LI’L COURSE. BIG STORY.
Wickenburg Ranch pumps up the volume on golf entertainment

Q&A WITH ‘GOLDY’
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SHORT ‘N SWEET
WICKENBURG RANCH’S PINT-SIZED LI’L WICK DISHES OUT BIG-TIME FUN AS PAR-3 LAYOUT
BY JOE PASSOV

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 MJ Companies, which developed Wickenburg Ranch in conjunction with Shea Homes. “They both 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 Gregory/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-outed in 2016 when a new clubhouse was built. Brownlee and Pickett began thinking about ways they could take advantage of the newly vacated space, with its hilly, cowboy-cool desert setting. Li’l Wick really
Above: Guests at LT Wick are encouraged to relax and have fun, as evidenced by this guest sporting her Wranglers during opening day festivities.

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

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

Huge bunkers, undulating greens, a ball-eating water hazard and substantial elevation changes are clear indicators that this isn’t your garden variety “executive course.” Holes range from 80 to 167 yards from the back tees and 62 to 91 yards from the front. Significantly, golfers who choose the front tees can play the ball along the ground if they wish — even with a putter — which is slightly less refined 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 on the left of the ninth green.

For those who enjoy the occasional wager, or going off the traditional golf flag, the architects designed layouts in odd places, including one just off the sixteenth tee, so whatever you’re betting in an I-O-R-F-E-S-style competition where your opponent says “let’s play this shot” or whether you’re just looking to practice some of the game’s tougher recoveries, you’ll have that opportunity at LT Wick. Equally impressive is the layout’s conditioning and flexibility. LT Wick’s cunningly contoured, bent grass greens roll as smooth and fast as those on his brother. And the holes that lie closest to Watering Hole — Nos. 1, 7, 8 and 9 — are lit for night play as are the bunkers, walk paths and landscape features. Imagine the gallery gathered for a twilight finish. Not quite the 18th at the Waste Management Phoenix Open, but pretty slicking in its own right.

The early round highlights include a cornhole hole in place at the first tee (if there’s a hankering, you’ll have something to do): a steep climb to the second tee and a formidable all-carried shot at the 140-yard third, over desert and a gigantic bunker, with one of Watering Hole’s most famous hazards, Volturno Peak, in the background.

Nevertheless, it’s the closing trio that will make or break a round at LT Wick — that is, if you’re keeping score. The 160-yard seventh demands a solid strike to a wide, oddly sloping green

“IF YOU WANT TO PLAY THREE OR FOUR HOLES AND DECIDE YOU WANT TO TAKE A BREAK AND HAVE LUNCH, OR A BEVERAGE, SO FOR IT, JUST JUMP BACK IN WHEN IT OPENS AND YOU GO.” — BILL BROWNEE

LT 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. “We’re seeing, “is that people who are getting up in 10, 15 years, or have medical-related issues that prevent them from playing full championship-style tests anymore are enjoying golf again with LT 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 Pickert are proud of what was accomplished at Wickenburg Ranch, from the sense of community to the unique lifestyle amenities. 60 percent of them own with open space or long views. Yet, they reserve special affection for what they achieved with LT Wick. “Woodard and I had to say that there’s only one of these babies,” says Brownlee. “Nobody’s done what we’ve done here.”

As we roll the ninth green in Clean Fray and the Eagles strumming, Take It Easy, it’s hard to disagree.

— Joe Pinson, on 18th Tee at LT Wick, named Best New Course Award 2017 by Golf Digest.