson's place is the last chance for floaters to buy ice, ice cream, beer, and other essentials. It's also the last chance to get a quick nine holes in while you're on your float.

As you float the Smith, you can't help but spot the sign at a bend in the river that reads:

STOP
LAST CHANCE SUPPLIES
GOLF – SHOWERS
ICE CREAM – ICE

I must have been quite the sight for some of those floaters as I stood on the tee box on the 6th hole and readied to hit my wedge shot into a small hand mown green 128-yards just a few paces from the riverbank.

After hitting my shot, I heard a rafter who was tangling with his fishing line call out, “How many holes have they got?!”

I yelled back up the canyon, “Nine holes, I’m on number 6!”

The rest of the party in the raft laughed as they maneuvered in and landed at the riverbank in front of the supply cabin and tied up their raft. Stretching their legs and supplying up for the last few days of their float they admired this par 3 course cut out of the mountainside with giant cups and yellow flagsticks dotting the hillside.

Admittedly the course at Heaven on Earth is a little short, with the longest tee shot being the one from the top of a little cliff that overlooks the whole property. This 145-yard shot plays much shorter because there’s a hundred-foot drop from tee box to green. From this vantage point, you can see the high rock faces that tower over the bends in the Smith River and the cabins and teepees that dot the beautiful patch of green grass all over the property. It’s as picturesque as it gets.

It was from this high hilltop that I figured out why you’d name this little spot along the Smith River Heaven on Earth. As I bounced my way back up Purgatory Trail, I thought for quite a bit about Heaven on Earth.

A lot of people might say they've been to Heaven on Earth, but if they don't mention the golf course, I'll know they can't be talking about the real place. Because I've been there.

And Heaven on Earth has a golf course.

Thanks to Vic Anderson and his family for having me out to play Heaven on Earth Golf Course and giving me the directions to get there. Next time I must just have to float in.

8.48. Fox Ridge Golf Course

On a cool morning, I drove through the green countryside of the East Helena valley and found my way to Fox Ridge Golf Course. With clouds blanketing the sky and a slight nip in the air, I walked into the clubhouse and met up with my good friends Jerry and Jan Hystad and Jerry's buddy Don Herzog.

The Hystads have been fervent supporters of this project and made sure some months ago that I would be having a ball at Fox Ridge Golf Course. Any time with the Hystads, is an undoubtedly a blast and Friday's round was no different.

The front nine at Fox Ridge features a number of small ponds and irrigation ditches that make for challenging tee shots where you have to place the ball or swing hard and carry the trouble. The 1st hole at Fox Ridge is a perfect example of this as it measures in at 376-yards but has a small channel of water that crosses the fairway some 270-yards off the tee. This green is large and inviting but is protected by a bunker in the front right and features a number of undulations that can create tricky chips and putts around the putting surface.

One of the most picturesque holes at Fox Ridge was the par 3 3rd that is 196 yards over a small pond lined by cattails. With a backdrop that includes the Sleeping Giant in the mountains north of Helena this hole sets up for a drawing iron shot so as to not leave the ball dangling in the

wind over the water hazard. This large back-to-front sloping green is protected by a giant bunker on the left side.

As we traversed the front nine that occupies the low meadow of this East Helena valley, the Hystads, Don, and I chased our golf balls all around the hillsides and past the trees, we laughed and told stories about golf and life. Both Jerry and Don spent their careers as lineman around Montana and worked on the same crew countless times. Now enjoying their retirement, they're still stirring up trouble, it's just on the golf course.

Making our way to the back nine at Fox Ridge, the course changed from a long hitters track and into a strategic golf shot kind of course. Climbing the hillside on the east end of the property, the thickets of tall pine trees narrow the fairways.

One of the best holes at Fox Ridge is the par 5 11th, this dogleg right par 5 demands a tee shot down the left side of the fairway to avoid the pine trees from blocking out your second shot. With a high wall of trees on the right corner of this hole, and a pond in the front left of this green, going for it in two isn't an easy decision. Lots of trouble lurks around every corner when you stretch your game on the back nine at Fox Ridge. This sloping two-tiered green can make for some hair-raising putts if your ball ends up in the wrong place.

After wrapping up our hike through the hilly back nine, Jerry, Don, and I went inside to the Red Fox to toast to our round. More stories were told, and laughs were had after the round. As Jerry and Don, went on their way, I took my clubs over to play the par 3 course at Fox Ridge.

An 18-hole layout with the longest hole playing 196 yards, this place is the perfect place to hone your wedge game and for anyone to play. With great greens and beautiful water features this little course is a treat.

As I played, I met a lady and her great nephew who she was out teaching how to play golf. As they let me join them for a hole, we visited about Fox Ridge and this par 3 course. She said, "I just love this course. It's a perfect place for me to bring my great nephew and I have a great time playing it as well."

I echoed her sentiments as I cruised around this track. Hitting wedge shots and mid irons into great greens this was a treat to play and didn't take up much time.

Walking back up to the clubhouse, I ran into the owners of Fox Ridge. We visited, and they told me the history of this golf course. They talked about shaping every green and planting every tee with a vision of having this be a place for everyone to enjoy.

They were right about that. After playing 36 holes at Fox Ridge, I knew that I had had a great time on the championship course and thoroughly enjoyed the Par 3 as well.

Few places can make the long hitter and the beginner feel right at home and as I watched the lady and her great nephew finishing up their round, I knew that these owners had gotten it right.

All the trees they planted and greens they shaped were worth it. Just ask that kid.

8.49. Bill Roberts Golf Course

Bennett MacIntyre and I stood on the 17th tee box at Bill Roberts and had to laugh. The people driving by with windshield wipers going wild and their heaters cranked had to be thinking we were nuts. Two lone souls out on the golf course in a downpour of rain and a constant wind.

Dressed in our rain gear, Bennett and I met at Bill Roberts and were assured we were the only two guys crazy enough to want to play golf in this weather by the Pro Shop staff. As their phone rang repeatedly with people calling in to cancel their tee times because of the weather, we made our way out the first tee.

On this first tee Bennett, made me a deal. The Carroll College Golf Coach handed me a sleeve of Titleist golf balls and said, "If I'm going to play in this weather with you, you've got to play this round with some Fighting Saints golf balls."

I laughed and begrudgingly agreed to this hilarious proposition. So, it began with the long-hitting Carroll College coach and I, a Montana Tech Oredigger at heart, each whacking Fighting Saint golf balls around this waterlogged golf course.

Bill Roberts is, and has always been, one of my favorite courses in the state. A public golf course that sees hundreds of golfers out there every day, today it was dormant, except for two crazy guys with a lot of faith in their rain gear.

As we began our round and acclimated to the weather and constant rain, we played the first few holes and remarked, "It's not so bad out here."

The most infamous hole at Bill Roberts is a long 615-yard par 5 called *Jaws*. This 4th hole is a double-dogleg that requires a tee shot over the tall cottonwood trees along the right side of the rough to cut the corner. After getting past the corner, the next shot is to the top of the hill to set up a short-iron or wedge into a well-protected green. All along this hole OB stakes consistently remind you of just how close you are to having your round blow up on you with just one bad swing.

As the temperatures continued to drop, the wind continued to howl, and the rain continued it's fall we kept trudging along playing golf and I continued to play with a Fighting Saints golf ball. I made attempts to lose it, but Bennett dug through weeds and timber to find it. He would laugh as he found my ball and said, "You're not going to get out of this deal that easy."

On the back nine, the 155-yard par 3 13th hole is a fantastic golf hole. With a beautiful pond in front of the green and to the right of the tee box. A bunker behind the green will swallow up any shots that are over hit to stay safe from the water. The green on the 13th is a hard-sloping back-to-front green with a crowned center that can make two putts from the side of the hole extremely challenging.

With my Carroll ball still in my possession and with an idea that my rain gear should have come with a money-back guarantee we came up to the 18th tee at Bill Roberts with just one hole left to play. This downhill par 5 is tree-lined on the left side and has a water hazard to the right midway down the fairway. At 477-yards this par 5 is reachable in two if the second shot can negotiate the pond short left of the green and the four bunkers that surround the putting surface.

Shaking hands and laughing at being the only people on one of the busiest courses in Montana, Bennett and I visited as we tried to dry off and warm up in the clubhouse.

“I wonder why no one else wanted to play in this stuff today?” I joked.

Despite the cold temperatures and freezing rain, I couldn't have asked for a better playing partner at one of my favorite tracks in the state.

Even if he did make me tee up a Carroll College golf ball the whole round.

Thanks to Bennett MacIntyre and the staff at Bill Roberts for a great day of golf on such a fun course!

8.50. Norwegian Wood Golf Course

Tee shots in golf are tough, tee shots from a weathered golf mat that must carry over a 1998 Buick Century and dodge a dilapidated old barn are even tougher.

This is the tale of a little par 3 course called Norwegian Wood near Canyon Ferry.

Riding out from Helena with my friend Jerek Wolcott on our way to Norwegian Wood we drove over the damn at Canyon Ferry and a few miles deeper into the valley. Along this two-lane highway sits the entrance to Norwegian Wood, and a small road that leads back toward the bar.

There is no real clubhouse at Norwegian Wood, just a simple bar and restaurant that serves tremendous burgers during the day and steaks at night. Walking in and paying our greens fees at the bar as a musician played Billie Joel's *Piano Man* and folks ate delicious looking dinners, Jerek and I were directed toward the first tee not more than six paces from the front door.

This first tee is a golf mat with green carpeting in the hitting area and hard-rubber on the area where you take your stance. Looking around the property, Jerek and I finally spotted the first flag that was seated on a small green directly past the tan 1998 Buick Century that must have been driven by one of the bar patrons and to the left of a small red barn that creaked in the wind. Behind the hole is a vegetable garden that is strictly out of bounds as noted on the scorecard.

Making our way around this golf course that's longest hole is 105 yards, Jerek and I laughed about the fun and tricky little golf holes we were playing. We hit from nondescript tee boxes and had to make our best guesses as to where some of the small greens began and where the roughs ended.

Jerek was quick to joke, "This might be the shortest golf course you'll ever play and but hopefully I'm not the worst player you tee it up with."

He wasn't, but he might have been one of the most fun. Dry humor abounded as we hit our tee shots and traded off sitting in the wicker furniture conveniently placed around this golf course.

Continuing up the valley wall and playing an uphill tee shot into the 7th hole that measures in at an even 100-yards. We stood atop the green and looked around the valley that leads to Canyon Ferry as the weather finally broke and the sky lightened up. It wasn't hard to understand why you'd want to build a golf course on this property.

Part of playing Norwegian Wood is the experience of paying for nine holes and getting more than you bargained for. It's about the laughs and the memories that you make while you spend an hour chasing a little white ball around a small golf course and then heading into a small bar and listening to live music.

Norwegian wasn't pristine, or immaculate, or anything you would find on a championship golf course. And that's why I liked it. Sometimes golf is about more than trying to put the ball in the hole.

Sometimes it's about praying to the golf gods that you don't hook one into the back windshield of that 1998 Buick Century.

8.51. Green Meadow Country Club

After a while, you get used to the rain. The steady noise of water splatting against the bill of your hat and the squish of soft ground under your feet grow familiar. You find yourself clubbing up without thinking of it, lifting up your pant legs as you hop across wide puddles, and constantly wiping your hands off on that last little dry spot of your golf towel before every shot.

As a steady drizzle of precipitation fell from the sky, I headed off toward Green Meadow Country Club in Helena on a Father's Day Sunday morning to meet up with my friend Nick Dietzen. Nick is a Helena native who plays regularly at Green Meadow and also works as the Communications Director for the Montana State Golf Association. It didn't take too much convincing to get Nick out on the course for a morning round.

Green Meadow is one of those courses that will constantly keep you coming back. In a low-lying meadow on the west end of the Helena valley, this golf course weaves its way across a set of railroad tracks and deep into the meadow for which it is named. Heavy thickets of bushes line the periphery of the course and eagerly anticipate swallowing up any wayward shots that golfers might hit. When you hit it in the bushes at Green Meadow, there is no getting your ball back, it isn't missing, it is gone. What consistently inspires me at Green Meadow is the shape the course is in. From fair roughs that can penalize wayward tee shots, to consistent fairways, and immaculate sloping greens, this course just gets the important things right.

A par 71 golf course that measures in at 6,403 yards from the back tees Green Meadow doesn't play long, but instead rewards those who find the fairway and have the flatstick going. I was lucky that my putter decided to make an annual appearance as Nick and I played our way across this track or my score could have been much higher than the one I posted.

As a twosome, Nick and I started on the back nine at Green Meadow on the 393-yard par 4 10th hole. Teeing off from under the shade and shelter of some hundred-year-old cottonwoods your tee shot crosses a rolling creek and avoid the row of pine trees on the left rough to find the short grass. A long tee ball here can set up a player with a mid-iron or wedge into a green that is well protected by a large bunker in the front of a wide green.

Nick and I visited throughout our round about the wet weather, how Green Meadow is one of our favorite courses in the state, and how much we've grown to appreciate golf in Montana. Gazing back at Mount Helena on the 12th tee, Nick said, "A lot of people might say other holes are their favorite at Green Meadow, but this one is mine. It just epitomizes how this course plays."

With Mount Helena in the backdrop of a large crowned green that is protected by a creek 20-yards in front of the green that is some 187-yards from the tee it is a spectacular view. A high row of cottonwood trees cast shade from the right of the green and from behind it while cottonwoods on the tee side of the creek sit on the left of the golfer. I can see why this one would be Nick's favorite.

After both making par on 12 and meandering our way through the back nine, we started on to the front where my favorite hole is the devilishly short par 3 5th hole. At only 130-yards from the back tees, you would think this hole is a simple birdie opportunity, but trouble lurks around every corner of this green. With a wind that usually blows out of the west and right into the golfer's face, it plays longer than the listed yardage. A pond protects the front of this kidney bean shaped green and a large mound sits in the front right of the putting surface and can make for dangerous chips and hazardous bounces if you don't clear it. All around the green is a water hazard lined by cattails and in the back behind the pin are a pair of bunkers that are willing to gobble up any shots hit just a bit too far past the pin.

After scaring the life out of you with these details, you would be hard pressed to believe me when I said that Nick and I both birdied this short par 3.

Walking off the green Nick laughed, "I'm not sure I've ever seen two deuces on this hole in my life."

“Well, I just knocked about three strokes off my score on this course in one hole,” I replied.

The two of us finished our round in the light drizzle and went inside the clubhouse to grab a drink after our last hole. As we sat there and visited about our round at Green Meadow, we decided it wasn't a bad day for golf at all and that anyone sitting at home because of the light rain was really missing out.

Because if Nick and I had decided to be fair weather golfers and to play another time, we would've missed out on both of us making birdie on the par 3 5th.

There's something to be said for dedication and for toughing out a little bit of precipitation falling from the sky.

Thank you to Todd Fitterer and the staff at Green Meadow Country Club for hosting me at your fantastic golf course. I absolutely loved my time on this course.

8.52. Highland View Golf Course

A friend of mine texted me as I was making the turn at Highland View Golf Course. The text read, “I just thought, who in the hell would be crazy enough to be golfing in this weather!?? Oh wait, it's Sean, HAHA.”

I'm sure she wasn't the only one driving by this nine-hole regulation course and nine-hole par 3 course on Monday in Butte thinking about the crazy guy out there playing golf. In fact, I wondered it myself as I trudged my way through puddles and as heavy rain pelted the whole Mining City.

I showed up at Highland View unsure of if I'd find it opened or closed. Inside the pro shop I found a girl working behind the counter who really questioned if I was going to go out and play in this as I paid my greens fee and collected a scorecard.

She gazed out the door as I walked across the ninth fairway and onto the 1st tee where my feet sank into the saturated grass as I placed my tee into the turf. On the 352-yard hole, I pulled back and swung as best as the multiple layers I was wearing would allow and hit my drive down the center of the fairway. I watched it against the hazy skyline that was preventing all of Butte from seeing the bordering mountain ranges and saw my ball come to a splashing halt in one of the thousands of puddles dotting the course. It was a large splash followed by a series of smaller splashes, much like when you go skipping rocks as a kid.

The Butte Muni was a little bit wet that day as I trudged along ever thankful for the recently purchased new rain jacket that was so desperately needed. My old rain gear had me thinking that after deflecting 10,000 gallons of rainwater over the last couple of months, it became instantaneously permeable like a car you drive just past the warranty mileage and then the transmission goes out.

The Muni is a straightforward course with not a dogleg in sight. The holes are back and forth and feature greens that crown from the center out offering challenging putts if your wedge or iron game isn't sharp.

Where you would go to tune up that iron and wedge game would be the par 3 side of the course. A 1,480-yard layout that features just one hole over 200-yards, this is a perfect place to work on your short game. With receptive greens and a variety of different yardages this nine-hole course is a wonderful little par 3 course in the center of town.

The toughest test on the par 3 course is the 1st hole, a 225-yard starting hole that will quickly remind you that par 3 courses are never as easy as you think. Slightly turning right-to-left this large green is difficult to find with a long iron and usually leaves any player bringing a wedge with them to start the nine.

The shortest of holes at Highland View Par 3 is the 125-yard 9th hole. A short finishing hole, with a back-to-front sloping green, this is a golfer's last chance at sticking one close and knocking in a birdie putt.

As I settled for par on this last hole, I walked back toward my car and the clubhouse and locked eyes with the girl in the Pro Shop through the window. Her expression seemed to ask, *“He must be some kind of a nut to play golf in this?”*

If only she knew that she wasn't the first person to call me crazy today.

8.53. Butte Country Club

Walking side-by-side with my older brother Bill into the tunnel that runs under Elizabeth Warren Avenue in Butte, we found a pair of presents that had been waiting for us in this dark tunnel. As our eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness of the tunnel and we walked closer and closer, we finally figured out what they were.

“Beer!” I yelled as I picked up both cans like a kid who just ran down the stairs on Christmas morning to see that the jolly old fat man himself did indeed think he was good this year.

Sitting there in the shadows underneath the rain-soaked road between the 15th and 16th holes, were a couple of canned microbrews that the Butte Country Club's Head Professional Josh

Walsh had left for us. He must have figured we might need a pick me up after trapesing through the chilly and wet weather all morning long. And boy was he right.

Decked out in rain gear, I was prepared to play the Butte Country Club by myself that morning when my brother Bill decided to tag along. Dressed like he was a veteran crab fisherman straight off a King Crab season with the crew of *The Northwestern* on the Bering Sea, Bill offered to walk along with me during my rain soaked round. I'm glad he did, because he got to witness one of the craziest and luckiest shots of my lifetime.

On the 347-yard par 4 5th hole, I had hooked my drive into the trees along the left. With O.B. down the right side of the hole it was a safe miss, but it left me essentially treed. With a pine tree a good ten yards in front of me that had low hanging boughs it forced me to hit a punch shot toward the front of this elevated green that has a steep hill leading up to it from the fairway. At 135-yards out, I played a 4-iron in the back of my stance and intended to bounce it in front of the green and hopefully have it trundle its way up the hill and onto the putting surface.

The ball did just that as it first bounced just past the cart signs 25-yards in front of the green and then continued to roll its way up the hill and onto the green. Then the ball hit the pin and disappeared.

“Did that just go in?” Bill asked as he looked bewildered.

“It sure did!” I exclaimed and let out a belly laugh.

With an improbable eagle on the 5th hole, I had suddenly gone from the outhouse to the penthouse and was reinvigorated with an energy that helped me push through the rest of the rainy round. After plucking my ball out of the cup and venturing on with a grin the size of the Berkeley Pit on my face, Bill and I continued our way around the historic Butte Country Club.

The BCC is a course I'm more than familiar with. It was my home course when I played for Montana Tech in college and even where I shot my career-low round while winning the Butte Country Club Pro-Am last summer. It's a course that I've played hundreds of times and have always enjoyed.

One of my favorite holes at the Butte Country Club is the drive-able downhill par 4 11th that measures in at 336-yards. This hole is a great opportunity for birdie that can jump start your back nine. A long tee ball that lands on the downslope of the hill inside 100-yards of the green can find its way on the putting surface if it misses the small hazard in the front right of the green. An oddly shaped green, pin position on this hole is critical and can make eagle a possibility or only a dream depending on where they place the pin.

The back nine at the Butte Country Club is where the real scoring opportunities are on the course. With a bevy of shorter par 4s and the lone par 5 on the card, the 13th hole, this course can give up a number of birdies on the closing nine if you find fairways and greens.

The 18th hole at the Butte Country Club is a 391-yard par 4 that has you tee off from the southern most corner of the property. With OB down the right side and wide pine trees and Blacktail Creek on the left it can look much tighter from the tee box than it is. A wide fairway gives way to an elevated green that is protected by some trees that hang over the right side of the putting surface and a bunker in the front right. A harsh slope on this crowned green will send anything on the left side of the green down the embankment leaving a difficult up-and-down.

Along with the fantastic 18 holes on the Butte Country Club course, it should also be noted that the bar at the BCC is one of the best. This course's 19th hole features some of the best people Butte has to offer and a relaxing place to grab a bite before or after your round.

But if you're really in a bind and looking for a drink at the Butte Country Club, check the tunnel between 15 and 16. If you're in luck, you might just find an IPA or two waiting for you and your brother.

8.54. Beaverhead Golf Course

As the sun finally made its way out from the clouds that had blanketed Montana for over a week on Wednesday morning, I found myself traveling south and crossing the continental divide on my way to Dillon to play Beaverhead Golf Course.

A white clubhouse with a deck greets visitors as they make their way near the putting green and onto this gorgeous parkland course. It was on the putting green that I met up with my playing partners and hosts for the round, Greg Fitzgerald and Kevin Engellant. Both collegiate standouts, Greg played football for the Grizzlies in the mid-90s and Kevin played basketball for Montana Western.

On a gorgeous morning the three of us teed off on the 354-yard par 4 1st hole that doglegs right past a row of tall green trees and a bunker sitting on the corner of the fairway. This treelined fairway narrows at the corner before you find an undulating green protected by a bunker in the front left.

The three of us walked our way around Beaverhead Golf Course in the sunlight that had been so unfamiliar the last few weeks. Featuring a nice balance of holes that turn from left-to-right and right-to-left and straightforward holes, it makes for an enjoyable test of golf for any shot shape.

A small creek runs diagonally across the course starting near the 6th tee and across the 3rd, 4th, and 8th fairways. This creek comes into play off the tee on the par 4 3rd hole. A slight dogleg

left past a pair of bunkers on the left, the safe play is to aim to the right side of the fairway just short of the trees on the right and give yourself a wedge or mid-iron into an undulating and crowned green shaded by a bank of trees behind the putting surface.

The most challenging hole on Beaverhead Golf Course is the 403-yard par 4 6th. A slight dogleg left past a number of bunkers along the left rough this hole becomes more challenging the closer you get to the green. A small pond in the front left of this green can make the second shot into this tiered green difficult. This back-to-front sloping green makes for difficult two putts if your second shot isn't on the correct area of the green.

Sitting in the clubhouse after our round, Greg, Kevin, and I visited about Beaverhead Golf Course. I had to say this was one of my favorite nine-hole courses in the state. From the tall trees surrounding every green to the creek running across the property, this course has something for everyone. While having a burger in the clubhouse and watching a group of youngsters that Kevin teaches golf to putt around the practice area, I realized I couldn't have had a better time in Dillon.

There can't be many places to learn how to play the game better than Beaverhead Golf Course, because there aren't many courses in Montana better than this track or the people who play there.

8.55. Madison Meadows Golf Course

We sat on the deck late into the night smoking our cigars with the starry southwestern Montana sky over the top of us. Not more than 75-yards from the second hole at Madison Meadows, my friend Steve Maxwell and I shared stories. We shared stories of golf, life and most importantly of loss. As the glowing red embers in our cigars grew more dim, we laughed and fought back tears as we remembered our good friend, Jay Baumberger.

Getting the chance to play golf with Maxwell was something I had been excited about for some time. You see, Maxwell and I both had a special relationship with Jay. They were best of friends and golf partners for as long as I can remember. So, it seemed fitting that Steve and I would play a round together in memory of our friend.

This was one of the places on my trip across Montana that I was most hesitantly excited about. Madison Meadows Golf Course in Ennis, Montana is a course where I lost the state championship my senior year of high school. It had been six years since I'd been back, but I still remember every hole like it was yesterday.

Standing on the 1st tee at Madison Meadows, the memories of this course came flooding back. Overlooking this dogleg right par 4 with out-of-bounds stakes in every direction, I remembered the nerves I had to battle as I stood over my ball for the first shot of the state tournament six years ago. This 375-yard par 4 starts from an elevated tee box and heads down a steep hill toward a fairway protected by a row of trees on the right corner and a cottonwood on the left through the fairway. A narrow landing area forces a tough decision of which club to hit to start your round. Too far in any direction will spell disaster, but too short off the tee and you'll be left an agonizingly long and difficult shot into the green.

Maxwell, ever the betting man on the golf course, organized a skins game between our foursome that was completed by his friends Bernie and Kevin. As they all hit their approach shots into this crowned green, I surveyed my ball and hit a lob wedge at the pin. It gave one bounce, then rounded out the cup and sat a foot away from the hole.

After getting an earful from the guys for winning the first skin of the day on a kick-in birdie, I could tell today was going to be a blast with this crew.

The most challenging and intimidating hole on the course at Madison Meadows is the par 5 6th hole. The option to lay up with a long iron to the first fairway is the smart play, but the option to cut the corner on this double dogleg is more exciting. Hitting up the hill over an old wooden shed and finding the sidehill fairway without running too far into the hazard can give you a mid-iron into the uphill green that offers a fantastic view of the Madison River valley.

The 9th hole at Madison Meadows is a 512-yard downhill dogleg right par 5. If your tee shot carries the small gully in the landing area and the waste bunker on the right of the fairway it can give you a good look at the green. An undulating green protected by a greenside bunker in the front right, a good iron shot can yield birdie to finish the round on this fantastic course.

After the pot from the skins game was divvied up, I took a couple of my newfound bucks downtown to meet my cousin Conor at the Gravel Bar in downtown Ennis. I hadn't seen Conor in years before I ran into him as I was walking toward the putting green at Madison Meadows and heard a loud, "HEY COUSIN!" as he walked over to say hello.

I had no clue Conor was working on the grounds crew at Madison Meadows before I arrived but was able to joke with Maxwell, Bernie, and Kevin that I think being related to a greenskeeper was the reason I was winning so many skins.

After dinner and drinks at the Gravel Bar, Steve and I went and found our place on his wooden deck overlooking Madison Meadows. I pulled out the cigars I had brought for Steve and I to smoke just like he and Jay had always done after golfing.

As we laughed and told Jay stories late into the night, I couldn't help but feel that pain in my heart find it's way back. There are moments when you almost get used to someone not being around anymore, but not this night.

Looking up at the stars and taking a hard drag off my cigar as Steve told another one of his many hilarious Jay stories, I wished more than ever that I could've bought three cigars for that night. Just like I so often wish we didn't lose our friend and didn't have to have an empty seat on that deck under the stars.

8.56. Big Sky Resort Golf Course

With a roaring river to my right and a rough rock face to my left, I drove up the two-lane highway from Bozeman and climbed higher up the mountain road. Waves crashed over the front of the whitewater rafts below the highway as the mountain town of Big Sky came into view.

With Lone Peak at the top of the magnificent mountain backdrop, I arrived at Big Sky Resort Golf Course. An Arnold Palmer design measuring 6,800 yards from the tips, this public course sits in the heart of the Big Sky community. Holes weave their way through homes and small neighborhoods throughout this whole mountain course.

Arriving at the course, I was paired up with a pair of recently retired brothers named Trav and Kevin who hailed from New Hampshire and their younger roommate Louie who recently moved to Big Sky from California. From the first tee, the three of us absolutely hit it off. Outgoing and hilarious, the threesome I joined was as much fun as I've ever had.

With thick New England accents, the brothers spouted off one-liners I wish I would've written down that had the whole group laughing on every hole.

At Big Sky Resort Golf Course, keeping the ball in the fairway is very important. On every hole, thick bushes and trees line the periphery while a small creek works its way through the first few holes and returns to line the 17th and 18th.

The 1st hole at Big Sky features an elevated tee box right below the clubhouse lining up a slight downhill dogleg left with out of bounds to the left of the fairway and a trio of bunkers surrounding this undulating and large green.

One of my favorite holes at the course was the 423-yard par 4 7th hole that doglegs slightly right. Tall fescue rough sits on the left of the fairway while a row of trees lines the right. A large fairway bunker sits in the landing area on the left and a pair of bunkers sit in front of a back-to-front sloping green.

As we rounded the turn and continued to laugh our way around this course, Trav, Kevin, Louie, and I found ourselves on the closing stretch at Big Sky. The group agreed the last three holes on the course were the best of the bunch.

The 16th is a short uphill par 4 with a fairway that sharply turns right near the 100-yard mark on this 334-yard hole. A number of bunkers line both sides of this fairway while another bunker sits behind the elevated green.

The 423-yard 18th hole is a fantastic finishing hole that forces you to lay up short of the pond that cuts across the fairway 100-yards short of the green. An elevated green with a deep pot bunker in the front right slopes from back-right-to-front-left and offers a variety of scary and dangerous puts if your second shot isn't where intended.

As a dark storm cloud littered heavy drops of rain on my car and the whitewater rafters paddled their hearts out below the highway trying to outrace the storm, I realized that whatever recreation you choose to do, Big Sky is one heck of a place to do it.

And hopefully you run into a hilarious crew of guys like I got to play the Big Sky Resort Golf Course with.

8.57. The Reserve at Moonlight Basin

There comes a point when you are so tired from climbing up steep hills that your ears begin to ring. With my heart pounding and my heavy breathing drowning out every natural sound of this beautiful area, I finally summited the top of the hill and stood atop the 5th tee at The Reserve at Moonlight Basin outside Big Sky, Montana.

In hindsight, walking this course wasn't my brightest idea. When I arrived at the spectacularly beautiful stone façade clubhouse with views of the practice area in the foreground and the mountain peaks in the background, I was greeted by bewildered looks as I said, "I'm walking today."

Their responses were mostly:

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I've never seen anyone walk this course."

"You're going to walk?"

Before starting my round, Moonlight Basin's Director of Golf Greg Wagner, handed me a can of bear spray and gave me quick instructions on how to use it.

"Pull this cap off and fire from the hip, so you don't shoot the spray over the bear. And you should be good to go. I doubt you'll see one, but here you go just in case," Greg said.

I laughed as I put the bear spray in an open pocket of my golf bag on the first tee and said, "Well it's always better to have it and not need it, then to need it and not have it."

The first hole at Moonlight Basin offers a fantastic view of the whole mountain valley from an elevated tee. A 200-foot drop from tee to fairway on this dogleg left par 4 with a bunker protecting the end of the fairway makes club selection on this 463-yard hole important. After the first portion of the fairway another elevation drop lays between the fairway and the undulating green that is protected by a deep bunker to its right.

Continuing my trek down the steep hillsides for the first few holes, I remembered something that made my calves tense up, “*What goes down, must come back up.*”

After the 470-yard par 4 4th hole, that turns slightly to the left on the gradual uphill fairway and is crossed by a creek 110-yards short of another tough green protected by a bunker in front, I started one of the toughest hikes of the day.

With my clubs on my back, I trudged up the path from the 4th to the 5th hole. The steep grade got my blood pumping and my lungs feeling as if they were going to burst at any moment as the trail continued to wind its way up the hill. Ten minutes into this climb, I realized why no one walks this mountainous course as I finally spotted the next tee.

As the miles added up and my legs grew wearier from the consistent climbs up the mountainside, I arrived at the long par 5 13th hole. At 628-yards this hole doglegs right 280-yards from the green and climbs its way up the hillside. Protected by eight bunkers inside of 100-yards, going for it in two isn't a smart decision. This wide green features a high ridge in the front right and a number of swales that create intimidating pin positions.

On a course that offers nothing but spectacular mountain views, I found myself standing for an extra moment on every tee box and taking in the grandeur of Moonlight Basin. Talking with Director of Club Operations Mike Wilcynski after the round, the course was designed by Jack Nicklaus to offer the best of views from every tee. One of the best views on the course is the 16th hole at Moonlight, a downhill par 3 playing around 200-yards with a mountain peak in the backdrop of the green.

Walking back up another steep path that switch-backed its way up the mountainside toward the clubhouse, I took a moment to look back down the mountain valley that houses the Reserve at Moonlight Basin.

The 10.6-mile hike that covered 1,200 feet of elevation change and the reactions I got from some of the staff when I walked back to the clubhouse was worth it.

You can't beat the views at Moonlight Basin, but next time, I might take a cart.

Thanks to the Greg Wagner, Mike Wilcynski, and the rest of the staff at Moonlight Basin for hosting me for a great day of golf.

8.58. Spanish Peaks Mountain Club

With the windows rolled down on a sunny afternoon, I followed a two-lane road past the tiny mountain sky town of Big Sky and headed deeper into the mountain forest. Rounding corners and climbing higher up the mountainside, I finally rounded a bend to see the clubhouse of Spanish Peaks.

An immaculate log building that overlooks the 18th green of the Tom Weiskopf course, it stands high and tall over everything else in the valley, much like the Spanish Peaks for which the club is named. Inside the clubhouse, I met with Spanish Peaks Head Golf Professional Tim Phelps who gave me a brief overview of the course.

A young man named Jackson gave a ride down to the putting green and handed me a can of bear spray saying, "I sure hope you don't need this." Jackson and I visited while I putted around on the practice green for a few moments before his Walkie-Talkie went off and he was headed back to work.

I played the tips at Spanish Peaks because I wanted to hit from the back tee on the 1st hole. One of the most unique tee boxes I have ever seen, the 1st at Spanish Peaks doesn't tee off from a normal tee box, but from off the putting green where a black metal tee marker is planted

in the putting surface that reads 433-yards. This downhill par 4 turns slightly left to right with bunkers along the left rough 300-yards from the tee. A downhill second shot into an undulating green with a large horseshoe shaped bunker on the left makes this a great opening hole.

One of my favorite holes on the course was the par 5 2nd that plays 527-yards from the tips. This downhill hole turns left in the fairway past a large pond filled with age old pine trees who have succumbed to the tough winters and now sit submerged just under the surface of the blue water, before making a right-hand turn past a line of trees towards a well-protected green. This par 5 is best played as a three-shot hole leaving players a wedge in to this bowl-shaped green.

Continuing to gaze in wonder at some of these magnificent golf holes designed by Tom Weiskopf that incorporated the mountainous terrain without losing the natural luster of this area, I realized the clouds behind me had overtaken Lone Peak and turned a nasty deep black color. Small raindrops fell from the sky sporadically before they came down in waves, then the waves turned into icy hailstones. Halfway through the par 4 5th hole, and with nowhere to I hide, I finished out the hole before finding my way into a snack shack located near the 6th tee.

Inside I found a group of guys from the Chicago area waiting out the worst of the storm. Joining them and trying to warm up after the temperature had dropped 15 degrees in the last few minutes, we visited about the rest of their friends who had decided to go on a float trip that afternoon.

“I bet they wish they had gone golfing now,” one of them joked as the hailstones pelted the windows of the snack shack.

After the hail stopped, I continued my round in the drizzling rain until it quit as I started the back nine. A gorgeous back nine that carves its way through treelined corridors, it features

some of the best par 3s I have ever played. The 15th is a prime example, as this 210-yard downhill par three has a pond to the left of the green and is surrounded by four deep bunkers. Playing a club or two shorter than the listed yardage, this undulating green rewards the tee shot that finds the center of the putting surface.

With clear skies and that after rain smell and freshness blanketing the course, I found myself taking deeper breaths of the mountain air and savoring this gorgeous golf course. Walking back toward the clubhouse, a slight mist still hung in the mountain air.

Spanish Peaks was a spectacular blend of natural beauty and golf course design. This is what golf in the mountains should be like. Making you feel suddenly insignificant as you watch a storm cloud roll over the top of a peak and completely at peace once the rains have stopped.

I had went into the mountain forest today with my golf clubs and came out in wonderous awe of Spanish Peaks.

Thanks to Tim Phelps and the staff of Spanish Peaks for a wonderful day of golf and hospitality for Montana's Longest Drive.

8.59. The Yellowstone Club

No one else has ever carried my clubs. Not a soul other than myself has ever slung my bag over their shoulder, until I played the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana.

Driving through the gated entrance into the exclusive resort property and up the paved mountain road toward the clubhouse, I wasn't sure what to expect at the Yellowstone Club. It was a course I had heard of, I had read about, and one I had even Google Earthed a time or two, but what I played was so much more than you could imagine.

In the Pro Shop of the Yellowstone Club I met the Director of Golf William Ciccotti and the Head Golf Professional Drew Glover. It was Drew who promised me that I my experience at

the Yellowstone Club would be unlike any other, and he was right as he introduced me to Les, my caddie.

A semi-retired former Yellowstone National Park Ranger, Les wore full length white bibs with YELLOWSTONE CLUB emblazoned across his shoulders in green letters. As we stood on the first tee, I explained to Les that I'd never had a caddie before, let alone someone to carry my bag and he just laughed and said, "Well, I'm glad I'm your guy then."

I was glad Les was my guy as well. Instead of fore-caddying like he usually does for golfers at the Yellowstone Club, he and I were able to walk and talk about the game of golf, life, and so much more. I told him about my journey and how he wasn't just carrying my golf bag but also the obituary of one of my best friends who was tagging along in spirit. We connected, Les and I, on a level I doubt most people do with someone lugging around their golf clubs.

As Les guided me along the Tom Weiskopf designed course that blended the mountains and trees with the scenic backdrop that Big Sky provides, we started on the back nine on the dogleg right 10th hole that plays 443-yards from the tips. An uphill tee shot must negotiate a fairway bunker on the right-hand side and leaves you a severely downhill shot into a tricky green protected by a pair of bunkers to the right.

Concluding the back nine with the par 5 18th that plays 576-yards up a large hill before twin bunkers at the crest of the hill make you choose between trying for this well protected green by hitting a drawing shot past the bunkers that catches the slope and rolls to the front of the green, or to hit to the top of the hill to the right of the bunkers and give yourself a downhill wedge into this sloping green.

It was on the front nine where the most memories were made for me however. The signature hole at the Yellowstone Club is the 434-yard par 4 4th hole. From a tee that overlooks

the whole Yellowstone Club a fairway opens to the player with a bunker on the left and large icy blue pond on the right. A tight fairway between these two hazards leads to an elevated and crowned green protected by twin bunkers on the sides.

After playing the par 5 5th hole at Yellowstone, two employees of the club made their way towards Les and I. Before any conversations were had, they tossed Les a can of bear spray and said, "You might want that. Apparently, there's a bear on the next hole."

The four of us rushed to the par 3 6th hole that has five bunkers surrounding the green and a small pond in front that is fed by a gorgeous cascading waterfall to the left of the green to see if we could spot the bear. Sure enough, moseying its way across the cart path and taking a little swim in the pond was a cinnamon colored black bear.

As the bear swam, Les looked at me and said, "I think it's about a 7-iron to the green from here, Sean, but you might want to wait."

"Les, why would I wait? This is the only chance in my life to hit a tee shot over a bear!" I laughed. "But I think I'll hit the 6 just to be safe."

Les and the others laughed and took photos as I teed my ball up and hit my iron shot over the top of the bear who had begun climbing out of the water and headed up the hill toward the next hole.

As my ball fell from the sky and found one of the greenside bunkers I laughed, "Well, I would've hit the damn green, but I was a little concerned about hitting a high cut over a carnivore."

After the bear had scampered up the hillside and out of eyesight and I settled for a bogey Les looked at me and said, "You can blame that one on the bear."

When our round had ended and Les and I were regaling the shop staff with our stories of the bear and the tee shot that was hit over it, we both looked at each other and smiled as people laughed at our doozy of a golf tale. As we exited the shop I shook Les' hand and thanked him repeatedly for being my first caddy. With a twinkle in his eye he said, "Anytime Sean. It was my pleasure."

What Les doesn't know is the pleasure was all mine. It was a fantastic experience playing the world-renowned Yellowstone Club made even better by having Les on my bag.

I'd never had anyone ever carry my clubs before. And I'd never hit a tee shot over a bear.

That is until I played the Yellowstone Club.

Thanks to William Ciccotti, Drew Glover, and the rest of the staff at the Yellowstone Club for such a wonderful day at their amazing golf course. And a special thank you to my friend Les for being my first caddy.

8.60. Fairmont Hot Springs Golf Course

"WHAT'S THE COURSE RECORD? AND WHERE DO I RENT CLUBS?" is just scratching the surface of the one-liners that Coach Bob Green has in his repertoire. The self-described geriatric football coach who was once dubbed "the Best Quote in College Football" had me doubled over laughing throughout our round at Fairmont Hot Springs Golf Course.

Coach Green, who recently re-retired from Montana Tech was more than ready to go for a round of golf at Fairmont on Monday morning when I met up with him. Dressed in an Oredigger golf shirt and hat, khaki shorts, and his rolled white socks, Coach Green was chomping at the bit to play a warmup round with me before his schedule 12:20 money game with his regular group of pals.

“THEY WON’T KNOW WHAT HIT EM’ I TELL YOU WHAT! I’LL BE DIALED IN AND READY TO TAKE SOME BUCKS OFF THOSE MEN AFTER THIS!” Green proclaimed. “THEN I’LL BE ABLE TO TAKE PAM GREEN OUT FOR A NICE MEAL, WHICHEVER DRIVE-THRU SHE WANTS!”

Bob Green is one of those people in the world who has never needed an energy drink. At 70 years old, the Marine Corp Veteran is always chomping at the bit, getting the most out of every day, and telling jokes whenever he can. Spend five minutes with the man and you can see why so many former Orediggers were willing to run through brick walls for the guy. He’s infectious, he’s fun, and he’s not a bad golfer for a “geriatric”.

Fairmont is Coach Green’s home course and one he plays quite well. The most famous hole at Fairmont is the “Mile High, Mile Long” par 5 5th hole that stands exactly one mile above sea level and plays at a staggering 649-yards into a steady breeze coming out of the west. As long a hole as you might come across, this true three-shot par 5 features a crowned green as a reward for making your way down this long and impressive par 5.

For Coach Green, his favorite hole on the course has to be the par 3 12th hole that plays an uphill 214-yards. Coach aced this hole this spring and wasn’t too proud to say he hit driver when he did it because of the harsh wind sweeping across the course that day. A wall of trees behind the sloping green can protect it from this harsh wind, but a tee shot needs to find the right spot on this green to prevent a long and turning putt.

As we cruised our way around the course running on Bob Green time, I struggled at times to keep up with the old football coach in his cart. By the time the finishing stretch of holes had arrived Coach was anxiously waiting to go win some dough in his money game.

The last hole at Fairmont is as challenging a hole as there is on the course. A dogleg left par 4 that plays 387-yards over water, it demands an exact tee shot about 240-yards in length to find the landing area just short of the pond at the bottom of the hill. With out-of-bounds right and a high wall of cottonwoods left this tee shot is the most challenging on the course. A crowned green in the shadows of some more cottonwoods awaits the players who can successfully navigate this difficult golf hole.

After the round, Coach Green raced off to go play with his regular crew who was assembled on the 1st tee. The go-go-go nature of Bob Green is as infectious as it is genuine. I'm confident that man has never had a bad day in his life.

Some days are just better than most. I know that because my day golfing with Coach Bob Green was as good as they get.

I just hope the "geriatric" football coach won enough money to let Pam Green get fries with that.

Thanks to Coach Green and the staff at Fairmont for a wonderful day of golf.

8.61. Anaconda Country Club

Just east of Anaconda sits a small town called Opportunity that is home to the Anaconda Country Club. A white building perfect for wedding receptions sits behind a white picket fence and is shaded by some tall cottonwoods that were in full bloom when I walked toward the clubhouse.

It was in the Anaconda Country Club clubhouse that I met up with my playing partners for my nine-hole round at the ACC, reigning Montana State Amateur Champion Caleb Stetzner, and Jackson Wagner. Both accomplished golfers throughout their careers Wagner and Stetzner

both won State Championships for the Copperheads while in high school. Also, in the clubhouse of the ACC was Head Golf Professional, and all around wonderful guy, Mark Torney who sent us out to the first tee after we had BS-ed for long enough.

The ACC is a perfect little nine-hole course that plays at 3020 yards from the white tees and makes its way across a rushing creek a few times and through an outcropping of cottonwoods as well. With cotton flying in the air, Caleb, Jackson, and I teed off on the 1st hole of the Anaconda Country Club.

A straightforward 367-yard par 4 with bushes left and out of bounds right, the perfect shot is anything that stays in the fairway and gives the golfer a wedge into this crowned green. A bush in the middle of the fairway 100-yards from the green can cause problems if your tee shot isn't far enough back of it.

Caleb, who is going to be a junior playing golf for MSUB in the fall, tends bar and works in the clubhouse at the Anaconda Country Club in the summers while Jackson just graduated from the University of Montana's School of Journalism and is headed to Oregon for work as the summer wraps.

These two former Copperheads showed me all of the intricacies of the wonderful Anaconda Country Club as we played. With small greens that putt extremely true the ACC provides so many birdie opportunities while large numbers lurk around corners thanks to the high number of cottonwoods that line the roughs.

The 3rd, 4th, and 5th holes at the ACC all play about 378-yards from the white tees. The 3rd is a dogleg right, the 4th is a straightforward par 4 with long rough on both sides of the fairway, and the 5th is another straightforward par 4 with a back-to-front sloping green.

It isn't a surprise why Anaconda has produced such good golfers with a course like this. The ACC rewards good shots and can penalize the big miss. The picture-perfect greens probably don't hurt the case either.

After playing the short but challenging 140-yard 8th hole that crosses the creek to a crowned and elevated green offering the player little room for error on their tee shot, the three of us came to the 369-yard 9th hole that doglegs left and goes over the creek. The perfect line is directly over the top of this large tree that sits in front of the fairway 180-yards from the tee box. Taking this line prevents the player from being blocked out by the large cottonwoods on the edge of the opening on the left of this slightly larger than average back-to-front sloping green.

After the round, Caleb, Jackson, and I, made our way back into the ACC clubhouse who tally up our scores and retell some tales of our loop to Mark.

There aren't many places like the Anaconda Country Club in Opportunity, Montana, and there aren't many places you'll find better people than inside that white clubhouse shaded by the cottonwood trees.

Thanks to PGA Professional Mark Torney and the ACC for great hospitality and a great round at their beautiful course.

8.62. Old Works Golf Course

On the once contaminated hillside above Anaconda, Montana sits Old Works Golf Course, one of the best golf courses in the state. A Jack Nicklaus Signature Design that just celebrated its 25th anniversary a year ago, this golf course is one of my favorites.

With five different sets of tees the course can play from 7,705-yards to 5,348-yards depending on whether or not you choose to play the correct tees. A challenging links style layout

in southwest Montana, Old Works is and has always been a real work of genius by Jack Nicklaus and the group who came up with the idea for Old Works.

Sparkey McLean was one of those people who worked on Old Works when it was just an idea on how to treat an environmentally contaminated area. “I remember, we used to play army and all sorts of games on these hills and in the old tunnels,” Sparkey recalled. “It was probably as contaminated as all hell, but it was a great spot to play as a kid.”

The 1st hole at Old Works is a challenging par 4 playing 451-yards from the tips and turning left toward a large green past the 150 stake. A creek runs the length of the hole on the left and tall fescue lines the right-hand side. The unique black sand in the bunkers is dense enough to keep from blowing away in the windy Anaconda area and protects the first hole with a long bunker along the left side of this wide kidney bean shaped green.

The greens at Old Works are gigantic. Usually featuring a couple of tiers and large undulating humps they make for a heck of a time putting if your shots are placed in the right area.

As the former Copperhead Golf Coach and current Montana State Golf Association Junior Program Director and I played Old Works the large smelting stack on the hillside across town was another reminder of the mining and smelting past of Anaconda. The 3rd hole at Old Works is a reminder as well as this dogleg right par 5 that plays 587-yards from the tips has you aiming at some old flues made from brick on your tee shot before turning toward an elevated green that has a top tier before sloping toward the back of the green and creating a small bowl on this monstrous green.

This Nicklaus Course is as good as it gets when it comes to blending history and golf. Small plaques stand in areas near most tees and greens giving a history of what part of the smelting operation that portion of the golf course used to be used for.

For Sparkey his favorite hole at Old Works is the 463-yard par 4 5th hole that tees off from an elevated box and heads down the hill to a large fairway with fescue right and water to the left before an undulating back-to-front sloping green protected by one bunker awaits the second shots. Sparkey said he loves that hole the most because of the view you have from the tee box of his whole hometown.

“I just love looking back across this valley and seeing this great town that holds so many memories for me,” Sparkey said. “This was where I grew up, and I never thought in a million years we would end up being able to turn this wasteland into something the public can enjoy. It makes me so proud.”

As he should be, Old Works is a one of a kind Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course in southwestern Montana. It blends history with wide fairways and breathtaking views of this former smelting town in a way that only Jack could have imagined.

I doubt a young Sparkey McLean would have ever thought his childhood army fort on contaminated ground would be a golf course 50 years in the future, but I know today’s Sparkey feels like a kid again when he gets to play golf on his old stomping grounds.

Thanks to Sparkey McLean and Mark and Lisa Savoy for hosting me for a round at this amazing golf course in Anaconda, Montana.

8.63. Deer Park Golf Course

I may have had the most perfect day in Deer Lodge, Montana on Wednesday and it all started at the Deer Park Golf Course.

A modest nine-hole public course just west of town, Deer Park is down a winding little road where you pass under some tall cottonwood trees to find a white clubhouse with a small putting green nearby. Inside hang trophies from past high school state championship teams from the mid-2000s who called this course home and a small bar where a couple of old-timers were grabbing a quick drink before continuing their round.

I BS-ed with the two men at the bar and grabbed a scorecard to play Deer Park in the mid-morning sun. As I was walking out the door I was warned to stay out of the ponds that were on the course that weren't on the scorecard because of all the flooding trouble Deer Park had had over the beginning of the season. Apparently, the course was under quite a bit of water until just a few days before I rolled into town.

This nine-hole course plays 3,184-yards from the white tees and features a number of fun holes throughout the track. The 1st hole is a fun par 4 measuring 392-yards that tees off from right by the clubhouse. A small channel runs the right rough while bushes cover the left side of the rough. Anything right of the fairway is a dangerous play leading up to the crowned green that slopes back-to-front.

As I made my way through my round at Deer Park, I was astonished at the number of people out playing it in the middle of the day. There were elderly couples out with their push carts and young guys out with their golf carts having a ball at the course.

After crossing back in front of the clubhouse, I hit the 476-yard 5th hole that runs east toward the town. A relatively straightforward par 5, left brings the small creek into play on all three shots while right can leave you in the long grass or near some bushes that can block out your path to the green. The initial tee shot has to cover a small pond just a short distance in front

of the tee. This undulating green slopes off in a variety of directions and can leave difficult pin positions if you aren't on the right area of the putting surface.

My favorite hole for the course was the par 3 7th that plays 131-yards. A small black sand bunker protects the left side of this green that slopes back-to-front. With the wind coming right at the player and the pin being tucked in the back corner of the green, this short par 3 was far more challenging than the scorecard would indicate.

Visiting with the folks at the golf course after I had completed my round, I found out that Deer Park Golf Course is maintained by volunteers. All the mowing and groundskeeping duties are done by members of the community and one prison trustee who comes out and helps. This news only made me enjoy Deer Park even more, because it's a golf course made by the people and for the people of Deer Lodge to enjoy.

After my round, I was about to head out of town when I decided to peak my head in and tour the Old Montana State Prison and cross it off my bucket list. I had driven by the old prison countless times and seen signs along the highway but had never had the time to go and tour the museum.

The tour and the history of that old building was something else. I took my time and read the stories that were listed at every stop along the way through the old building as families from across the country walked through as well. From the guard towers to the prison yard, the tour was exceptional and something I was so happy I took the time to enjoy.

After playing Deer Park Golf Course that morning, taking a little self-guided tour through this historic Montana landmark was the perfect way to spend the afternoon in Deer Lodge.

Golf and an old prison tour, that sounds like a pretty perfect day in Deer Lodge to me.

8.64. Rock Creek Cattle Company

The top-rated golf course in Montana isn't down some fancy driveway, it isn't near any major airports, and it isn't easy to find, but boy is it something special. I'm talking of course about the Rock Creek Cattle Company outside of Deer Lodge.

High up in the hills west of Deer Lodge, is a course I have been fortunate enough to have play a few times before that weaves it's way up and around the mountainside of western Montana. With sprawling fairways that appear out of the sagebrush covered hillsides once you come around the cart path, Rock Creek is a hidden gem. With fantastic undulating greens, blind tee shots, and deep bunkers sporadically placed around the course this ranch themed golf course has always been at the top of my list of courses around Montana.

With holes named after famous western films and tee markers made out of old branded farm wood, the Rock Creek Cattle Company is Montana's best version of a true Montana golf course. Rugged wilderness and grassland borders every fairway and large rocks and tall pines dot the property throughout the ranch and golf course.

Playing with Scott Meissner, his brother-in-law Mike Spencer, and Mike's son Landon, the four of us had a perfect weather day at Rock Creek Cattle Company. The sun was shining as we ventured out to the 10th hole to begin our round on the back-nine. The 10th hole at Rock Creek Cattle Company is called "High Noon" and marks the midway part of the round, with an elevated tee on the 632-yard par 5. The tee shot must carry over the bunkers on the left just short of the landing area to give players a chance at going after this long hole in two. The fairway dips down midway through the hole and then starts a steady climb back up the hill to an elevated and undulating green protected by a bunker in the front right. Trees and a hazard line the right side of this hole and can gobble up any shots left to out to the right of the green.

“The Good..., The Bad..., and The Ugly” are the aptly named 12th, 13th, and 14th holes at Rock Creek Cattle Company. An homage to the Clint Eastwood Classic, this string of holes features back-to-back par 3s and a tough par 548-yard par 4. “The Bad...” is a 265-yard par 3 that plays uphill and usually into the wind to a large but difficult to hit green. “The Ugly...” caps off this difficult stretch of golf holes with a downhill tee shot to a large landing area with the best play being the center of the fairway so that the twin mounds that can make second shots blind from the sides of the landing area don’t block out the golfer’s view of the green. Requiring another long iron shot in to this undulating green with a bunker on the right and a large false front, this is one of the most difficult par 4s on the course.

The most beautiful tee shot on the course at Rock Creek Cattle Company has to be the one from the 17th hole called “Rio Bravo”. From an elevated tee, this par 3 plays shorter than the 191-yards listed from the back tees but players must be careful to hit it over Rock Creek which weaves its way in front of this green and will surely swallow up any shots left hanging in the wind or hit without confidence.

As Scott cracked jokes throughout our round at Rock Creek and Mike and Landon and I did our best not to bust a gut laughing at some of his one liners, the shot of the day was Scott’s. On the 17th, Scott hit his first ball into the water and reluctantly teed it up again. As he cracked another joke in the middle of his backswing, he sent his ball on the perfect line right at the pin. The group of us watched as Scott’s ball bounced a foot in front of the hole and hit the pin only to sit a foot or so to the side of the hole. Collectively we laughed and lauded Scott for his best effort to almost par the hole after hitting his first into the creek. As Scott tapped in his bogey putt, the three of us congratulated him on his best shot of the day but joked about the ball he had to get rid of in order for it to happen.

The Rock Creek Cattle Company is one of those courses I could go on and on about. It perfectly blends the frontier of Montana with championship quality golf at the highest level. There isn't hole that is similar to another at Rock Creek and every tee box and green offers a new challenge and requires a different strategy. That's the sign of a world class golf course.

As we sat around the bar just off the 18th green at Rock Creek having a beer and sharing stories, Rock Creek's General Manager Louie Bartoletti introduced himself to us. A Butte native, Louie welcomed us to the course and asked how we liked it, to which we all responded with nothing but praise.

Sitting there watching a group hit shots into the 18th green and drinking my post round beer, I thought about how I would explain Rock Creek. How do you describe a course as wonderful and challenging as this one?

Simply put, the Rock Creek Cattle Company is as good as golf in Montana can get. And that's pretty damn good.

8.65. Hamilton Golf Club

High in the Sapphire Mountains where the clouds blanket the pine trees, I stood atop the Skalkaho pass and watched the water thunder down the rocks of a magnificent waterfall. The dirt road leading from Philipsburg across to Hamilton was a shortcut of sorts, even though I spent a great deal of time outside my car gazing at the amazing scenery.

Descending the mountainside and out of the clouds I entered the Bitterroot Valley and into Hamilton just in time to play the Hamilton Golf Club with Robby Porch Jr. Introducing myself to Robby and heading toward the 1st tee at the HGC, we were greeted by a downhill dogleg left par 4 with a tall bank of cottonwoods lining the left rough just past a pond. The green at the 1st is protected by a bunker in the right front and slopes from back-to-front.

The course at Hamilton Golf Club is a beautiful parkland style track. With beautiful trees lining all the fairways and greens. A small creek runs through the front nine and cuts across the fairways of the some of the holes.

The par 5 7th hole is one of the fairways that is divided by the creek which runs at a diagonal from 300-yards on the right rough to about 240-yards as it crosses the left rough. Making long tee shots dangerous this creek can force longer hitters to lay back from it and then attack this par 5 with a smart second shot and then a wedge in. Another undulating and quick green greets the golfer and can make for a difficult birdie putt.

On the back nine at Hamilton Golf Club is where the Bitterroot Mountain Range offers a fantastic backdrop on every hole. Stepping across the road and onto the 10th tee a 414-yard par 4 that doglegs right greets the players. You must place your shot in between the trees on the right and ponds on the left that will catch anything that runs too far through the fairway. A small bunker protects the green in the front left that slopes back-to-front.

As Robby and I played our way in toward the clubhouse, the finishing stretch at Hamilton Golf Club is an amazing trio of holes. The 16th is a dogleg right drivable par 4 that plays 363-yards but the tee shot must carry the large pond on the right and miss the bunker in the front left of this green. The 17th is a 167-yard par 3 with a large bunker in the front right with a wide green and the 18th is a narrow 430-yard par 4 with ponds to the left and out of bounds past the tree lined right rough.

After wrapping up our round at Hamilton Golf Club, Robby and I headed into downtown Hamilton and stopped at Nap's Grill for a burger. Diving into a fantastic 2/3 LB burger and talking about our round, Robby and I were quickly in a food coma as we sank deeper into our booth seats.

As we said our goodbyes and I headed down the road, I took another look at the Sapphire Mountains which I had traversed earlier that morning. Near dawn I was gazing at the Skalkaho Falls and in the afternoon, I had already played the spectacular Hamilton Golf Club and had one of the best burgers on my trip.

My trip across the Mountains into Hamilton was one I will surely be making again.

8.66. Whitetail Golf Course

On a beautiful Friday evening I headed out for a quick-nine holes at Whitetail Golf Course and ended up spending the evening playing the course with a group of newfound friends.

They were waiting in the clubhouse for the rest of their group to arrive, so they could play a couples best-ball but ended up being a player short, so I offered to play along with them and we headed out to the 1st tee at Whitetail Golf Course.

The aptly named Whitetail Golf Course sits in a beautiful river bottom near the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge where whitetail deer bound out of the underbrush and seem to be around every corner of the golf course.

The 1st hole at Whitetail Golf Course is a 315-yard par 4 that begins near the clubhouse and goes toward the middle of the property. Trees line the fairway on both sides midway through the hole before a small back-to-front sloping green finishes the hole. A bunker sits behind the green to collect any shots that run too far through the putting surface.

A unique aspect of the Whitetail Golf Course is that it has back-to-back par 3s and back-to-back par 5s on the scorecard. The 4th hole is a 166-yard hole with another small crowned green while the 5th hole is a 145-yard par 3 with a bunker on the right side.

After the dogleg left 344-yard par 4 6th hole, the 7th and 8th holes at Whitetail are back-to-back par 5s. The 7th is a 502-yard hole that tees off from across a small bridge and past a pair of

large trees in the center of the fairway while the 8th heads back toward the other direction 453-yards. A large bunker right of the fairway and trees left confine this small fairway before twin bunkers protect the front of this elevated green.

Finishing our couples best ball and having more fun than I ever expected when I planned on a quick nine in Stevensville, I drove out the gravel driveway and past a field full of whitetail deer. Getting to join in with these fantastic couples was an absolute blast. We drank beers and laughed the whole round on a perfect Friday evening.

Thanks to the staff at Stevensville's Whitetail Golf Course for a fantastic evening and for so many laughs

8.67. Stock Farm Golf Club

In the Bitterroot Valley sits an exclusive and wonderful and gorgeous golf club just outside of Hamilton, Montana called the Stock Farm Club.

The long roadway out to Stock Farm is lined by tall cottonwoods that the Copper King Marcus Daly planted so his buggy rides could be in the shade and not under the hot sun. It was at Stock Farm where Daly began breeding champion race horses like Scottish Chieftain who was the only horse bred in Montana to win the Belmont Stakes in 1897.

On this treasured land rich with Montana history is the Stock Farm Club. While staying true to its historic roots with homes in the classic red barn style and a gorgeous log and stone clubhouse, the Stock Farm is home to a championship golf course designed by Tom Fazio.

With my host Mr. Chuck Shonkwiler, his son-in-law Harley Paugh, and Dave Pyrone, our foursome put down some putts on the fast-paced practice green before we found our way to the back tees that are near the clubhouse deck. From high on the beautiful hill the 1st hole at Stock Farm is a 420-yard par 4 down a hill that with a deep bunker on the right-hand side of the

fairway that slopes from left-to-right. A two-tiered green slopes from back-to-front and demands an on target second shot below the hole for a any real chance of making a birdie.

The signature hole at Stock Farm is the 356-yard par 4 3rd that tees off from an elevated tee box and then crosses a wide ravine to a fairway that has a steep hillside of sagebrush to the left and a large bunker 250-yards from the tee box. Requiring a precise tee shot with the beautiful Bitterroot Mountains and Blodgett Canyon in the backdrop, the second shot on this hole doesn't get any easier as a turtleback green built out near the edge of the hillside is protected by a large bunker on the left and a deep bunker on the right.

As Chuck, Harley, Dave, and I made our way around the Stock Farm Club, I was instantly overtaken by the beautiful surroundings that Stock Farm is nestled in. With ponderosa pine trees and sagebrush lining the periphery of every fairway and green, and deep high lipped pot bunkers scattered around the property this course is as challenging as it is beautiful.

After the turn, we were greeted by the exciting and challenging 375-yard par 4 11th hole that again demands accuracy with not only the tee shot but also the shot into the green for any hope at birdie. A narrow fairway with a bunker on the right ends as a small creek runs in front of the green that is protected by a deep bunker in the front right. The small putting surface is two-tiered and slopes from right-to-left with a dramatic slope running through the center of the green.

On a beautiful afternoon Stock Farm was more magnificent as I could have imagined and the company I had couldn't have been better. As Harley and Dave rode in a cart together, Chuck drove alongside me, and we visited throughout the round. He explained the design ideas behind every hole and even read a few putts on the tricky Fazio greens for me.

The finishing hole at Stock Farm is one to remember, playing 436-yards from an elevated tee to a downhill fairway with three bunkers protecting the landing area that slopes from left-to-

right before climbing back up the hill. With a second shot playing a club longer than it says due to the slope a large bunker sits in front of the green ready to snag any shots that aren't carefully thought out or executed into this sloping and challenging green with a ridge in the right third.

After our round, our foursome went into the men's locker room area of Stock Farm that was decorated with some big game trophies that filled the vaulted ceiling room. Complete with a full bar, leather couches, a card table, and an attendant that greeted us, we sat around and reminisced about our round and my first time playing Stock Farm.

Leaving the property in the shade of those mile-high cottonwoods that Marcus Daly rode his buggy under around 120 years ago, I was enthralled by the majestic course and great hospitality at Stock Farm. I'm not sure if it can get any better than playing golf in the Bitterroot Valley on a sunny day.

Something about playing golf at Stock Farm made me think that I would've enjoyed being a Copper King.

8.68. Missoula Country Club

The 16th hole at the Missoula Country Club is a historic place for golf in Montana. A white sign with green lettering hangs on a tree behind the green and reads:

16 GREEN
Was Constructed in 1931
It Is The First Grass Green
In The State Of Montana

This historic and wonderful golf course is a tight track lined by countless trees that drape over the fairway and can block out shots into greens if you're not on the correct side of the fairway. It's a challenging test of shot making at such a wonderful course.

My host for my round at the Missoula Country Club was my friend Bryan Porch who I've known from refereeing basketball all around the state. Porchy, as he's called, is as fun as it gets.

Originally from Florence, he's a fast talker full of jokes and one-liners. Joining us for the round of golf was Bryan's older brother Robby who I played golf with in Hamilton.

The 362-yard 1st hole at the Missoula Country Club is a perfect example of the type of golf you'll be playing at the MCC. A straightforward par 4 lined by trees on both sides of the rough your tee shot has to be far enough back and favor the right side to be able to dodge the limbs on a tall deciduous tree that hangs over the left-hand side of the fairway the runs up to a green protected by a bunker on the right and one behind the back-to-front sloping green.

Robby joked, "I'm just here so the conversation isn't completely one-sided," after Bryan had made a great up-and-down and congratulated himself before we had the chance. "But it doesn't look like I'm going to be much good."

Playing with these two brothers was as much fun as you could imagine. Listening to them tell different versions of the same stories throughout the round had me laughing all afternoon.

The 10th hole is a 468-yard par 5 that runs down between banks of trees toward a gorgeous pond with a rock wall in front of the green. A bunker on the side of the fairway completely wraps its way around a tall ponderosa pine tree ready to make shots into this well protected green even more difficult. An undulating and elevated green the 10th can be a challenging place to make birdie depending on the position of the pin.

With Bryan and Robby providing the humor as made our way through the back nine at the Missoula Country Club, we found ourselves at the gorgeous 17th hole. From an elevated tee this 150-yard hole has water to the right and left and a set of bunkers protecting it as well. Playing a club shorter than the scorecard would recommend, this is an excellent par 3 that demands precision.

The closing hole at the Missoula Country Club is a 502-yard par 5 that heads back up the hill toward the clubhouse. With trees lining the left of the fairway and a pair of bunkers on the right the real danger on this hole is the out-of-bounds on the right of the rough all along this hole. Reachable in two, the green on this hole is protected by a trio of bunkers in the front left, the right, and behind the putting surface.

As the three of us finished our round and the two Porchs and I walked off the green, I had the last laugh. I said, “After playing golf with both of you guys, I’m pretty sure I know who my favorite Porch is... It’s Brad.”

We were rolling with laughter once again as we decided on dinner plans and headed downtown to the Mo Club to get a Mo Burger and a beer to complete a “real Missoula experience” as Bryan called it. Inside The Missoula Club the three of us looked up at the walls adorned by all the team pictures and action shots of great teams and players from Montana.

Eating my Mo Burger and having a cold one with the Porch brothers talking about my golfing plans all around Missoula, I figured I had had a pretty great day of golf.

It isn’t every day you get to play the first grass green in Montana and then reminisce about it with a Mo Burger and a cold one.

Thanks to the Missoula Country Club and to the Porch brothers for a fantastic day in Missoula playing golf

8.69. Canyon River Golf Club

East of Missoula, there is a golf course just barely visible from the Interstate. At 80 miles per hour, if you blink you might miss the wide fairways or tall fescue rough that combine to create an amazing golf experience at Canyon River Golf Club.

The fairways at Canyon River are the first part of the course to catch your eye, as these sprawling stretches of green grass seem to meander on endlessly as you stand on the opening tee. There is of course the deep fescue rough at Canyon River that lines every hole and can quickly steal a ball away from you after any wayward shots find their way into it. What Canyon River also has are gigantic undulating greens, the kind of greens that can leave you with putts of over 50-feet if you find yourself in the wrong quadrant.

It is on this gorgeous golf course that is nestled along the Blackfoot River among the mountains that encapsulate this immaculate valley that I met my playing partners just off the 1st tee Gary Chumrau and Bill Hill. Gary and Bill were gracious enough to join me on a windy day that made Canyon River an even tougher track rather than go fishing as they had originally planned.

“I’m not sure I would want to be on a boat right now with this wind,” Gary said as we began our walk down the first fairway. “The fishing is probably terrible today anyhow.”

The opening hole at Canyon River slightly turns right-to-left past a bunker on the left side of the fairway. A slow rolling hill will catch longer tee shots and bring the ball past the cart path leaving less than 80-yards into a pin that can be tucked behind the deep front right bunker. This 398-yard hole is an early opportunity to make birdie if your game is strong off the tee to begin the round.

One of the most exciting holes at Canyon River is the drivable 338-yard 8th hole that turns slowly right-to-left past a deep fairway bunker. This risk/reward hole is best played by flying the

bunker on the left to leave a short approach up the hill to a sloping green. Staying to the left side of this fairway will also help players avoid the dangerous and deep greenside bunker to the right of the putting surface that will leave you short-sided for this green that slopes away.

As Gary, Bill, and I battled the wind that was sweeping through the canyon east of Missoula we came to one of Canyon River's signature holes, the par 3 12th hole that catches of the eye of people traveling along the Interstate. This downhill 190-yard par 3 plays a club or two shorter than listed to a green protected by a handful of bunkers left of the subtly front-to-back sloping green.

After battling the wind and the fescue at Canyon River Golf Club, Gary, Bill, and I went inside to grab a beer as a reward for finishing our long walk across this great course. The three of us clinked our glasses together as Gary joked, "There is no way the fishing would have been better than this."

Canyon River is one of the best golf courses in Montana and one of my favorite tracks to play. If you're driving on the Interstate heading north into Missoula, don't forget to look for Canyon River Golf Club.

Thanks to Canyon River, PGA Professional Edward Bezanson, and the rest of the staff for a wonderful day at such a fantastic golf course.

8.70. The University of Montana Golf Course

I wish my school had a golf course.

At the base of Mount Sentinel just past the University of Montana is a nine hole golf course. Decorated with Griz flags and tee markers, this par 35/36 track is an old staple in Missoula. Originally called the Missoula Country Club, the University of Montana Golf Course was established in 1924 and has matured into a tree-lined beauty in the Garden City.

The University Course is a reasonably flat track that you can cruise around and play a quick nine in about an hour and a half. That was just the case when my friend and former college teammate Taryn Campbell, her older sister Carlan, and myself made our way out for an afternoon round.

An opening tee shoot from right by the deck of the Iron Griz restaurant operated by the University's Dining program on the par 4 364-yard 1st hole welcomes you to this fun track. A relatively straight course keeping your shots in between the trees is the most important part of playing this course. Twin bunkers protect this turtleback green to open up the round.

The best view of the course is from the 3rd tee perched on the hillside of Mount Sentinel for the 462-yard downhill par 5. With trees left and out of bounds past the trees on the right this tight fairway needs a straight tee shot to give players any hope of getting on the green in two. A small pond in the front left of the green protects this putting surface and can force some players to lay up just to be safe going in to this crowned green.

As you make your way around the University Course you will have to hoist shots over the tops of skyscraping pine trees while also punching low shots underneath the low hanging branches of some other deciduous hazards.

Finishing the round at the University of Montana Golf Course is the par 5 535-yard ninth hole. Another long tree-lined fairway, this closing hole has the driving range to the right of the rough and a tall fence protecting the student apartments left of the left rough. Twin bunkers protect this putting surface from any shots intending to roll their way up from the sides of this hole and onto this back-to-front sloping green.

After our round at the University Course, our group headed over to the Iron Griz to grab a quick bite and a beer. As the men's league went out to go play their matches on a beautiful

summer's night we visited and watched them tee off from the 1st tee right outside the windows of the Iron Griz.

It's too bad my school doesn't have a golf course like this.

Thanks to Chris Anderson and the staff at the University of Montana Golf Course for the hospitality and for a great round of golf on this fun track.

8.71. Highlands Golf Club

“We're a drinking club with a golfing problem,” was the way Mike O'Connell described The Highlands Golf Club to me as I toured the old mansion style restaurant called *The Keep* before our round.

A building with high vaulted ceilings, old stone fireplaces, and old wooden beams, the clubhouse of The Highlands Golf Club is housed downstairs while the restaurant is up above offering amazing views of the whole Missoula valley.

The Highlands Golf Club begins with a 380-yard downhill par 4 that turns slightly right-to-left. With a pair of bunkers midway through the fairway and another bunker farther down the right side this downhill par 4 is a challenging opening hole. The fairways at Highlands are very tough because of the sidehill lies you get on every one of the holes.

Another downhill par 4, the 2nd hole at Highlands Golf Club is a challenging tee shot through a narrow corridor of trees. This rolling fairway has out-of-bounds to the left of the rough and leads to an undulating and extremely sloped green.

As Mike and Mike's friends Will and Andrew and I walked our way around this unique little golf course, one of the most surprising things was the number of deer and fawns on the course. Not at all timid these deer would watch you hit shots from within feet away.

The 9th hole at Highlands plays as a par 4 on the front nine but a par 5 on the back. From the tips it measures 515-yards up a steep hill toward a green near the clubhouse. A steady climb with a pair of bunkers on both sides of the fairway in the landing area. The ninth green is a turtleback with a large ridge running down the middle of the putting surface that also has a pair of bunkers surround it.

After we had finished our nine and before Mike and his buddies continued their round we sat on the patio and had a drink to celebrate our round. As we visited and looked out on the backdrop that is the greater Missoula area, Mike invited all of us over for a 4th of July barbecue later in the day.

In true 4th of July style, hot dogs and hamburgers were cooked on the grill and beers were put on ice in the cooler. A number of my cousins and extended family showed up and we sat in lawn chairs in the sun on a great day and visited.

It was a great day for golf, for a barbecue, and to see family and friends. And it got off to a great start at The Highlands Golf Club, “a drinking club with a golfing problem”.

Thanks to Mike O’Connell and his family and the staff at The Highlands Golf Club for a great 4th of July

8.72. The Ranch Club

On a warm Thursday morning, I was a witness. High on a hillside overlooking a 138-yard par 3 at the Ranch Club, I saw my friend Harley Paugh make a one.

With a wedge he landed his golf ball a few feet left of the pin along a little ridge in the green and spun it to the right. With eyes wide, we all saw it track its way toward the hole and teeter on the edge of the cup before dramatically dropping in.

Instinctually the yelling and cheering started, creating an epic din that could be heard all throughout the Ranch Club. High fives were exchanged, quite a few expletives were dropped in disbelief, and we all gut laughed and cheered long after the ball hit the bottom of the cup.

Then it was my turn to hit and I joked, “How am I supposed to follow that?”

The Ranch Club is a links style golf course that protects its greens with deep pot bunkers and long fescue rough. If your tee shot finds the fescue in some of the areas at the Ranch Club, the ball is as good as gone.

The 7th hole at the Ranch Club is a 585-yard par 5 that seems to have more water than land as you stand on the tee and survey the landscape. A large pond runs the length of the hole and cuts across the fairway midway through the hole forcing players to consistently be wary of the hazard before approaching the large greens of the Ranch Club.

One of my favorite holes at the Ranch Club was the par 4 10th that plays 383-yards from the tips. A sharp dogleg left, the tee shot needs to negotiate the dangerous bunkers along the right of the fairway and sets up a downhill shot to the protected green that slopes from back-to-front.

After Harley had made a one at the 4th hole, the rest of our round was spent focusing on the upcoming shot and then reminding ourselves with a, “Did that really happen?”

The par 5 17th hole at the Ranch Club is a 544-yard hole with a landing area along the left of the fairway on that will shoot your ball down the fairway and bring the green into play on the second shot. A slightly downhill shot protected by a pond to the right of the green and bunkers surrounding the putting surface faces the golfer if their drive is long enough.

After our round, Harley, his buddy Will, and I, had to go into the clubhouse to tell our tale. Each version of the hole-in-one we all saw was even more dramatic than the previous.

Sitting at the bar in the clubhouse of the Ranch Club having a beer compliments of the hole-in-one hitter himself, I even told a tale or two about the epic shot to anyone who would listen.

My first trip around the Ranch Club was a phenomenal experience highlighted by seeing someone make a one.

Because, I was a witness.

Thanks to Harley Paugh and the Ranch Club for a great day of golf in Missoula. This is a fantastic golf course I am eager to play again.

8.73. King Ranch Golf Course

In the low lands northwest of Missoula, sits an area the Indians used to call *qua elth* which translates to “state of tranquility”. Tranquil is an apt way of explaining the valley where French Canadians settled in 1864 called Frenchtown.

In Frenchtown, King Ranch Golf Course offers a round of golf along the rolling Mill Creek that feeds into the Clark Fork. The wetland area surrounding Mill Creek is a great place for a golf course with tall cottonwood trees and cattails lining a number of the fairways.

It was at King Ranch Golf Course that I met up with my old college teammate Troy Wolff and his younger brother Derek. Cruising down the road toward the golf course, I almost didn't see Troy waving at me from his front porch not more than 100-yards from the entrance to King Ranch.

After a tough spring due to the above average rainfall and high-water levels, King Ranch was finally able to open up the old 9 holes on this 18 hole course. Talking with King Ranch's Pro Tim Bakken he said, “We're open. For a long time, we weren't sure when that was going to happen. But we're open for business!”

Starting on the 10th hole at King Ranch, Troy, Derek, and I made our way through a few of the holes on the back nine. The 365-yard par 4 hole has a steep left-to-right slope throughout the fairway before the long back-to-front sloping green.

On the 13th hole, an elevated tee box awaits players on this 218-yard par 3. Midway between the tee and the green sits a cattail lined pond where ducks and geese swim in high volume in front of this wide turtleback green.

One of my favorite holes at King Ranch was the very gettable par 5 14th hole. As long as your tee shot doesn't find the large pond running through the fairway, this short par 5 is reachable with a long or mid iron. The green on the 14th is a small putting surface that slopes from back-to-front.

Throughout the round, the rushing water of Mill Creek and the waterfowl of this low-lying land northwest of Missoula provided a great backdrop for a peaceful round of golf at King Ranch. The word tranquil came to mind, but I guess I wasn't the first one to think that about Frenchtown.

8.74. Larchmont Golf Course

I remember playing golf through all four seasons in one day. Having to clear a path through the snow that had fallen in late April to putt my ball at the Frontier Conference Championships when I was a sophomore in college.

The weather was a bit better this time around when I got to play Larchmont Golf Course in Missoula on a hot Saturday afternoon. With temperatures in the low 90s, I met up with someone who remembered the cold rounds at Larchmont just as well as I did, former Carroll College golfer Justin Galiher.

There aren't many people who have spent more time at Larchmont than Justin who has worked and played out there for as long as he can remember. With a father who is the golf pro at Larchmont, Justin knows Larchmont like the back of his hand from countless rounds at this public course in Missoula.

Larchmont is usually a busy track filled with foursomes at all hours of the day, but on Saturday afternoon the course seemed uncharacteristically empty. Perhaps the first hot day of the summer was scaring off some of the usual crowd, or the lakes and rivers of western Montana were beckoning folks to come cool off, but either way Justin and I flew around the course at Larchmont in record time.

A fantastic track that plays between 7,000 and 6,400 yards from the different sets of tees, Larchmont has grown into a mature golf course. With wide fairways lined by tall trees, Larchmont is gettable if you stay in the fairway off the tee.

Opening with a 504-yard par 5 that meanders past a bank of trees in the right rough just past the wide landing area 250-yards from the tee. An uphill second shot can reach the green if it avoids the twin bunkers in front of this undulating and large green.

As Justin and I enjoyed the heat, we had to reminisce about the much colder rounds we'd played on this course. We talked about old teams we played against, courses we remembered, and how suspect the weather usually was when you had to play golf in the fall and spring in Montana.

While setting our record pace and playing the front nine in an hour-and-fifteen minutes, we teed off on the par 4 8th hole. This 335-yard dogleg right is one of my favorites on this great course. A high wall of trees along the right rough forces players to decide whether to play it smart by laying up short of the trees through the fairway with a 240-yard shot just past the corner

or to make the riskier choice and try to cut the corner with a tee shot that has to carry the trees. Another set of bunkers protects this small back-to-front sloping green on this fantastic hole.

On the back nine, Justin said his favorite hole was the par 5 16th. At 493-yards this par 5 doesn't seem too daunting on the scorecard, but as it slightly turns right midway down the fairway the left side of the hole is lined by a pond and the green is protected by a monstrous tree in front of the left side of the putting surface while trees line the right side of the rough. This undulating and challenging green is out on a small peninsula that consistently reminds players that you're just a few feet away from digging in your bag for a new golf ball.

After finishing our round on the 381-yard par 4 18th hole that becomes tight and tree lined around 270-yards from the tee and with a green with water on the right and a deep bunker on the left, Justin and I grabbed a beer and sat on the patio after our round.

As the heat faded and made for a beautiful late afternoon in Missoula, I was sure that this beat the heck out of playing through a snowstorm so years ago.

Thanks to Larchmont Golf Course and the Justin Galiher for a great afternoon of golf at this great track in Missoula!

8.75. Silver Fox Golf Course

Sunday was my birthday. Turning 25 was something that sort of caught me by surprise on this trip. Another surprise of this trip was being able to golf with my friend Dillon Delaney.

Dillon is going to school to be a dentist in Minnesota and after 10 months of school in the Land of 10,000 Lakes, he is finally home to enjoy his summer. Naturally, he was on the hook to play some golf with me.

At Silver Fox Golf Course in Pablo, Montana, Dillon and I made our way around the nine hole executive course on a beautiful summer day.

“25 today huh?” Dillon asked dryly. “Your best years are probably behind ya.”

Dillon was my roommate in college at Montana Tech. We lived in the dorms together as freshmen and then had a house we rented our junior and senior years. At first, Dillon’s dry sense of humor took me some time to get used to. In the beginning weeks of school, we both drove each other nuts. When he would be going to bed, I would watch a funny movie late into the night. When I was trying to sleep in, Dillon would make the most noise on the planet while getting dressed.

After about a month, he and I finally figured it out and became great friends. Sure, we might’ve tormented each other incessantly, but it was wonderful.

It was wonderful to torment each other on the golf course as well when we played Silver Fox. There was plenty of opportunity to do this on the par 3 course.

Starting on the 104-yard par 3 that plays up a small hill with the driving range to the right and a bunker to the left to the green.

The longest hole at Silver Fox Golf Course is the 235-yard par 4 6th. Interestingly, this was the only hole on the course where I lost a ball. Well actually, my ball was stolen. Dillon and I had decided to let a single play through after hitting our tee shots on the hole with water along the right and a bunker in the middle of the fairway leading up to small green with a bunker in the front left.

As the single in a cart drove up to hit his second shot as Dillon and I watched from the tee box I remarked, “I don’t think that’s where he hit his ball.”

Dillon laughed, “Nope. He’s definitely playing yours.”

Sure thing, walking up the fairway, Dillon and I never found my ball, but we did find an old and beaten up Titleist that I’m sure the single was sadly missing.

After our round concluded at Silver Fox, Dillon and I enjoyed the rest of my birthday by playing at the KwaTaqNuk Casino in Polson and then finished our night fishing up at a mountain lake by his house.

Year 25 was off to a pretty good start.

8.76. Mission Mountain Golf Course

On a quiet morning in Ronan, Dillon Delaney and I stood on the first tee at Mission Mountain Golf Course praying.

It wasn't a religious experience happening on the first tee, but it was out of necessity. Starting off our round on the 543-yard par 5, Dillon had made his first swing of the day and hit his golf ball on a bullet like trajectory straight toward a house.

The ball hung in the air for what seemed like an unusual amount of time making us think that it perhaps had missed the house. Then we heard the distinct WHACK that comes from driving a little white golf ball right into vinyl siding.

“Well, I wonder if anyone is still sleeping in that house?” I joked.

That's one way to start a morning.

As Dillon and I made our way around the track at Mission Mountain Golf Course we met a 6,700-yard layout that requires every type of shot. After the opening par 5 that has a row of trees protecting the right rough from 100-yards of the green and three bunkers around the putting surface, we settled in really nicely to our round.

One of the best holes at Mission Mountain is the par 4 10th hole that plays 399-yards. Slightly doglegging right after the landing area, a downhill second shot awaits players that forces them to fly a cattail lined pond and onto a back-to-front sloping green.

Back-to-back-to-back par 4s make up the 12th, 13th, and 14th holes. The 12th is a rolling dogleg left that plays 395-yards into a green that has bunker on the left. The 13th is a long and challenging par 4 that is treelined along the right and has trouble along the left before an undulating green sits protected by a bunker in the front left. The 14th at Mission Mountain is a very gettable 288-yard uphill par 4 that has a trio of bunkers short of the green that slopes back-to-front forcing players to either try and drive the green or lay up short of the trouble.

The most challenging hole at Mission however, is the par 5 15th that is rated the hardest hole on the course. At 616-yards this beast of a hole plays between a creek on the left and trees on the right. The creek meanders in front and to the right of the green making it a truly three-shot hole.

Surprisingly, Dillon and I finished our round without hitting any more siding and went and grabbed a bite of lunch before heading our separate ways.

At lunch Dillon said, “I didn’t play too bad today, if you don’t count the first swing”.

“You need to go tell that to those nice people whose house you hit.”

Thanks to the staff at Mission Mountain Golf Course for a great day of golf in Ronan.

8.77. Wild Horse Plains Golf Course

There are moments on this trip that have stuck with me. Moments that are as distinctly Montana as anything I’ve ever come across that I’m sure I will never forget.

On a hot Monday afternoon, I sped up the highway past Plains, Montana and turned down a gravel road just past the large white sign showing the way to the course. With only one truck on the parking lot, I grabbed my clubs and headed toward the clubhouse to see if I could go out and get nine holes in in the 95-degree heat.

I opened an old green screen door and went into the small shop that sells golf balls, tees, and drinks but couldn't find anyone behind the counter. I looked around at the trophies and pictures hanging on the wall for a few minutes until I finally heard something coming from the cart shed.

I rounded the corner outside of the shop to find the old guy working the course that afternoon sitting back with his feet kicked up on another chair watching M*A*S*H reruns. It was the perfect spot where he could stay out of the sun and get a slight breeze to roll through the open garage door.

I think I might have half startled him as I rounded the corner and asked to play golf.

“Shoot, you're crazy to want to go play in this heat,” he said. “It's just too damn hot today for me.”

We visited for a short while in the shade of the cart barn as Alan Alda's Hawkeye Pierce made wise cracks in the background before I eventually made my way out into the heat.

The course at Plains is a beautiful track just to the east of Highway 200 that climbs a high hill and overlooks the town of Plains and the Clark Fork River. Gigantic powerlines hang above the course as they supply power westward.

The opening hole at Wild Horse Plains Golf Course is a 332-yard par 4 that tees off from the hill near the gravel road you travel into the course on. It slightly doglegs right past the row of trees that protect the clubhouse and cart barn and leads to a small turtleback green protected by a small bunker in the front left.

The most challenging hole both to walk and to play is the par 5 2nd hole that clocks in at 444-yards. An opening shot needs to be in the fairway that slightly turns left to make way for an

extremely uphill second shot that must be careful to miss the trees lining the fairway on both sides before the green that sits behind a small hill.

It wasn't until I got to the top of this hill that I realized how ungodly hot it really was. The uphill climb along the second hole had me remembering what the older guy watching the shop had said, "It's just too damn hot today".

With the heat on top of the hill came a spectacular view of the countryside surrounding the town of Plains and the whole valley. The best view of the valley came from the 6th tee along the northwest side of the course. From this high vantage point on the par 3 151-yard hole, you could see almost forever with the only sounds being the popping of the electricity along the power lines.

After finishing up on the ninth green, I sauntered my way down the hill to find my friend watching another rerun of M*A*S*H on the TV inside the cart shed.

"You survived the heat," he said. "Pretty darn hot out there wasn't it?"

"Almost too hot for golf, but you're in the right spot to stay out of the heat," I replied.

"Yes sir, and the best part is, I'm getting so old I can't remember any of these episodes anymore," he said as he muted the TV.

Not wanting to interrupt his programs, I thanked him and walked out the cart barn. I could hear him unmute the TV and rest his feet back up on the chair in front of him as the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital went back to work.

8.78. Trestle Creek Golf Club

I found out that there are two people who would drive a couple of hundred miles to play golf with me last Tuesday morning when my uncle Bill Ryan and Jerry Hystad each met me in St. Regis, Montana.

Early that morning, Jerry drove to Trestle Creek from Helena, Montana to meet up with my uncle Bill and I while my uncle Bill drove from Moscow, Idaho where he was at some work meetings.

“Actually, I took a wrong turn out of Moscow, so I really drove over from Washington to be here this morning,” Bill joked.

After that slight detour through the Apple State, Bill and Jerry were waiting for me at Trestle Creek when I made my way off the Interstate and into the clubhouse at Trestle Creek. Trestle Creek has always been one of those golf courses I’ve thought about playing as I cruised by on the highway. From the Interstate, the sight of greens and fairways always catches a golfer’s eye.

Trestle Creek is a relatively young course in Montana’s golf landscape. A photo album sits on the glass-plated countertop filled with golf balls and sand that shows photos of the construction of Trestle Creek in 1994.

Weaving its ways through the trees, Trestle Creek is a tree-lined nine-hole track. The opening hole at Trestle Creek is a 354-yard dogleg right par 4 lined by tall pines on the both the left and right side of the fairway that narrows near the green that slopes back-to-front.

The 3rd hole is the one most visible from the Interstate and will make any golf junkie want to take the exit and get a quick nine in while on a road trip. What better way to stretch the legs on a long drive than to stop and play some golf. The third is a slight dogleg left with trees on the left of the fairway and out-of-bounds along the right. Three bunkers line the landing area of the fairway 250-yards or so off the tee right at the corner of this hole and a large bunker in the front left of the green protects an undulating back-to-front putting surface.

Trestle Creek has an abundance of challenging and scenic holes on the course like the 356-yard par 4 4th that plays down a tight corridor of a fairway lined by tall pines on both sides and with a pair of pine trees in the fairway down the left-hand side. A large green that slopes back-to-front slopes away from the players has a bunker on the right completing this challenging par 4.

The next memorable hole at Trestle Creek is an over water par 3 that plays 143-yards to a green shaded by a tall pine behind the left of the green and a small flowering tree in the front left. Countless golf balls are visible under the pond and serve as a reminder that being short isn't an option on this hole.

After our round, Bill, Jerry, and I made our way into the clubhouse and sat down for a beer. Throughout our round we had laughs, told stories, and perhaps hit a few pine trees on this tight course. The stories of trying to carve a ball through the narrowest of windows in the trees made for plenty of material for laughs and storytelling as we sat around a buddy bar.

As my uncle Bill, Jerry, and I said our goodbyes in the parking lot after shooting the breeze we each pulled out of the parking lot and headed down the highway.

I'm a pretty lucky guy to have an uncle and a friend like Bill and Jerry who would each drive a couple of hundred miles to play golf with me in St. Regis.

Thanks to Dan Park and Trestle Creek Golf Club for a wonderful day of golf in St. Regis, Montana.

8.79. River's Bend Golf Course

Along the beautiful Clark Fork River is a great nine-hole golf course that weaves its way along the river and through the trees and offers tremendous views of the scenic mountain valley that Thompson Falls sits in.

Arriving at River's Bend on Tuesday afternoon, I started my round on the dogleg right par 4 that plays right along the bend in the Clark Fork River. From an elevated tee this hole plays 338-yards and is lined down the right side by pine trees and on the left by the driving range which gives way to the river. After hitting down the hill to the landing area, the second shot at River's Bend is into a turtleback green along the tree line.

Throughout this course, every tee shot requires something different. The 2nd hole for example is a par 5 begins along the river and then works back up a hill and toward the trees. On this 500-yard par 5, the safest play is to hit to the base of the hill with an iron and then layup to a wedge to attack this back-to-front sloping green.

The course at River's Bend then begins to get tighter as the holes delve deeper into the rows of pine trees. One of the toughest holes on the course is the 410-yard slight dogleg right par 4 4th hole. Trees line the left and right of this fairway that bends slowly to a small slightly elevated green.

Sitting in the clubhouse after the round and looking out the window at the Clark Fork River and the high mountain face that watches over the river and the course I visited with the lady working the bar at the clubhouse. We visited for a short while about River's Bend and then about this beautiful little northwest stretch of Montana.

River's Bend is a beautiful and wonderful little nine-hole golf course that truly does bend along the scenic Clark Fork River.

8.80. Linda Vista Golf Course

It was a strange feeling playing a hole without a flagstick, but it might have helped my game. Instead of taking aim at a pin, I had to hit toward the center of the green.

This was the case on the 8th and 9th holes at Linda Vista Golf Course. With high waters earlier in the year, Linda Vista is recovered from the flooding that affected Missoula quite well. Talking with Linda Vista's Pro Charles G. Miller in the clubhouse before I went out to play, he gave me permission to go play the 8th and 9th holes even though they weren't open to the public yet.

I set out on to play the par 29 Linda Vista Golf Course on a beautiful morning. Weaving its way back through the low meadow off of Lower Miller Creek Road near the Bitterroot River, Linda Vista plays to 1,815-yards with two par 4s and seven par 3s.

The opening hole at Linda Vista is a 350-yard par 4 that doglegs slightly right past a fairway bunker on the right corner of the hole. Trees and bushes line the left side of the rough along the hole before a turtleback green that sits protected by a pair of bunkers completes the whole.

One of the most beautiful holes at Linda Vista is the par 3 4th hole that plays 137-yards from the back tees. An over water tee shot awaits the player from the back tee where you must walk down a small corridor through the bushes to find an isolated tee box. The green on the 4th is a large surface with a deep bunker in front of the undulating green.

After making my way through the next few holes at Linda Vista, I crossed under the caution tape and went to the 8th and 9th holes that hadn't been opened to the public yet. It was an interesting feeling on the 9th tee hitting back toward the clubhouse on the 145-yard hole protected by three bunkers and having to just take a guess at where the hole might be.

After finding the middle of the green with my tee shot, I found the hole located in the back-left corner of the green. Not being able to see the pin on the hole really changes the way

you play golf. It might be an improvement for my game to just hit for the middle of the green and like I had to playing Linda Vista's 8th and 9th holes.

Linda Vista Golf Course in Missoula is a great executive course that is a nice fit for people who don't hit the ball too far off the tee, younger people learning the game, and for someone who wants to work on their irons and wedge game.

Thanks to Charles Miller and the staff at Linda Vista Golf Course for having me out to play this great course and letting me get the 8th and 9th holes in.

8.81. Indian Springs Ranch Golf Course

After a long drive up the western side of the state, I pulled into the parking lot at Indian Springs Ranch in Eureka, Montana. Five hours in the car left me eager to get out on this links style course in the late afternoon.

Tall fescue rough and green fairways abound on this links style golf course in northwest corner of the state. At 6,677 yards, this tight golf course offers up a great challenge to anyone who ventures out to play it.

Opening with a 410-yard par 4, Indian Springs Ranch has a narrow fairway with mounds along the right of the rough and fescue lining the second cut on this hole that slightly turns to the left and plays uphill to a green that is two tiered and slopes back-to-front.

Making my way around this challenging course, one of the best views was from the par 3 6th hole that sits high on the hillside and requires a long tee shot to cover the gully that runs between the tees and the green. A deep sand trap sits in front of this undulating green and anything short of the bunker will be lost to the gully.

The scariest moment of my trip was walking to the par 3 8th hole from the 7th green. Walking down the cart path I took a slight shortcut through a small patch of fescue and onto the 8th tee when I felt something under my foot. The “Fight or Flight” response kicked in as I high-stepped my way out of the tall grass and onto the tee. I tried to scream but like in a nightmare when you try to cry out and can’t muster a sound, I was even too frightened to make a noise when I looked down and saw the snake at my feet.

Standing on the 8th tee after my encounter with the snake, I had to take a moment to catch my breath. Panting and winded, I quickly took an inventory and reassured myself that I was in fact, okay. Amazingly I hadn’t messed my shorts when I was almost scared s@#\$-less by the snake.

Calming my nerves, it must have been the adrenaline coursing through my veins that helped me stick an iron close to the downhill 182-yard 8th hole that has a pond to the left and a green that slopes from front-to-back and from right-to-left and make a very memorable birdie.

My favorite hole at Indian Springs Ranch Golf Course was the par 4 14th hole that plays uphill for the duration. Playing 355-yards from the tips, a cross bunker sits in the middle of the fairway at 235-yards and another fairway bunker anchors the right side. A small creek runs the length of the right of the hole and the elevated green sits protected with a bunker in the front left.

After my round I visited with Indian Springs Ranch’s Head Golf Professional Mark Fenech. We talked about our favorite holes, some of the challenges around this track, and how tight of a links style course this one can play like.

If you want to be tested by gorgeous links course in northwest Montana, make your way up to Eureka and play Indian Springs Ranch. Just watch out for the snakes.

Thanks to Mark Fenech and the staff at Indian Springs Ranch for a wonderful afternoon of golf in Eureka.

8.82. Cabinet View Golf Club

Cabinet View Golf Club in Libby can be described as a shot-maker's course. Carved out of the pines of northwest Montana, Cabinet View has a reputation for being a challenging track and I put that reputation to test when I played it on Friday.

On Friday, I hopped in the car and headed toward Libby to meet up with Libby golfers Gary Peck and Wayne Haines. In the pro shop I visited with the course pro Jeff Dooley who said, "If you want the real scoop on this course, you picked the right group to play with. These guys play here every day."

Gary Peck is a Libby Logger legend and played basketball and golf at the University of Montana in the 1960s. As we played our round, Gary told the story of his Griz team winning the school's first Big Sky Conference Championship in golf.

Wayne Haines is a tremendous golfer himself having shot his age nearly 130 times and still playing to a low handicap. Wayne was instrumental in building the expansion of Cabinet View Golf Club from a 9-hole course to a championship quality 18-hole course. When the back nine was built, Gary worked six days a week and even has a pond on the new nine named for him.

The front nine at Cabinet View starts with a 513-yard par 5 that is tree lined on both sides of the fairway. The fairway turns up the hill and to the left past some tall pines before a bunker protects the large sloping green.

The course at Cabinet View is as fantastic as the reputation it has. The greens at this course are as nice as I have putted on during this trip, they are quick and roll true, the kind of greens that inspire confidence that often isn't there with the putter in your hand.

The best view of the Cabinet View Mountains that sit high above Libby and the Kootenai River comes from the 5th hole. Slightly turning right from the tee box with the pine trees perfectly framing the green and greenside bunker in the foreground with the mountains in the back, this is a gorgeous 417-yard par 4.

The back at Cabinet View is a shot-maker's course. Carved out of the mountain hillside by Wayne and others, this course cannot be overpowered but instead must be played. It is a nine that reminds you of the precision that golf requires.

One of the most beautiful holes on the course is the par 3 11th that plays 150-yards from the tips. A With a small pond to the right of the hole and bunkers on each side of this undulating green that slopes from back-to-front and from left-to-right it is a fantastic short par 3.

Throughout the round at Cabinet View, Gary and Wayne told me about the history of the course. Gary spoke mostly about the front nine while Wayne talked about the back nine he helped construct.

In fact, Libby has a tremendous history of golf in Montana. At one point, Libby has been the home course of one of the best professionals in Montana Jim Mee, the best amateur, Arizona State commit Ryggs Johnston, and Joe Cielak who is the reigning Montana State Mid-Amateur Champion. It isn't a wonder why this course has produced so many fine golfers.

Libby's Cabinet View Golf Club is an amazing course in northwest Montana that lives up to its reputation for being a great but challenging track.

Thanks to Cabinet View Golf Club and their PGA Professional Jeff Dooley for a fantastic day of golf in Libby.

8.83. Buckwood Country Club

From the beginning of this trip, I was figuring I would find a golf course that perhaps I had missed during my research. That was just the case of Buckwood Country Club a par 3 course in Eureka, Montana. Located right behind the Silverado Motel & Bar and in front of an RV Park this par 3 was an easy way to spend an evening in Eureka.

With Scott Meissner and Mike and Landon Spencer, I ventured out to play Buckwood Country Club on a sunny Friday evening in Eureka.

The four of us began our round on the course that plays 1,278 yards from the back tees on the 100-yard down hill par 3 hole that plays alongside the access road to the RV park and back to a relatively flat green.

The 5th hole is a 135-yard par 3 that plays past a pumphouse on the right to an elevated green with a rock wall protecting the front of the putting surface.

The small course at Buckwood Country Club is an entertaining place for quick nine. The longest hole at Buckwood is the 260-yard par 4 9th hole that plays over the top of some small trees and back alongside the Silverado Motel & Bar to a slightly elevated green.

Playing the nine holes in about a hour, Scott, Mike, Landon, and I had more laughs than I could count. The short course proved challenging and exciting for the wager we had put on this round after we picked our partners.

If you're looking for a fun little nine hole experience that won't take you too long to play, Buckwood might just be the place for you.

8.84. Meadow Creek Golf Course

A large billboard for Jerry's Saloon greets drivers along the highway as they head north from Whitefish. Promoting golf, a restaurant, and an RV Park, one has to think, what more could you need in Fortine, Montana?

Down a dirt road in Fortine, the log cabin exterior of Jerry's Saloon and a pair of flags both blowing in the wind, one Canadian and one American invite you into this rustic bar. For just 15 dollars, that you conveniently pay at the bar, you can head out behind the bar and begin your round on the nine hole Meadow Creek Golf Course.

Beginning with a 125-yard downhill par 3 past a tall pine tree on the right from a tee box that is just paces away from the back deck the Meadow Creek Golf Course has something for everybody. A short course that will be perfect for newcomers or the settle bets made inside the bar, Meadow Creek and Jerry's Saloon are a hidden treasure along Highway 93.

Working my way around the par 3 course in a short amount of time, I finished my round on the 145-yard par 3 9th which heads up a hill toward the side of the bar. A turtleback green awaits your wedge shot on this closing hole where bets can be settled before heading back into Jerry's Saloon.

Meadow Creek Golf Course behind Jerry's Saloon is worth a stop for just the story of playing golf behind a bar in Fortine, Montana. Just watch for the billboard promising golf, a restaurant, and an RV park and you'll be on your way to a great par 3 course.

8.85. The Wilderness Club

Designed by Sir Nick Faldo, the Wilderness Club in Eureka, Montana, is rated as the #1 Course You Can Play in Montana by GolfWeek Magazine.

In the wild landscape of northwestern Montana, the Wilderness Club has sprawling fairways cut out of the tall pines and deep bunkers that will penalize errant shots from both off the tee and near the greens. A few years back I made the long drive north from Great Falls to play the Wilderness Club for the first time and the long day in the car was made worth it by this spectacular golf course.

Coming back to the Wilderness Club, I was with my friends Scott Meissner, Mike Spencer, and Landon Spencer who had played it a few times before I made it to Eureka to meet up with them. Their recent experience on the course had them prepped and ready to go from the first tee where Landon and I decided to play the tips that stretch the course out to 7,207 yards.

The opening hole at the Wilderness Club is a 389-yard par 4 that plays up hill from near the driving range and putting green and bends slightly right-to-left. A trio of bunkers occupy the left side of the fairway before the elevated and undulating green that has a pair of bunkers on the right and one in the back left.

As I made my way across the native grasses that stretch across the fairway everywhere the fairways and pine trees don't occupy, I was regretting playing the tips as I slashed my ball out of a few bunkers on the 2nd hole.

The 161-yard 3rd hole is beautiful as they get. An over water par 3 with mountain peaks in the backdrop and three deep bunkers surrounding this wide turtleback green make it a challenging par if you can't find the putting surface.

The 10th hole at Wilderness Club is a downhill 320-yard par 4 with a fairway that is shortened along the left side by a deep blue pond that protects the front of a green with steep slopes near the sides. An old dead tree along the right side 200-yards from the tee provides a great visual for this dastardly hole to open up the back nine.

The back nine at the Wilderness Club takes you back into the meadowlands of beautiful countryside outside of Eureka. The finishing hole plays at 593-yards along a lake where canoes are paddled around the calm water to the left of the fairway that slopes from right-to-left for the entirety of the hole. A par 5 that can be reached with a long drive that runs past a hill with bunkers on both sides or can be wisely played out right of lake to make it a three-shot hole. The 18th green slopes from right-to-left and from front-to-back with a ridge that divides the green and can make for long and challenging putts to complete the round.

The Wilderness Club is a fantastic track in northwest Montana. A unique and challenging course in a gorgeous area this is one of the best around and a refreshing course that anyone can make a tee time and play at.

Thanks to Anthony Sable and to the staff at the Wilderness Club for a spectacular day of golf in Eureka

8.86. Eagle Bend Golf Club

I've never framed money before, but the \$15 I won at Eagle Bend might just have to hang on my wall for some time. Golfers always seem to have a game going. A skins game, a best ball, a Nassau, or what have you. Contrary to what Judge Smalls said in Caddyshack, there is gambling at Bushwood Country Club and everywhere else for that matter.

The game at Eagle Bend was a 2-man best ball \$5-dollar Nassau, with \$5 going to the winning team on the front nine, on the back nine, and for the 18 hole round.

The partners for the match at the magnificent Eagle Bend Golf Club were my host Greg Barkus and his partner Lon Hinkle. Hinkle, 68, played professionally on the PGA Tour and the

Champions Tour where he accumulated six professional wins. Taking on the Eagle Bend members with me was my friend Jim Hann.

The first hole at Eagle Bend is a dogleg right with trees lining the right side that can block out second shots if the tee shot doesn't carry far enough to the corner of the fairway. A pond sits through the fairway past the corner of the dogleg leading up to a kidney bean shaped green with a deep bunker in the front left on this 413-yard par 4.

The finishing hole on the Eagle nine is a 461-yard downhill par 4. A blind tee shot that will chase down the hill if hit far enough, the hole bends slightly right-to-left with a wide fairway. The large green is protected by a bunker left, right, and behind.

One of the best holes on the course is the par 4 14th that plays 416-yards uphill and past a bevy of bunkers along the left side of the fairway. After the first trio of bunkers, a pond sits in front of the deep greenside bunker below the elevated green that has a number of swales running through it.

After playing the Eagle and Bear nines at Eagle Bend with Lon, Greg, Jim, and myself, we settled up our bet. Luck was on our side as Jim and I made a number of birdies and ham-and-egged our way around the course to finish ahead in the match on both the front and back nines and win the total match.

After a quick lunch with Greg, Jim and I finished the day playing the Osprey nine at Eagle Bend. Making its way around the lake and the meadows near Flathead Lake, the Osprey nine is one of my favorites. It begins with a 347-yard par 4 with water all along the right side of a fairway that bends to the left and is lined by trees on the left. A deep bunker on the right side protects this opening hole on the lakeside nine at Eagle Bend.

Perhaps my favorite hole on the Osprey is the 412-yard par 4 7th hole that plays along an inlet of the lake. To the left of the fairway that doglegs from right-to-left sits a marina filled with boats and yachts in the crystal blue water. The best tee shot is just to the right of the tree along the lake on the left of the fairway and will set up a wedge or mid-iron into this large green that slopes back-to-front and is protected by three greenside bunkers.

After finishing the 27 holes at Eagle Bend, I was asked by someone what my favorite course in Montana might be. I think out of all the courses I have played Eagle Bend might hold that distinction. With three different nines to choose from and perhaps the best greens in the state, Eagle Bend is a course I would play every day if I had the chance.

Some years from now, I think someone might ask me why I have \$15 framed on my wall and I'll have to tell them the story of playing my favorite course in Montana and taking some money off a retired 3-time PGA tour winner.

Thanks to Greg Barkus, Head Golf Professional Michael Wynne, Lon Hinkle, and the rest of the great people at Eagle Bend for a wonderful day of golf on this fantastic course.

8.87. Village Greens Golf Course

Evening golf is sometimes the best golf, and at Village Greens that was just the case. A par 70 course in Kalispell, this wonderful course that features rolling fairway hills and small lakes around a track that stretches to 6,401 yards from the tips, Village Greens is an enjoyable course.

The opening hole at Village Greens is a 586-yard par 5 and is listed as the toughest hole on the course. A dogleg right with a lake to the right of the fairway, twin bunkers midway through the fairway after the dogleg narrow the apron of the undulating green that is protected by a bunker in the front left.

The 4th and 5th holes at Village Greens are back-to-back par 3s playing 180 and 140-yards apiece. The 180-yard 4th plays to an undulating green protected by long rough on all sides while the 5th requires the golfer to carry the water that protects the front of this green slopes from back-to-front and will feed shots hit too short down the hill and into the water.

On the beautiful summer evening, my playing partner Shay Smithwick-Hann and I were playing at a great pace. It wasn't too long until we had made our way onto the back nine in less than an hour-and-a-half and stood on the tee on the tough par 4 13th.

A 467-yard hole that plays from an elevated tee down the hill and back up to an elevated green, this challenging hole has a fairway that is sandwiched in between a large pond on the right side and a diabolical bunker on the left.

After such a tough par 4, the reward is a short par 4 that plays 387-yards from an elevated tee and meanders to the right past the same pond, this time on your right, to a green stuck on the sidehill above 13th tee.

Village Greens plays to a par 70 because it has five par 3s and only three par 5s on the course. It was a perfect course to play in the evening with quick greens, a variety of different and challenging holes, and a great pace of play.

Thanks to Village Greens for a great evening of golf on such a fun and enjoyable course in Kalispell.

8.88. Northern Pines Golf Club

Growing up in Great Falls I know a thing or two about the wind.

First things first, it sucks. Secondly, it can wreak havoc on golf shots if you're not prepared. Always feeling like the wind in your face was a common theme in my youth and I think it prepared me for links golf.

Northern Pines in Kalispell is as good a links golf course as I've come across on this trip. At over 7,000 yards from the tips, this Andy North design has long fescue rough bordering every hole and large greens protected by deep bunkers that require flighted irons and creative plays around the greens to score well.

With the breeze into your face on the 384-yard 1st hole that bends left past some rolling hills that hide the fescue rough that sits through the fairway ready to eat any tee shots running through the short grass. A low spot along the fairway on the left serves as a collection area for tee shots leaving a slightly uphill second shot into a green that slopes from back right to front left and is protected by a deep bunker in the front of the putting surface.

An excellent links course presents challenges to golfers that in turn have to use creativity to carve their way through the rolling hills and fescue with success. Northern Pines is a links course that gets the little imagination working while you play the course by presenting multiple ways to play some of the shorter holes.

An example of this is the par 4 9th that plays 430-yards, usually downwind, but has dangers all down the right side of the fairway. If the deep bunker at 260-yards down the right side doesn't dispel players from taking an aggressive line on this hole that doglegs slightly to the right, the deep grass bunker past the sand bunker will leave you sorry you didn't play it out safely into the left side of the fairway. A pair of bunkers in the front left are to be avoided when hitting into this undulating and tiered green.

The 404-yard 14th at Northern Pines is my favorite hole on the course. A slight dogleg right from an elevated tee box, this hole has a string of bunkers running down the right side of the fairway and a hazard running down the left. A lone bunker in the front right protects this

green that slopes harshly from back right to front left that sits near the meandering river and in the shade of some tall trees in the backdrop.

Battling wind and fescue, my first time playing Northern Pines was an absolute treat. Links style golf courses will always hold a special place in my heart because of the shots they require and the elements you are forced to battle.

The wind of course is old hat for a guy who grew up in windy Great Falls, but the dangers of Northern Pines were a new and exciting challenge I would take up any day.

Thanks to Northern Pines Golf Club for a wonderful day of golf on this great links style track.

8.89. Polson Bay Golf Course

It isn't every day you get to play with a champion, but at Polson Bay Golf Course I got to do just that when I teed it up with 4-time Montana State Special Olympics Champion Robbie Hayes and his stepfather Roger Wallace.

The Championship Course at Polson Bay is an amazing track that stretches down near Flathead Lake and offers up some of the best views in Montana from a number of tee boxes including the opening hole. The 1st at Polson Bay is a 404-yard par 4 that doglegs left past high cottonwoods and a bunker on the left corner of the fairway. From an elevated tee box, this picture-perfect opening hole requires a solid opening tee shot to set up a mid-iron into an undulating green protected by a bunker in the front left.

As Robbie, Roger, and I played our way around the front nine at Polson Bay, Robbie told me all about all the medals he's won in Special Olympics. Not just a golfer, Robbie has also won medals in a variety of track events at the Special Olympics State Games.

“I’m super fast,” Robby explained on the 3rd hole after using his lefty swing to hit one down the fairway. It caught me off guard that Robbie hits the ball left handed but putts right handed.

Roger laughed as he explained, “Robbie used to really slice his putts when he putted left handed. It was just something we noticed when Robbie was putting around in the pro shop. He actually putted the ball better from the other side.”

So, with 13 left handed clubs, one right handed putter, and with his stepfather Roger as his caddy, Robbie has proven to be quite the player. He’s also proven to be quite the inspiration. I can’t be sure there are more people I admire in golf than Robbie, or Roger for that matter who has taught Robbie everything he knows about the game.

The par 5 6th hole at Polson is as great a visual hole as it is playable. A long dogleg left along the lake, this par 5 can be reached in two but traditionally plays as a three-shot hole. A narrow landing area lined on the left by hazard and a pair of bunkers along the right demands an accurate tee shot before the hole turns left and plays uphill to a green protected by bunkers on both sides.

Finishing our round on the Championship Course on the 528-yard 18th hole that bends slightly right-to-left, Robbie, Roger, and I capped off a perfect morning in Polson. Reachable in two, the green is protected by a large bunker in the front right of the undulating putting surface.

After the round, Robbie and I had lunch and visited about golf and his favorite holes on the Championship Course before he and Roger left to go camping for the weekend and I headed out to the Olde Course.

My playing partner for the Olde Course was 8-year old Max Milton. Max is the son of Polson’s Head Golf Pro Cameron Milton and a pretty darn good stick. He recently won the state

competition for the Drive, Chip, and Putt competition in Missoula and as we played the first couple of holes on the Olde 9 Max told me he wants to play on the PGA Tour and eventually win a major.

Being a betting man, I made a wager with Max who was raising funds for his trip to Washington to compete in the regional Drive, Chip, and Putt competition. The deal was, I would play the tips and Max would play the junior tees and we'd play straight up. If he beat me, I'd give him \$100 for his trip but if I beat him I'd give him \$50.

Early in the round at the Olde 9, Max might've had me on the ropes as his game was as consistent as it gets. With the straps of his small golf bag draped across his shoulders the aspiring major winner played down the center of every fairway while I had to wrangle with my drive on a few holes.

Luckily, I made a few putts and tossed in a birdie or two against the 8-year old who was able to brag in the clubhouse about the \$50 he won in our match. I was just relieved I could register a win against a future major winner.

Hours later I was driving around Polson and decided to head by the course and work on my putting on the practice green. I found Max on the putting green, practicing his short game late into the evening and he and I played a few putting games for about an hour before the street lights came on and he hopped on his bike to head home.

Looking across the course at Polson Bay Golf Course and seeing Max ride his bike down the cart path, I don't think I could've had a better day of golf. In such a spectacularly beautiful place I found some amazing and inspiring people in Robbie, Roger, and young Max.

If you're looking for a place to inspire your golf game, Polson Bay is that place.

Thanks to Cameron Milton, Roger Wallace, and the rest of the staff at Polson Bay for a fantastic day of golf and memories at such a great course.

8.90. John's Golf Course

“Hit this one high over the house and drop it on the green,” Steve Espinoza said from the seat of his utility cart. “And make sure you don’t break my windows.”

I steadied myself over the ball and was just about to take the club back when Steve reminded me again with a laugh, “Make sure you don’t break my windows.”

These were the same instructions he’d given to Sir Nick Faldo years ago when he arrived to play an exhibition at John’s Golf Course outside of Eureka, Montana and had given to countless others over the years who’ve played the course surrounding the Espinoza home.

The story of John’s Golf Course begins with a tragedy. In 1993, the Espinoza family was woken up at 3 in the morning by a Highway Patrolman. Michael Espinoza, 20 years old back then, was killed in a car crash outside of Eureka returning from dinner with some friends in a nearby town. Michael was the second of their children that Steve and Juana had lost after losing an infant daughter almost two decades earlier.

For Steve, a disabled Vietnam veteran, the loss was crushing. It broke his heart even more to tell his son John who was born with Cornelia de Lange syndrome which is a very rare genetic disorder that causes a range of physical, cognitive, and medical challenges to those diagnosed with it. John had looked up to his older brother Michael with the same loving admiration as all younger brothers do and now he was gone.

About a year later, John walked into Michael’s room and grabbed a golf club of his brother’s and took it downstairs to his parents and asked his dad to teach him how to play golf.

Part of John's disability is a lack of a range of motion in his wrists, so in the front yard of their house Steve teed up a ball for John to hit.

“Not knowing how to teach someone to play, I just told John to hit the ball,” Steve said with a twinkle in his eye. “And he did, he hit it clear across the yard! And I said, ‘John, my god! What a shot! Do it again.’ And he did it again, it was amazing.”

So, Steve took John to a nearby golf course to play but John got too nervous with all the people in front of them and behind them.

“I got so nervous. I got so nervous my very first time. People kept rushing me and telling me to hurry up. I told my dad I wanted to go home,” John recalled.

“On the way home John said, ‘I wish I had my own golf course.’ So, I got home and stepped out of the car and saw the front lawn and said, ‘I’m going put a green right here for my son,’” Steve said of the beginning of John’s Golf Course.

And Steve did just that for his son on his 10-acre property. Asking for help from courses in the area and then eventually all around the world, he got seed, used equipment, and tips for building and maintaining a golf course from course superintendents.

John’s Golf Course played all around the Espinoza home with holes spread around the 10-acres that John could play whenever he wanted, after of course he helped mow the greens and fairways with his father. John would play the course from sun up to sun down and his game showed it as he went on to win 10 Montana State Special Olympic Championships and took home bronze from the Special Olympics World Games in Dublin, Ireland.

With John and Steve riding in the golf cart and giving me directions on how to play the remnants of the holes left at John’s Golf Course, I played all the holes including the one

requiring a shot up and over the house. I was extra careful to not break any of Steve's windows on this over-the-house par 4.

Leaving John's Golf Course was tougher than I thought it would be because it had warmed my heart. Meeting Steve and John and having them show me their course and tell me their story was something I will cherish for the rest of my life.

John's Golf Course was built in a front yard using earth, sand, and seed, but it was really built with love. The love of a mourning father who wanted to give his special needs son a place to learn to play the greatest game on earth.

That's what love is. Love is John's Golf Course.

Thanks to the Espinoza Family for having me out to play John's Golf Course and for sharing your stories with me. It is a memory I won't forget.

8.91. Eagle Falls Golf Course

Standing in the cold late October Great Falls wind that feels like sandpaper against your face I laid a rose down beside the leaf covered green and thought to myself, "*It has been a year.*"

Staring up toward the heavens and seeing the clouds slowly pushed across the face of the sky the thoughts came rushing back like they so often do. Instinctively my jaw tensed, I bit my tongue just enough to keep my mind off the pain inside my heart and blinked feverishly to keep the salty tears from sneaking down the sides of my cheeks.

What a difference a year makes.

It was a year ago that my dad called me and broke the news saying, "Jay is gone". Truthfully the rest of what he said remains a blur. I can retrace my steps and remember exactly where I was when my world lost a bit of its color.

And what a difference a year makes.

Taking Jay's golf cart out for a final round on the golf course's last day of the season, my dad and I shared some silent moments with the old lovable redhead.

"Jay spent so much time out here working to make this golf course what it is," my dad said with a tremble in his voice I don't often hear. "He did so much work, so he and I could come out and enjoy this course when he retired... Life just isn't fair."

In a fair world, cancer wouldn't take people who fill our lives with color. In a fair world, I wouldn't be leaving a red rose on the apron of every green on a bitterly cold last day in October. In a fair world, my heart wouldn't break, my jaw wouldn't tense, and I wouldn't blink to fight back tears when the memories come flooding back.

Memories, like the ones I've got of Jay hide around every corner of Eagle Falls Golf Course. And now thanks to Jay, I have memories across every golf course in Montana.

Jay's was a story I shared with nearly everyone I met and teed it up with across the Treasure State this summer and it would go a little something like this:

One the first tee of every golf course in Montana, from Plentywood to Dillon, and Eureka to Broadus, I would dig in my golf bag for a ball and a tee and see your obituary tucked safely inside the side pocket. Tattered and ragged from being held and passed around the fourth largest state in the Union, I would tell my new friends about how your passing inspired me to make my own dream of playing every golf course in Montana a reality.

I would share that, "A great friend of mine passed away after a short battle with pancreatic cancer who had always wanted to go on a golf trip with my dad and me. There were ideas for golf trips we had kicked around and planned in the hypothetical sense only to have Jay taken away before we could ever make it happen. So, I put Jay's obituary in my golf bag when I started this journey and would play every golf course in Montana with him with me."

And I did just that.

Across the 8,507.3 miles I racked up on the odometer in my 2012 Ford Focus that was packed to the gills with notebooks, golf balls, a golf bag, and six golf shirts, four pairs of shorts, two pairs of pants, and more socks and underwear than I knew what to do with, I had a copilot in spirit. Cruising down the lonely highways of Eastern Montana and the windy mountain roads of Western Montana, Jay was with me.

During the long days when I walked more miles with a golf bag slung over my shoulders than I ever thought possible, and my feet would ache, and the rainstorms that all too often included bits of hail hit like a ton of bricks, I would have moments of weakness. The doubting thoughts would sneak into my consciousness.

And that was when I'd reach into my golf bag and pull out Jay's obituary.

On the anniversary of Jay's leaving us, my dad and I played one final round of our first year without Jay. As we played we scattered roses across all 18 holes at Eagle Falls in memory of a great friend who I know we wish we didn't have to fight back tears whenever we think about him. But the pain and hurt of missing a loved one doesn't fade with time. And neither does the amount I miss him.

What a difference a year makes.

In loving memory of my friend Jay Baumberger (Jan. 7, 1952-Oct. 31, 2017)