

In 2008, the Okanagan was poised to become Canada's top golf destination. And then the recession struck. Six years later, on the heels of a financial crisis and a golf crisis, how is the Valley's golf industry faring?



RAISING OUR GAME

By Natalie Appleton

In May 1899, Dr. Jack Carruthers must have looked like a ghost, trudging along the City Flats staking greens amidst the morning fog of Okanagan Lake. At age 46 and six feet four inches tall, all that bending over to lay out Kelowna's first golf course might have taken a toll on the Scot. Fortunately, he had the help of Elisha Bailey, the butcher and post master. It was almost 14 years before other Scots laid out the first golf courses in Vernon and Penticton on baseball fields and orchards, using melted CPR babbitts for flagsticks and tomato cans for cups.

Kelowna lead the way, hosting the first recorded tournament for mainland BC on July 1, 1899 at the nine-hole course now buried under Memorial Arena and City Hall. There were just eight players. Another four regular golfers, bachelors, were drawn instead to the meal and marriageable women they might find at the Dominion Day picnic.

It was a "cool and pleasant" day according to the *Vernon News*. Bailey shot 68. At tournament end, golfers and the reporter who later wrote about it realized this was just the start of something. "We anticipate that Kelowna will some day be as well known for golf as for

tobacco, cricket or any other games or vegetables."

Almost 110 years later, in late June 2008, their prediction was reality. Tower Ranch Golf & Country Club, a par 72 track designed by Thomas McBroom, had just opened on a stunning hillside of spruce and golden grasslands. It was Greater Kelowna's nineteenth course. In Vernon, a fivesome of international golf stars were competing in the Telus World Skins Game at Predator Ridge. Golf fans around the world watched Columbian Camilo Villegas, who won the event, reading putts in his notorious Spiderman pose. They saw Greg "The Shark" Norman escort a ladybug out of his putting line. And in the background, the Okanagan landscape.

Fred Couples took third place at the Skins, and the next day opened a Vernon golf course he helped design—the golf club at The Rise. Between the two events, there were probably whispers Norman too would be designing a signature championship track in the Valley, his a total redesign of Peachland's Ponderosa Golf Course.

That June in the Okanagan, it looked as though golf and the good life would go on forever.

Will Deck plays golf on the UBCO Heat team.

Will Deck photo by Alex Hill/UBC Okanagan Athletics; Predator Ridge photo by Collin Jewell.

Neil Schmidt grew up in the glory days of golf. Every weekend, he stepped outside with his stiff leather bag and the set of Wilsons that once belonged to his aunt. He waited for his Uncle Nick's truck to pull up to the house, just off the bottom of McCurdy Road. Ten-year-old Neil usually played the Lakeshore Road Fairview Par 3 with his uncle. For a long time, golf was just "something fun to do," he says.

He had the sun, the grass and his uncle at his side while his mother was working as a nurse at the hospital. And he often had a plate of fries at the end of the round. As a

boy in Kelowna in the summer-time, it didn't get much better.

Within a few years, though, Neil had another reason to keep at it. By the time he was 13, he was shooting in the mid-70s and his mom had bought him a junior membership at the Kelowna Golf & Country Club, the city's oldest course and home to PGA tour player Dave Barr.

"Being a Kelowna kid, and for your icon in your sport to be at the same course..." says Neil. "It was a big deal."

A sports writer once described Dave as "arguably the greatest tour pro this country has yet produced." The Kelowna native spent 19 years

on the PGA tour, where he won three times, in addition to 12 Canadian tour titles, the 1985 World Cup Team Championship and the Champions Tour 2003 Royal Caribbean Golf Classic, a first for a Canadian.

"I had a good run," says Dave, retired now, and splitting the year between Palm Springs, FL., and West Kelowna. Depending on where you're standing at the Barr home, you might see Mission Hill Winery or the tip of Two Eagles Golf Course & Academy, where he occasionally plays in addition to the Kelowna Golf & Country Club or any of the other courses in the area.

By the time Dave was 15, he was playing at the country club. He'd acquired the nickname "hands" because of his "wristy" swing, and he was down to a 3 handicap."

When Dave was a boy, "there weren't that many courses around." In fact, there were two: the country club and Shadow Mountain, now the site of Walmart. Dave's first attempts at the sport were played "batting around" found balls with his brother in the yard of the old Dr. Knox school and later at Shadow Mountain. There, he and his brother would play 54 holes a day, from 6 in the morning until 9 at night.

By the time Dave was 15, he was playing at the country club. He'd acquired the nickname "hands" because of his "wristy" swing and he was down to a 3 handicap. "I wanted to play all the time," he says, and he could. Back then, tee times were for the taking. Today there are nearly 150 names on the waitlist for membership and the club allots its almost 50,000 rounds per season using a ballot system. As a teenager, though, he golfed to his heart's content and the practice paid off. Dave won junior events, got a golf scholarship to Tulsa, OK., and started beating American up-and-comers like Tom Kite and Ben Crenshaw.

"I thought maybe I could make a go of it as a professional," says Dave and beginning in 1974, he did.

While marriage and easy access to the United States took the Barr family to Richmond for 25 years, Dave always returned to Kelowna to golf and, albeit unknowingly, to inspire.

Neil's hero was just a fairway away. For most of his late teenage years, he had a standing one o'clock tee time and he still had a plate of fries after the round. He went on to become a



Clockwise: Photos from the Vernon Golf & Country Club 100th anniversary celebrations in 2013: president Brent Barker with anniversary scroll, vintage hickory golf clubs, board member Brian Carpenter.



Clockwise: Overview of Kelowna Golf & Country Club (KGCC) c. 1930, KGCC today, golfer at KGCC c. 1920, golf legend Dave Barr, three golfers at KGCC c. 1920.



Tower Ranch Golf & Country Club.



Three views of The Harvest Golf Club.

Golf was still on a heavy upswing," says Neil about his career choice. "There was a time—in the '80s and '90s—when you talked about your lawyer, your doctor, and your golf pro."

— Neil Schmidt
Director of Operations
Tower Ranch Golf & Country Club

Canadian junior in 1988 and earned a golf scholarship in California.

Meanwhile, Kelowna's ninth course, known today as The Quail Course at Okanagan Golf Club, was under construction. In the South Okanagan, there were 12 courses, in the north another 10, including the newly opened Predator Ridge, a golf resort community near Vernon that now encompasses 36 holes, a lodge and almost 500 doors.

"Golf was still on a heavy upswing," says Neil about his career choice. "There was a time—in the '80s and '90s—when you talked about your lawyer, your doctor, and your golf pro." He became a carded CPGA professional in 1991. He left school to work in the pro shop at the Kelowna club and later took on posts at The Harvest Golf Club, the Osoyoos Golf & Country Club and Predator Ridge.

Photos contributed.

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Then, before a seed of grass was even planted at Tower Ranch, tucked high above Kelowna at the end of McCurdy Road, Neil agreed to become head pro. Tower Ranch is built on the land of golf fan Stu Tower who had always wanted to share his slice of heaven. For Neil, who grew up at the bottom of McCurdy Road, it was kind of like coming home. The course was set to open in June 2008.

A light wind blew the day the golf club at The Rise opened in Vernon on June 18 that year. By mid-morning, when Fred Couples was about to hit the ceremonial opening drive, it was 20 C, a cool summer day in this part of BC.

Couples, who designed the course with Gene Bates, reached for his driver and hit straight down the middle, almost 270 yards away from a crowd of media and spectators standing behind the first tee. The four NHL stars waiting to play the dedication round with him clapped.

The Rise, a 753-acre resort community that promised future residents vineyards, winery, boutiques, a lakeside beach club, restaurants and even a hotel, was riding on this golf course, this day. "There was tremendous excitement around it," says Terry Yacyshen, the resort general manager. His voice carries the calm and authority of a veteran

radio announcer. "The opening was a crescendo to a very significant time in what The Rise was to become."

Between 2005 and that June afternoon, The Rise had sold 200 residences to people whose cars would snake up the hill and past a giant rock wall and bowl of fire named Brigid, the goddess of fire. In time, her flame was expected to welcome hundreds of people home.

Those hopes were pinned to the sky long before there was any hint of a recession.

There should have been a morn-

ing parade of drywallers and sunburnt carpenters heading up to The Rise every day for years. But four months after opening the golf course, the property was put up for sale. By December, The Rise was awarded bankruptcy protection. Sidewalks were never paved. Street lights were never erected.

"It was the worst possible timing," says Neil. Like The Rise, Tower Ranch opened just as the American credit crisis came crawling across the border.

In spite of being named one of the top three courses in Canada and the Okanagan by *Golf Digest* and *SCORE Golf*, people weren't golfing, homes weren't selling. "As well as real estate does is as well as a golf course does," says Neil. By 2011, the company that owned the course (not the residential builders or sales firm) went into receivership.

Neil held on. "I don't know if it's because I'm stubborn or if it was about being creative," he says. "I stayed."

Tower Ranch, a semi-private club that pulls about 90 per cent of its green fees from locals, suffered because, at some point golf became entertainment, says Neil, and "entertainment is one of the first things that gets stripped away."

Buying that second home or the next, better home, also tends to get shelved during recession. Across the Valley, golf courses and course communities tumbled deep into the red.



Sonora Dunes Golf Course, Osoyoos.

"Kelowna has easily become one of Canada's best golf destinations."

— Bob Weeks
Publisher of *Score Golf* magazine

The Rise had several offers from potential buyers, but they never materialized. By 2009, \$14 million had been spent on the golf course, \$105 million on the resort community, and a discount campaign was advertising the once \$500,000 homes for \$350,000. Three years later, in 2012, there were owners (mortgage holders became shareholders), though the property was still listed for sale. Board chair Steven Reilly told the media, "We are finally turning the corner and are ready to move the project forward."

At Tower Ranch, the asking price for the golf course dropped from \$21.5 to \$14.5 million. It finally sold for \$3.9 million to the Edmonton-based Carrington Group of Companies in March 2012.

In the midst of this crisis, Kelowna was trying to promote itself as one of Canada's top golf destinations.

And it is—according to Bob Weeks. Bob and his magazine, *SCORE Golf*, are considered the voice of the sport in Canada. Last summer he taped several NHL stars who summer in the Okanagan at their favourite courses. Later he wrote, Kelowna has "easily become one of Canada's best golf destinations."

Why? Nineteen courses, seven of which are championship calibre, within and around the city; plus nearly 40 courses in the Valley, including the Norman-designed Ponderosa Golf Course set to open this season.

"There is strength in numbers," says Bob, who covered the Skins game at Predator Ridge and the opening of The Rise. He remembers his first round in Kelowna, at The Harvest

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Golf Club. "It was so picturesque and just very serene. There was a calmness to it and that course has some great views. It's a pretty spectacular area."

Bob returns almost every summer and says Kelowna has raised its game. "There's more attention to detail. The courses are in better shape. There's a lot more hospitality. You can see how the industry has grown as a destination."

The golf, a lot of really great golf, was already here. It just needed marketing.

In 2010—almost at the height of golf tourism's decline—Golf Kelowna was created to promote 12 member courses and the region as Canada's premiere golf destination. Instead of competing for the same players, these dozen work together to draw them to the Okanagan for a golf trip that could include Black Mountain and The Okanagan Golf Club and The Harvest Golf Club and Gallagher's Canyon, for example.

Catherine Frechette, communications manager for Tourism Kelowna, which runs Golf Kelowna, says the initiative started with a to-do list. Step one: spread the word about what's here. Step two: make it easy for people to get here.

Golf Kelowna's marketing strategies and its website—which offers one-stop shopping for tee times, stay-and-play reservations

and tourism information—have paid off. But the heavy lifting really comes from what Catherine calls "a critical mass" of golf courses.

"These are people who are really avid golfers and it's such a selling point that it's easy for them to get to so many great courses," she says, describing the target market: mostly Albertans, along with BC and Pacific Northwest golfer/wine lovers. Toronto, with daily flights, is also becoming more prominent. But it hasn't been easy, not in light of the recession.

"We haven't reached pre-recession levels yet, but we're kind of making nominal gains back again," she says. "People are careful of their travel dollars."

Neil knows a thing or two about that. Before the recession, he says, people called and said, "Do you have tee times?" Now it's, "What kind of deal do you have?"

In addition to discounts and packages, his fingers unfold as he lists all the other things that could attract or deter golfers. "The US dollar, the weather, the price of oil, people needing passports." He unfolds his thumb. One more. "Is the pass open?" For locals, it's having so many options, and the cost of a round plus cart, now mandatory at most of the new premier courses.



In the end, though, it's about the golf. Really, really good golf. ➤

Photos contributed.


#	GOLF COURSE	CITY	HOLES	PAR	SLOPE
1	Shuswap Lake Estates Golf Club 2404 Centennial Drive	Blind Bay	18	71	127
2	Salmon Arm Golf Club 3641 HWY 97B	Salmon Arm	18	72	132
3	Hyde Mountain on Mara Lake 9851 Old Spallumcheen Road	Sicamous	18	72	136
4	Eagle River Golf & Country Club Hwy 1, East	Sicamous	9	66	-
5	Royal York Golf & RV 2440 York Avenue	Armstrong	9	35	117
6	Spallumcheen Golf & Country Club 9401 Highway 97N	Vernon	9	70	-
7	The Rise Golf Club 8500 Rising View Way	Vernon	18	72	137
8	Hillview Golf Course 1101 14 Avenue	Vernon	18	56	87
9	Highlands Golf Short-Game Excellence 7961 Buchanan Road	Vernon	9	27	-
10	Vernon Golf & Country Club 800 Kalamalka Lake Road	Vernon	18	72	126
11	Predator Ridge: Ridge Course	Vernon	18	72	133
12	Predator Ridge: Predator Course 301 Village Centre Place	Vernon	18	71	137
13	Lake Okanagan Resort 2751 Westside Road	Kelowna	9	27	-
14	Okanagan Golf Club: Quail Course	Kelowna	18	72	136
15	Okanagan Golf Club: Bear Course 3200 Via Centrale	Kelowna	18	72	133
16	Shadow Ridge Golf Club 3770 Bulman Road	Kelowna	18	71	124
17	Sunset Ranch Golf & Country Club 5101 Upper Booth Road S	Kelowna	18	72	133
18	Kelowna Springs Golf Club 480 Fenno Road	Kelowna	18	71	123
19	Tower Ranch Golf & Country Club 2455 McCurdy Road	Kelowna	18	72	133
20	Black Mountain Golf Club 575 Black Mountain Drive	Kelowna	18	71	125
21	Gallagher's Canyon: Pinnacle Course	Kelowna	9	32	96
22	Gallagher's Canyon: Canyon Course 4320 Gallagher's Drive	Kelowna	18	72	131
23	The Harvest Golf Club 2725 K.L.O. Road	Kelowna	18	72	127
24	Orchard Greens Golf Club 2777 KLO Road	Kelowna	9	32	98
25	Mission Creek Golf Club 1959 KLO Road	Kelowna	18	62	90
26	Michaelbrook Ranch Golf Club 1085 Lexington Drive	Kelowna	18	63	86
27	Kelowna Golf & Country Club 1297 Glenmore Drive	Kelowna	18	72	128
28	Shannon Lake Golf Club 2649 Shannon Lake Road	West Kelowna	18	72	125
29	Two Eagles Golf Course 3509 Carrington Road	West Kelowna	18	65	114
30	Ponderosa Golf Course Planned opening summer 2014	Peachland	18	72	-
31	Sumac Ridge Golf & Country Club 17333 Sumac Ridge Drive	Summerland	9	36	121
32	Summerland Golf Club 2405 Mountain Avenue	Summerland	18	72	126
33	Sage Mesa Golf Course 3415 Pine Hills Drive	Penticton	9	33	95
34	Penticton Golf & Country Club 600 Comox Street	Penticton	18	71	127
35	Skaha Meadows Golf Course 2435 Airport Road	Penticton	9	35	91
36	St. Andrews by the Lake Golf Course White Lake Road	Kaledien	9	32	99
37	Nik'Mip Canyon Desert Golf Course 6891 Tuc-El-Nuit Drive	Oliver	18	72	130
38	Fairview Mountain Golf Club 933 Old Golf Course Road	Oliver	18	72	136
39	Osoyoos Golf & Country Club 12300 Golf Course Drive	Osoyoos	18	71	134
40	Sonora Dunes Golf Course at Nik'Mip Resort 1300 Rancher Creek Road	Osoyoos	9	70	109



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NEXT GEN GOLFERS

Look out pros, here come the kids

Whack. The ball flies left. Head down, he reaches into the bucket of range balls. Whack. Whack. Whack—until the green plastic bucket is empty. And then he gets another.

This is Will Deck, a 21-year old Kelowna golfer who plays on the UBCO Heat golf team. Last fall, he won the PACWEST conference and was named CCAA Golf All-Canadian. He's been playing all his life.

On any given summer day at The Harvest Golf Club driving range, 17-year-old Lauren Rutherglen might be practising a few feet away. Eight iron first. Whack.

In the last two years, Lauren has won the Harvest ladies club championship by 13 strokes, been named top female golfer at the BC High School single-A provincials, and taken the top player to the 18th hole at the Pacific Northwest Golf Association's junior championship, an event won by the likes of Tiger Woods and Fred Couples.

She only started golfing competitively in 2012, even though she was introduced to the sport as a girl. There's a photo of her when she was about eight at the Osoyoos Golf & Country Club, pig-tails dangling from a pink plaid hat. She's at the driving range with other little kids in a golf camp, smiling as they swing at tennis balls with miniature clubs. "When I was really little in Osoyoos, all the ladies would say, 'Keep it up and you'll get a scholarship,'" says Lauren, an Immaculata Regional High School student who recently did earn a golf scholarship to Adam State University in Colorado.



Clockwise: Will Deck lines up a putt, Lauren Rutherglen on the tee, Lauren (second from right) showing team spirit.

Will, who remembers having a club in his hands as early as age six, grew up playing in the shadow of his dad, Garrett Deck, a competitive amateur golfer who played for the University of Tulsa. For Will, a golf scholarship and career has always been in sight. "I love the game and I want to pursue it as far as possible," says the fourth-year human kinetics student who has had offers to play at American schools. "I can't see myself sitting at a desk."

Golf is life for Will. Every summer, he works on The Harvest grounds crew where his dad is superintendent.



From April to August, he wakes at 3:50 a.m. to get behind a lawn mower and start cutting tees by 5. After his shift, he'll play a round, hit balls and then practice—chipping, putting, long iron, short iron, shots, punches, fades. And then he hits the gym. Not a single day last summer went by when he didn't have a club in his hand.

It was the same for Lauren. Last spring, it seemed to rain every time she arrived for her lesson with coach Chad Scott, The Harvest's head pro, but that didn't stop her. "She'd make me do lessons when it was raining sideways," says Chad. "I'd have my raincoat and umbrella on, and there we were."

Lauren couldn't afford to take a day off. A competitive figure skater until two years ago, her switch to golf put her up against girls who'd been playing full-time for years. "In order to get better than them, I had to practice way harder," says Lauren, who also manages to work at McDonald's and make good grades.

With just six months of coaching she'd shaved 30 strokes off her card. By the 2013 season she was scoring in the mid-70s. Titles and tournament wins soon followed.

"For her to make progress that quickly, you have to have some sort of natural talent," says Chad, adding that other things—practice, nutrition, working out—have gone into her success as well, but none more important than work ethic and focus.

Golf, an individual sport that pits players against only the elements and the mind, can be challenging for youth. To make it as far as Lauren and Will, you need more than just talent and drive.

"There are so many kids out there with great swings, beautiful swings, but they don't have the attitude or the mental toughness," says Don Kroschinsky, UBCO Heat golf assistant coach and 40-year member of the Kelowna Golf & Country Club.

"That's what really separates your university kids from the kids who like to go out and play weekend golf."


Golf also has a bit of bad rep. Will says some of the stereotypes can be a turnoff to young people who think of it as "tucked in shirts and old guys walking around on a Sunday afternoon." And television doesn't necessarily help.

"If you watch it on TV," says Don, "it's all about the score and players don't even converse with their caddies. One of the things pros are trying to do is make it a fun sport. Don't just take your score as your benchmark of the day. You were out in the sunshine, on green grass, with your buddies."

Along with the reputation for being boring and intimidating, golf isn't cheap. To help attract more juniors who will become lifelong golfers, the heads of five Kelowna courses got together in 2013 and created Grow Through Golf.

With one membership, young

players have access to six championship courses: The Harvest, Gallagher's Canyon Golf & Country Club, Black Mountain Golf Club, The Okanagan Golf Club (both The Bear and The Quail courses), and Tower Ranch Golf & Country Club.

"We want to give kids an opportunity to golf as much as they can and give an education component," says Chad. "We're not trying to produce tour players, just players. Our ultimate goal is to expose them to golf, and help them keep playing." 



Natalie Appleton is a Vernon-based writer and writing instructor.

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