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LI'L COURSE. BIG STORY.

Wickenburg Ranch pumps up the volume on golf entertainment

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WICKENBURG RANCH'S PINT-SIZED LI'L WICK DISHES OUT BIG-TIME FUN AS PAR-3 LAYOUT

BY JOE PASSOV

At the center of Li'l Wick sits Watering Hole, a full-service bar that is the hub of the action.

First you hear the banjo. Then the guitars come in. And soon Neil Young is crooning his classic rock lament, "Old Man, look at my life, I'm a lot like you were." You've just punched a three-quarter pitching wedge into the first green at Li'l Wick, the sun is shining and great tunes are piping from speakers all around you.

Now this is fun.

Word is spreading quickly about Li'l Wick, the nine-hole, par-3 short-game park that recently opened at Wickenburg Ranch Golf and Social Club, 75 minutes northwest of downtown Phoenix. If you're looking for a good time on a golf course, you've come to the right place.

"On a recent visit, I spotted two couples coming off the course and

asked them, 'What do you remember most about the round?' says course co-designer Bill Brownlee, managing partner of Phoenix-based M3 Companies, which developed Wickenburg Ranch in conjunction with Shea Homes. "They all said the same thing: 'The music! We've never played golf with music.'"

Wendell Pickett, managing partner in the Scottsdale-based land planning

and landscape design firm of Greey/Pickett, co-designed the Big Wick course with Brownlee and co-authored Li'l Wick as well. He explains the allure of Li'l Wick as the successful realization of three mandates: "It needed to be beautiful, it needed to be golf-worthy and it needed to be fun," he says.

From the early feedback, it's safe to say, mission accomplished.

Li'l Wick emerged from the former driving range of the previous incarnation of Wickenburg Ranch's championship course, which was partially relocated and re-routed in 2016 when a new clubhouse was built. Brownlee and Pickett began thinking about ways they could take advantage of the newly vacant space, with its hilly, cowboy-cool desert setting. Li'l Wick really



WICKENBURGRANCH

Above: Guests at Li'l Wick are encouraged to relax and have fun, as evidenced by this guest sporting her Wranglers during opening day festivities.



WICKENBURGRANCH

Left: An impromptu dance session for those more focused on the party than the golf.

is a park, complete with short-game golf course, walking paths, yoga lawn, an astronomy observatory – AND a special events amphitheater behind the ninth tee that can accommodate parties, weddings and concerts.

“We had four goals for the Li'l Wick short-game park experience,” says Brownlee. “The first was to introduce people into golf that hadn’t played golf. Second, to create golf that is fun and entertaining and not a 4- or 5-hour round that is difficult for many. Third, to come up with something that introduced a

different element of entertainment for the community. And fourth, to come up with something that would introduce a pedestrian non-golfer into a golf setting.”

The team checked each box with the creation of Watering Hole, a bar and grill plunked down right into the middle of the 18-acre experience. The island-like facility dishes out tasty, distinctive American fare – the smoked beef brisket grilled cheese sandwich is exceptional – premium beers and liquors, fire pits, wide-screen TVs and a variety of comfy chairs. Watering Hole offers so many

enticements, you might opt to stay put and skip the golf altogether, which is fine with the folks who created it.

“If you want to play three or four holes and decide you want to take a break and go have lunch, or a beverage, go for it,” says Brownlee. “Just jump back in when it opens up and away you go. I think that’s something people are going to embrace, that it’s not so structured.”

Still, the foundation of the entire golf park is the quality of the course itself. It certainly nails the “beauty” criterion, tucked into an alluring desert environment dotted with trees and shrubs, with one large lake and mountain backdrops beyond. The key question, then, is how “golf-worthy” are the actual nine holes, to borrow Pickett’s term? Li'l Wick easily passes the acid test: it’s a big-time challenge for strong players, doable and enjoyable for rank beginners and pure fun for everybody in between. The ingenious design holds the secret to its success.

Right: The now infamous “I’m on a Boat” chip shot challenge in full swing.

Huge bunkers, undulating greens, a ball-snagging water hazard and substantial elevation change are clear indicators that this isn’t your garden variety “executive course.” Holes range from 88 to 187 yards from the back tees and 62 to 91 yards from the front. Significantly, golfers who choose the front tees can play the ball all along the ground if they wish – even with a putter – which is ideal for less talented or less experienced golfers. Yet from the back markers, there’s plenty of golf for the serious stick, from several forced carries over desert, sand and water, to choosing proper club selection and trajectory at the downhill-plunging fourth, to utilizing the grassy bank to the left of the ninth green.

For those who enjoy the occasional wager, or going off the traditional golf grid, the architects placed bunkers in odd places, including one just off the sixth tee, so whether you’re betting in a H-O-R-S-E-style competition where your opponent says, “Let’s try this shot,” or whether you’re just looking to practice some of the game’s tougher recoveries, you’ll have that opportunity at Li'l Wick.

Equally impressive is the layout’s conditioning and flexibility. Li'l Wick’s cunningly contoured, bent-grass greens run as smooth and fast as those on its big brother. And the holes that loop closest to Watering Hole – Nos. 1, 7, 8 and 9 – are lit for night play as are their bunkers, walk paths and landscape features. Imagine the gallery gathered for a twilight finish. Not quite the 16th at the Waste Management Phoenix Open, but pretty stirring in its own right.

The early round highlights include a corn-hole game in place at the first tee (so if there’s a backup, you’ll have something to do), a steep climb to the second tee and a fabulous all-carry shot at the 148-yard third, over desert and a gigantic bunker, with one of Wickenburg’s most famous landmarks, Vulture Peak, in the background.

Nevertheless, it’s the closing trio that will make or break a round at Li'l Wick – that is, if you’re even keeping score. The 168-yard seventh demands a solid strike to a wide, wildly sloping green



WICKENBURGRANCH

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IF YOU GO

Wickenburg Ranch Golf & Social Club
(928) 668-5535
WickenburgRanch.com

Li'l Wick welcomes daily fee play starting at 11:00am and continuing under the lights on weekends. The guest fee is \$25, or \$15 if you’re already playing Big Wick. Sports shown daily on Watering Hole’s nine TVs, while food & drink specials keep the party hopping into the evening.

Directions: Wickenburg Ranch is located just north of historic downtown Wickenburg. From the center of the Valley the drive time is approximately an hour and fifteen minutes, and considerably less from the north and west suburbs.

fronted by water and sand. Another bunker lurks back-left and to the far-right is Watering Hole, so there’s no escaping your pals if you mess up. The 122-yard eighth sports more water and bunkers to carry, to a flattish, deep green. When the hole is cut in the back, you’ll require extra nerve to try and attack the pin. The 179-yard ninth heads uphill to a two-tier green framed by a hillside to the left and a bunker to the right. If you need to steel yourself before the shot, Brownlee and Pickett thoughtfully provided a walk path from the eighth green, over the lake to the Watering Hole. It’s a fine finish to a memorable, quick, round.

Li'l Wick has had an immediate impact on the community, where Trilogy at Wickenburg Ranch residents play for free. It’s \$25 for all-day outside play, \$15 if you’ve also tackled Big Wick that same day. There are no tee times, just a sign-up sheet at Watering Hole. “What we’re seeing,” says Brownlee, “is that people who are getting up in years, or have medical-related issues that prevent them from playing full championship-style tests anymore are enjoying golf again with Li'l Wick. There are several members of Trilogy at Wickenburg Ranch that have come back to golf because of this course. And that we have had 15 new players so far sign up for golf lessons, so that they could be able to play this golf course.”

Bill Brownlee and Wendell Pickett are proud of what was accomplished at Wickenburg Ranch, from the sense of community to the unique lifestyle amenities to the home sites themselves, 60 percent of them awash with open space or long views. Yet, they reserve special affection for what they achieved with Li'l Wick. “Wendell and I like to say that there’s only one of these babies,” says Brownlee. “Nobody’s done what we’ve done here.”

As we exit the ninth green to Glenn Frey and the Eagles strumming, *Take It Easy*, it’s hard to disagree. ■

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