

After 10 years, Wild Horse still celebrating success

Written by Deb Egenberger
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Word of mouth is best advertisement

What started out as a bleak spring for Wild Horse Golf Club's 10th anniversary has turned into a stellar summer to celebrate.

Green fees hit the highest mark ever for the nationally-rated course last month and workers continue to fill tee times on a daily basis.

For Don Graham, who came on board as the course pro in 2000, being ranked among the nation's best modern courses and topping the list of affordable courses is nice publicity but it's the word of mouth that makes all the difference.

"When I have a member say he was in Spokane, WA, and was wearing his Wild Horse shirt when someone stopped to ask if he'd ever played there, that's how I measure success," Graham said. "It's almost a jealousy thing. People really want to come here to play."

WILD  HORSE

This spring, though, Graham had a pretty grim outlook for the season.

"The weather combined with the economy was terrible," Graham said. "We came into June way behind where we usually are on green fees."

Weather has more of an effect on golf than just slippery clubs from rain or slicing drives from wind.

"People who travel here from any distance have to be able to plan ahead," Graham said. "When the weather is iffy, no one wants to take that chance."

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July's more stable temperatures helped make up for a slow start. Graham said the course had 2,368 green fee rounds that month alone, the most in any single month since the course opened in 1999.

Graham said Wild Horse expects between 9,000 and 10,000 green fees to be paid each year. With membership steady right at 210, income increases with more green fees.

"It's different from year to year," Graham said. "Some years are good and some years are better."

Most of those non-members rounds are played on weekends. To fill in week days, Graham said the course books a variety of corporate and special events.

"Corporate events are very big for us," he said.

That might be Wild Horse's biggest way to reach out to new players.

For example, Graham said, one corporate player whose company had booked an event in Gothenburg for several years brought a new corporate tournament to town when he changed jobs, hitting a whole new set of people.

What draws players to Wild Horse, Graham said, is the opportunity to play a different kind of golf than anywhere else.

"Sure you have Sandhills or the Dismal course (both near Mullen) but they are private. You have to be a member or know a member to play there," Graham said.

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Wild Horse is an entirely public course.

“Any regular Joe can come here and have a good time,” Graham said.

And what’s different about the way players are treated at Wild Horse may be what brings them back for game after game.

“We try to be more relaxed here,” Graham said. “It’s something people tend to expect with the surroundings. In some of those big city courses, players get treated like they’re in a cattle yard. Employees want them to get in and get out so someone else can play. It’s not like that here.”

And that’s why word-of-mouth advertising has worked for Wild Horse.

Graham has done marketing in national magazines, in some tourism publications and other points of interest.

He said a relatively new Web site—www.playwildhorse.com—has helped drum up a little business but it’s people telling people that has kept numbers up.

“The goal is to keep people playing here,” Graham said. “I think we’ve done a pretty good job of that.”