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Cottonwood Hills offers golfers a chance to play preview round

Watching work progress on Cottonwood Hills east of Hutchinson has whetted area golfers' appetites.

Construction Manager Brad Neville understands why: "It's the perfect place for a golf course."

His brother, Lane Neville of Scottsdale, Ariz., initiated the 620-acre development six miles east of town in 2002. Lane Neville has involved three other Arizona partners, who combined have invested \$3.5 million to \$4 million in the development northeast of 4th Avenue and Buhler Road.

Marriott Golf plans to open nine holes to public play within 30 days to 45 days. It has hired Jeff McCormick as director of golf and Ron Lewis as course superintendent.

Before Marriott Golf sets up operations, the Nevilles invited Kevin Brown and me to bring two groups out to play holes No. 11 through No. 16, plus No. 2 through No. 4. Those holes make up the west half of what will become an 18-hole championship course designed by Nick Faldo, winner of six Major championships.

When we arrived late Wednesday afternoon, Brad Neville reviewed some course details:

- Myers zoysia fairways, bent grass greens and tee boxes, and a cool-season blend of hybrid fescue and bluegrass seeded in the rough bordering the fairways.
- Native prairie grasses surround the course and a blend of four aggregate materials from Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri fill bunkers.
- Par 36 on nine holes open for play this spring, which coincidentally reflects the planned par 72 for the 18-hole course. Once completed, par will be 36 out and 36 in.

Brad Neville distributed course maps made by Garber Surveying service, P.A., of Hutchinson, and pointed the way to the No. 11 tee.

Brad Dillon, Stan Hill and Jeff Ollenburger joined my Cottonwood Hills preview round - with the understanding that they would offer on-the-record assessments of every hole. We played the middle set of five sets of tees all the way around.

No. 11, a 332-yard par 4 dogleg right, presents an intimidating westward carry off the tee over native rough. A menacing bunker complex protects a large green, forcing an accurate second shot.

No. 12, a 174-yard par 3, requires a tee shot over native rough and into a prevailing south wind. A multitiered green, protected by a front right bunker, offers at least three prime pin positions.

No. 13, a 376-yard par 4, with a fairway that bends to the left, invites a big drive. The huge green provides a great second shot target, but miss the pin and face a 50-foot lag putt.

No. 14, a visually challenging 362-yard par 4, requires a precise tee shot. But the hole accommodates a variety of shots. It finishes with another sizable, multilevel green.

No. 15, a long, undulating, double-bend 503-yard par 5, requires three quality shots to reach the green, even with the prevailing south wind at your back. A large fairway hump can prove disorienting.

No. 16, a 399-yard par 4, starts to the northeast and bends to the north. From the tee, a peninsula of native rough narrows the fairway considerably and then an island of native rough creates an even greater visual challenge. But another big green invites a second shot with a long-iron.

No. 2, a 329-yard par 4, rates as a classic risk-reward hole. Play to the inviting part of the fairway and you face a blind second shot to the hole; play to the difficult, uphill side of the fairway and you have an open shot to the green.

No. 3, a reachable, wide open 493-yard par 5, offers a straight forward hole that we welcomed after facing so many blind shots.

No. 4, a picturesque 116-yard par 3 with a big rolling green, encircled by danger - water in front and on both sides, and a bunker and two trees in back. It's exactly what a short hole needs to defend itself from short irons or wedges off the tee.

Overall impression: Kudos to Faldo's design and the Nevilles' execution of the development plan. Playing Cottonwood Hills will rate as a five-hour vacation for central Kansas golfers. They'll feel like they're out of town while touring this undulating, classic inland links course.

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