

Wolf Point Club

Texas, USA

St Andrews, Texas? Adam Lawrence visits a linksy heaven on the Gulf Coast

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“Like St Andrews, Wolf Point conclusively proves that dramatic topography is not necessary to produce stunning golf”



Wolf Point's par three fifteenth looks benign from the tee but the green's contour define the hole. Inset: Infierno bunker threatens the drive on the fifth

Even among the proportion of golfers who embrace the belief that the game is more fun and more challenging on courses that are firm and bouncy, there is often an unstated belief that such conditions can't be achieved on courses that don't have sandy soils.

Such doubters need to pay a visit to Wolf Point Club in Texas. But then, anyone who also questions whether golf courses can be affordable also needs to go to Wolf Point. As should anyone who believes that old fashioned, low profile golf went out with MacKenzie and Colt.

Stand on the first tee at Wolf Point and you will behold perhaps the single widest

expanse of short grass in the world of golf. From lake left to fairway edge way right must easily be 200 yards: it makes the first and eighteenth at St Andrews look narrow! Yet, because of the firm turf and cunning slopes of the green complex, anywhere other than position A (which will move according to the location of the flag) will make for a tricky approach; strategic golf at its purest.

Or the second hole: another huge expanse of fairway, peppered with bunkers. A single trap, small and deep, guards the central approach to the green. The U-shaped green has a left hand tongue way below the right side: it is

possible to putt from front right to front left, but skirting the bunker is tough and demands real precision and touch. Again, the wide fairway invites an aggressive tee shot, but positioning is crucial — if the flag is right and the drive goes left, forget three and be grateful to make four, and if the pin is behind the bunker, choose your line with great care.

The par five third is another clever piece of design. A row of diagonal bunkers that could have been placed by Harry Colt creates a speed slot down the left side. There is, again, tons of room out right, but bunkers in the second landing area make a tougher layup from that side, and the

green is bunkered deeply on the right too. The line of charm — the risky shot off the tee that creates the best angle for approach — is thus to aim dead at the pin.

Wolf Point is full of this kind of clever design work. At the short two shot fourth (which might just be drivable from the right tee in the right wind), a small creek marks the right hand side of the hole. Out left is another huge expanse of short grass, but anyone actively choosing to go that way is putting real pressure on his wedge game, because the green is banked into a big mound on that side, with a deep bunker cut into its face. From the right, so long as the tee shot avoids bunkers and the

creek, a range of shots can be used to get the approach close — a running chip banking off the side of the mound being perhaps the most appealing, given the severe tilt of the putting surface.

And so to the fifth, perhaps the best hole on the course. With the clubhouse and the first tee on the hill to the right, architect Nuzzo has created the biggest bunker on the course on that side. It's named Infierno: those who speak Spanish and know their golf will immediately connect it with the fearsome hazard on the fourteenth hole at St Andrews, yet another connection between Wolf Point and the home of golf. There is, again, a vast plain

of fairway to hit into without challenging Infierno, but the temptation to do just that is strong. For the green, backing hard onto the creek, is protected by deep swales (that could also be at St Andrews, or many other great links courses). A long two-shotter, the hole can only safely be approached from the right side, where there is an area of relatively level ground that can be used to bounce the ball in.

From the left, the options are lay up, hit a massive draw to access the approach ramp, fly the ball all the way to the plateau green (and stop it before the creek), or attempt a very risky running shot through the complex of swales, which, although they may at first seem shaped, are actually natural drainage channels, just tidied up a little during construction. This is among the greatest holes I have seen for its mix of challenge, space and wonderful use of natural contours. If the green is perhaps a little severe, so be it — you can always lay up and hope for a chip and putt four, rather like at the Road Hole (that St Andrews connection again!)



A deep swale divides the double green of holes eight and eighteen, creating wild putting on both holes

I could, if I had space, give a detailed account of every hole at Wolf Point. But the point, I think, is made: the course is astounding. Rarely have I seen a golf course that offers such a wide range of options on every shot, and, in particular, never outside the UK have I seen a course that is so attuned to the running approach. You could approach Wolf Point with a modern, aerial game strategy, but to do so would demand incredible precision and control – and, at least as far as I’m concerned, remove much of the fun.

It would be easy to dismiss the course as a freak, an outlier, because of the special circumstances of its creation and existence. For Wolf Point is a personal golf course in more than one way. Conceived and built for the sole use of its owner and his invited guests, it is also an intensely personal work for its architect, Mike Nuzzo, who gave up a successful career as an aerospace engineer to become a golf course designer, and for superintendent Don Mahaffey, who played a vital role in the construction process. But, even if the course itself is hardly a normal story of golf development, it represents a vitally important case study for an industry that has built itself into a very tight corner in recent years.

Faced with a site as flat as this – there can only be a scant few feet of elevation change across the entire property, and apart from the creek and its drainage channels, there is little in the way of obvious natural features – most architects, asked to create an interesting golf course,

would have resorted to large scale earthmoving, and consequently a big construction bill. Here, that isn’t the case. The only significant piece of earthworks was the excavation of the 14-acre lake that sits at the heart of the property, and the consequent creation of the hill on which the first tee and clubhouse sit (a job carried out over a ten week period between harvests, by a group of local farmers who brought their own equipment, thus keeping costs for the entire course to an astoundingly low US\$3m). Everywhere else, only small, localised bits of earth were moved, to build greens and bunkers, and to add golfing interest to the flat terrain. At the edges of the golf course, where the maintained surface meets the native brush, there was very little in the way of construction work, so the course and its surrounding landscape blend together in a gentle, unforced way.

As his first new build design job, Nuzzo has naturally thrown his heart and soul into the project, and as a result, has been able to identify small-scale features that could create outstanding golf holes without major construction. This is another lesson from Wolf Point – and yet another characteristic that it shares with St Andrews. The course is conclusive proof that dramatic topography is not necessary to produce stunning golf. Examples of this truth are legion around the golf course, but two will suffice: the amazing E-shaped green of the par three fifteenth hole, where small natural swales cutting into the green

area create a putting surface devilish in its challenges and the dominating, though shallow, false front of the one shot twelfth, where, because of the fallaway nature of the rest of the green, a front pin can only sensibly be accessed by a knockdown shot with a short iron that pitches in the fronting hollow and runs up the slope.

I have omitted mention of any number of wonderful Wolf Point holes through lack of space, but one other aspect of the course demands a paragraph, and that is the stunning maintenance. Superintendent Mahaffey and his team are proving that fast, firm, bouncy turf conditions are not only possible, but necessary, even in the extreme weather conditions that affect south Texas. The choice of Emerald bermuda grass, which produces deep roots and can thus tolerate the kind of irrigation regime needed to maintain firm conditions in such a climate – basically watering heavily but infrequently – was an inspired decision, and the result is a golf course that rewards the running shot more than almost any I have seen.

My love of Wolf Point, even from one, short visit, will hopefully shine through to readers. It is, perhaps, a little sad that, because of its intensely private nature, relatively few people will get to see the course, because not only is it probably the best first course by a modern architect that I have seen (I have not been to Bandon Dunes, perhaps the obvious alternative candidate for this accolade), but it is also a living case study for the future of golf design and construction. **GCA**