LET'S GOLF

• Hitting the links at our local golf courses

So, you're a golfer? Now, being a "golfer" doesn't mean that you hit balls every couple of weeks and golf occasionally throughout the year. Being a "golfer" means that you keep your clubs in the back of the car, "just in case." It means that every single time you drive by a golf course, you get the strongest urge to hit a bucket of balls (and you usually cave into this urge). It also means that you know your handicap down to the tenth. I should know - my husband is a "golfer," or should I say "GOLFER?!"

Now, if you are a serious golfer, then you probably already know about all of the great local golf courses. But, this article is for those of you who may have actually missed one or two of these courses; you are new to the area, or you are on your way to becoming a "golfer."

There is no better climate than California for golf. There are very few places in the world where you can golf year-round. The Sacramento region has an incredible number of first-class golf courses within a short distance of each other. Here are my top 11 local, public, 18-hole golf-course picks. (All right, my husband, the "golfer," helped out a bit.)

#1 PICK - EMPIRE RANCH GOLF CLUB

1620 East Natoma, Folsom, 916-817-8100
www.empireranchgolfclub.com

• The number one pick is, of course, the Empire Ranch Golf Club. This championship links-style course features a variety of challenges such as gently rolling greens, bunkers and marshland. It is set up to challenge all player ranges from beginner to pro by offering "play it safe" or "go for it" options. Their signature hole is 18, a par 3. It is quite rare to find a course ending with a par 3. This hole has an elevated tee, water hazard and sand trap, which add to the difficulty. Due to the elevation, it plays longer than it looks. The course itself is always in great playing condition and has very fast, but true, greens. Jonny Labelle and Bret Taylor (who is also the co-host of Sunday Morning Golf Talk on 1140 AM) are outstanding teaching pros. Their management team, Bob Sommers and Steve Laverde, are very involved in the day-to-day operations of the club. They also have the best men's club in the area with 582 members. Before or after your round, be sure to check out the clubhouse restaurant. The service is personable and efficient, and their
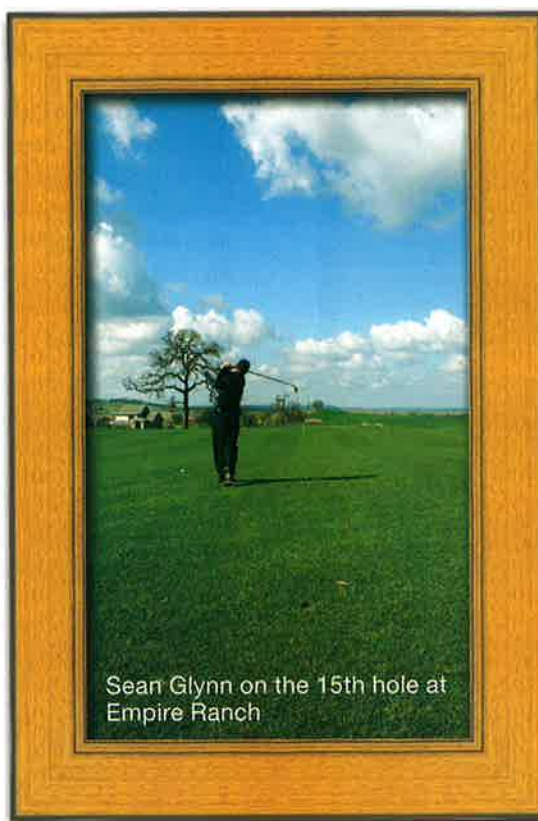

Sean Glynn on the 15th hole at Empire Ranch

breakfast value can't be beaten.

#2 PICK - WHITNEY OAKS GOLF CLUB

2305 Clubhouse Dr., Rocklin, 916-632-8333
www.whitneyoaksgolf.com

• Whitney Oaks is a horseshoe-shaped ridge that towers 200 feet above two meadows and oak-dominated woodlands that characterize the topography. An abundance of spectacular granite outcroppings, natural wetlands, majestic oak woodlands and wildlife add to the scenery, making it feel like a golfing paradise at times. The challenge to this course is its difficulty - it is a true test of your entire golf game. Many average golfers who leave with high scores and lost balls vow never to come back. But following a cooling-off period, most decide to return, believing the next visit will be different. The beauty of the challenge keeps bringing people back. For most golfers, it is best to play it safe on this course. The fairways can be tight and unforgiving and the greens are typically two-tiered with considerable break and tend to run fast - challenging even the best putters.

#3 PICK - DARKHORSE

13450 Combie Rd., Auburn, 530-269-7900 www.darkhorsegolf.com

• Although DarkHorse Golf Club is a good 45 minutes away from Folsom, this course just had to be in the top three since it is the most nationally decorated course throughout the Sacramento Region. It was recently selected as one of Golf Digest's "Best New Affordable Public Courses" of 2003. This past summer, Golf Magazine recognized DarkHorse as one of the "Top 10 Courses You Can Play in America." A course of this caliber would normally charge $100 a round, but DarkHorse prides itself on being a course that everyone can play by charging very reasonable green fees.

RUNNERS-UP

APPLE MOUNTAIN

3455 Carson Rd., Camino, 530-647-7400
www.applemountaingolfresort.com

• Apple Mountain is best known for their truly spectacular snow-

capped mountain views amongst stands of pine, cedar and madrone.

BASS LAKE GOLF COURSE
3000 Alexandrite Drive, Rescue, 530-677-GOLF
www.basslakegolfcourse.com
• This golf course has come quite a long way in recent years.

Empire Ranch driving range

Not surprising when you consider that owners Alex and Sabrina Ho have spent an estimated $1.5 million in improvements under the guidance of general manager and superintendent Steve Carlton. The course is complete with new tee boxes, cart paths, a pond which guards the 16th hole, a 7,000 square foot putting green and clubhouse with a full-service restaurant and bar. Their hard work has really paid off. This 18 hole golf course is naturally beautiful with smooth, fast greens, and challenging narrow fairways.

CASTLE OAKS
1000 Castle Oaks Dr., Ione, 209-274-0167
• One of the best features of the Castle Oaks course is their open layout. This is not a links-style course, so it is not cramped at all. As a matter of fact, you never see another fairway.

HAGGIN OAKS GOLF COURSE - ALISTER MACKENZIE
3645 Fulton Ave., Sacramento, 916-481-GOLF
www.hagginoaks.com
• Haggin Oaks is known across the U.S. for its Golf Super Shop. Built in 1932, it has become Sacramento Valley's #1 golf store. Here, you'll find the largest selection of golf merchandise in the area, and a staff of 14 PGA and LGPA golf professionals on hand to customize your shopping and purchasing experience.
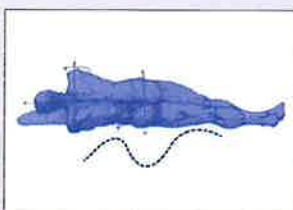
MORGAN CREEK

8787 Morgan Creek Lane, Roseville, 916-780-2582
www.morgancreekclub.com

• Morgan Creek is known as the longest course in the Sacramento region. The course is forgiving and can accommodate a wide range of handicaps. They also have great specials during the week.

TEAL BEND GOLF CLUB

7200 Garden Hwy., Sacramento, 916-922-5209
www.tealbendgolf.com

• Teal Bend was named after the Teal duck, which inhabits the property, and you will most likely see all kinds of other wildlife here too, including deer, hawks, and fish. The signature of this golf course is their undulating greens, which offer a smooth, consistent surface from the first hole through the 18th, year round.

TURKEY CREEK

1525 Highway 193, Lincoln, 916-434-9100
www.turkeycreekgc.com

• Players at Turkey Creek will notice three environmental signatures of the course: the rolling oaks woodlands on the front nine, the rugged quarry area, and a back nine that has been said to resemble Germany's Black Forest. The centerpiece is the old granite quarry, now a lake that comes into play on the 3rd and 18th holes. The layout marries challenging play with the history and terrain of the region providing, hole-by-hole, the best layout in the area.

WILDHAWK GOLF CLUB

7713 Vineyard Rd., Sacramento, 916-688-4653
www.wildhawkgolf.com

• Wildhawk has a high desert look, which is unique to the area and features four sets of tees, interesting water features and unique shaped bunkers. The course is known as one of the best daily fare golf courses in Sacramento. Also unique at Wildhawk is the option to "Walk the Hawk" - allowing golfers to either walk the course or use a cart.

Want to know more about the golf courses in our area and across the nation? Check out these resources:
• www.golfguideweb.com
• www.golfcalifornia.com
• www.golfable.com
• www.capitolcitygolf.com
• www.ncga.org
See you on the links! ❶

— Elizabeth Morabito