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Opening the links (with Nick Faldo video)

By Harold Bechard

The Hutchinson News

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Before he stepped foot in the south central part of the state for the first time and started pacing off what would eventually become Cottonwood Hills Golf Club, Nick Faldo said he knew only one thing about Kansas.

"Tom Watson comes from there ... that's all I know," said the former No. 1 golfer in the world, with a grin. "But, not from Hutchinson. That's all I knew."

Now, he knows two things about the Sunflower State.

"Hog Wild," said Faldo, referring to the Hutchinson barbecue establishment at 2401 N. Main.

It seems the 49-year-old Faldo and the folks from Faldo Design, who mapped out the 7,213-yard, par-72 golf course located a half-mile north of 4th Ave. on Buhler-Haven Road, took a liking to Hog Wild Pit Bar-B-Q during their trips to Kansas.

"What was great about this place, I was introduced to Hog Wild ... sitting on the back of a truck eating beans and Hog Wild - two platefuls of that and you'll struggle for the next hour or so," Faldo said Thursday, much to the delight of the media who were on hand for an informal press conference.

"Then we came here in the summer and we had cheese sandwiches!" Faldo said incredulously. "I said, 'Hey, when I come to Kansas, I have Hog Wild,' and I made him call them up and get it. And then I said, 'What about ice cream?' and he said, 'You're kidding?'"

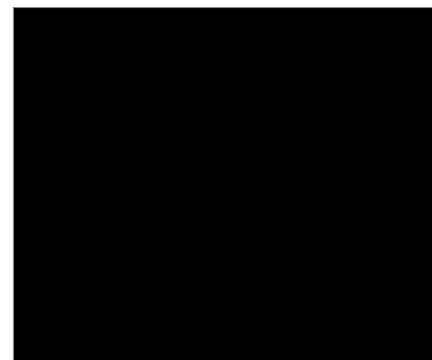
A cooler of ice cream arrived shortly.

And so, that is how Cottonwood Hills came to be built.

Well, sort of.

Faldo, who is in Hutchinson to help promote the grand opening of the Cottonwood Hills course, said being part of a team that designs golf courses has been the perfect complement to his current duties as a golf analyst for CBS Sports and The Golf Channel.

"I think this is one of things I love. It's a different lifestyle," he said. "I love coming out with the guys and being part of the team, sitting on the back of the truck, having lunch, when it's either 90 degrees or its freezing. We're having fun."



Golfer Nick Faldo plays the course he helped design, Cottonwood Hills, Friday in Hutchinson.

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No one is sure how much fun it will be from the back tees at Cottonwood Hills, which already has a course rating of 76.5 and slope rating of 150. According to the United States Golf Association, a golf course of standard playing difficulty has a slope rating of 113.

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"It's a toughie," said Faldo, who took a few swings on holes 11 and 12 during the question and answer session.

Faldo remembers well what it was like the first time he saw the 620-acre tract of land that many hope will become not only one of the top courses in Kansas, but also a self-sustaining master-planned community in the future.

"It was about minus-five that day," Faldo said. "But, walking the land, we knew there was something special here. It was a unique piece of land in the middle of Kansas. We had a real treat unraveling golf holes out here and when we cleared a bit more land, we discovered more and, I think the way it come out, we're very delighted.

"There's a nice rhythm to the golf course and a great variety of looks."

Thursday's visit to Cottonwood Hills was Faldo's first in nearly a year. On Friday at 7:30 a.m., Faldo will play the course and Baseball Hall of Fame shortstop Ozzie Smith, formerly of the St. Louis Cardinals, is also scheduled to be present. The grand opening for the 18-hole layout is set for Saturday.

Faldo, a former Masters and British Open champion, helped design the course as part of the London-based Faldo Design Company. The course is managed by Marriott Golf, which currently manages 60 courses in 15 countries.

Faldo liked what he saw Thursday morning of a course that had been pounded by heavy rains in the last few weeks.

"The course is really in fabulous condition, said Faldo, who toured the layout with owner Lane Neville and projects manager Brad Neville. "It's looking very good, very impressive. The rain has been falling for the last month ... they had a 100-year flood and then what was it, 21 days later, they had a 50-year flood?"

"There are some damaged areas in the middle of some fairways, but considering as much as eight feet of water stood in some parts just a few weeks ago, it's in great shape."

Faldo said his playing days, although not completely over, now take a backseat to his duties as a TV golf analyst, his family and his golf course design company.

He plans to play in the British Open next month and after turning 50 years old that week, will play in the Senior British Open the following week at Muirfield. He will also play in the Dunhill Cup in October.

"I was thinking the other day, 'OK, I'm playing three events, in Scotland, on links courses - I don't have to get it airborne."

Links courses, you see, have always been a favorite of Faldo, who has won 43 tournaments world-wide, six of them Majors, and will be the European captain for the 2008 Ryder Cup matches.

"It's a wonderful form of golf, the variety," he said. "You have strong winds here. The golf course will be dry at times. Sometimes, it'll be sunny, dry and windy - so you want the golf course to play like that. Like I said, I love links, I love the variety. Morning or afternoon, you know it can be totally different. That makes it so enjoyable. You can come here and play this golf course for a week and I'd be surprised if you had to two same conditions.

"You can play the holes different ways with different angle and different options."

And possibly the best link-style course in the United States - Prairie Dunes Country Club - sits just five miles away.

"Prairie Dunes has always run well and when you have something like that next door, it's a great bench mark," Faldo said. "Of course, I've always been a competitor and I love a bit of competition and things like that. But, more than anything else, we recognized the potential of this site when we first saw it."

Hosting tournaments

Cottonwood Hills director of golf Jeff McCormick is hoping to see some major amateur tournaments come to his course in the near future.

"I've had some conversations with (KGA executive director) Kim Richey and we certainly want to be part of the KGA schedule and hoping to get there in 2008," he said. "We think this would be a great venue and we'd love to host an event."

Home sites

Cottonwood Hills owner Lane Neville said there have been 30 pre-sales of homes on the

property and he is hoping to finalize those in the next 60 to 90 days.

Neville said there are "400 free-standing home sites" at Cottonwood Hills. He estimates over 800 families from more than 30 states have called for information about the property. He said 30 percent of the pre-sales are from the Wichita market.

Neville estimates homes will be in the \$275,000 to \$750,000 range, with lots costing \$80,000 to \$100,000.

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