

John Thronson has designs on expanded role in construction

By BOB SPIWAK

Central Oregon bills itself as "The Golf Mecca of the Northwest." On the dry side of the Cascade Mountains, it boasts 300 sunny days a year, clean high-desert air and 23 golf courses, mostly clustered in the Bend-Redmond area. To the west, volcanic and lesser peaks stab the sky like the spikes of a giant upended golf shoe.



John Thronson

Eagle Crest Resort, near Redmond, sprawls along the Deschutes River on a flat plain on which lie the 18 holes of Eagle Crest golf course. The resort climbs a substantial hill westward which is crowned by its Ridge course. An 18-hole putting course twists and turns near the clubhouse, and to the southeast an 18-hole "long-iron" course is under construction.

To refer to 44-year-old John Thronson as superintendent of this domain would be accurate, but woefully inadequate in describing the man —

and what he does. Under the tutelage of his mentor, designer Gene "Bunny" Mason, he helped build the original Crest course. Thronson designed and built the 18 holes of the Ridge, the putting course and the new, shorter 18 under construction. He is involved in the design of three courses on a planned 7,000-acre destination resort in Washington near the town

of Roslyn, home of TV's Northern Exposure.

He also was involved in building the Running Y course in Klamath Falls, an Arnold Palmer design which will have its grand opening at the end of August. As if these are not enough, Thronson is working on a course at a Superfund site near Kellogg, Idaho.

Thronson's employer, Trendwest, Inc., owns Eagle Crest and is in turn 80-percent owned by Jeld-Wen, the largest door and window manufacturer in the world. This corporate giant develops



Landscaping is a key ingredient at The Ridge Course.



properties for golf resorts. And since his Ridge Course opened in 1992, Thronson has been Trendwest's man. If not actually designing the courses, he is involved and serves as construction superintendent on all courses as well.

He works hand-in-hand with Terry Anderson, Eagle Crest's director of golf. The pair met 12 years ago when both went to work at Eagle Crest.

"We have an unusual thing here," said Thronson. "On many courses there is an antagonistic relationship between

the superintendent and pro. But we have both taken the time and effort to educate each other on what we do, why, and its importance. We've been the best of friends from the beginning."

Working as a team, the pair have had other job offers, but are sticking with their current situation.

"These people in management are so good, so nice," Thronson said of corporate managers Jerry Andres and Bill Liche, "that we prefer to stay here,

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By BOB SPIWAK

Running Y Ranch, a resort within a working cattle ranch in south-central Oregon, will celebrate the official grand opening of its golf course on Aug. 26, with designer Arnold Palmer playing an inaugural round.

Built by John Thronson of Jen-Weld Corp., the course wanders through picturesque Payne Canyon, playing from 4,886 to 7,165 yards.

Water comes into play on five holes and more than 30 bunkers are strategically

Thronson a key in Running Y Ranch

placed, eight of them surrounding the 9th green.

Traversing an open meadow, with views of Klamath Lake and the Crater Lake Range, the front nine hosts the signature 5th hole, a short par-3 at 4,200-foot elevation and dominated by water on the right. It measures 140 yards from the middle tees.

The back nine is a nature walk, with a mixture of juniper, pine and other trees, frequently occupied by bald and golden eagles and ospreys, with deer wandering beneath.

Wildflowers are an important part of the design, adding color to the fescue roughs, bluegrass-ryegrass fairways and bentgrass greens.

According to Thronson, it took 10 months over two seasons to build the course, despite abnormally difficult mud and rock conditions.

Thronson designs in hands-on way

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even though we have had more lucrative offers."

Thronson is a man who, literally, has his hands in the dirt. He designs a course, but does not use a computer for three-dimensional renderings.

"What I do for each hole is take them [constructors and shapers] out and find a place with loose dirt," he said. "Then we sculpt it by hand into how the hole should look. They get a better feel for it than off a piece of paper, and we can easily change something on the spot."

What Thronson sculpts is a course that is kind to the typical resort player "... who is generally hitting woods for the second shot." The rough is cut to 1-1/8 inch, the fairways to 5/8 inch.

Thronson defines the holes at the Ridge with mounding which, "echoes the far backgrounds." Where volcanic peaks dominate the background, the course's contours are sharper. Where the background is lower, gentler mountains, the course is more rounded.

"It's not something I would do in the Midwest," Thronson laughed. "The features must be in keeping with what nature has provided."

The courses at the resort have two trademarks: acres of wildflowers and fast greens. "Stimping" at around 9, the greens are PennLinks bentgrass, mowed to about 1/8 inch. Every two weeks they are top dressed with a light layer of sand.

"They're firm, but they hold shots well and they putt at the same speed in the afternoon as in the morning," Thronson said. He explained that he keeps the putting surface "lean" by minimal fertilization — no more than 3-1/2 pounds per 1,000 square feet per year of nitrogen.

Thronson is excited about the new Running Y course at Klamath Falls. "It was tough to build, muddy and rocky. We had to blast some of the hard rock. And we used a lot of the pieces as decorative features," he said.

The average piece of rock was the size of a dining-room table and some of them required two D-8s to move. At the end, 101 people were working to finish the course which took only 10 months to build, with a winter layoff in the middle.

Running Y is half meadow

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Bermuda care

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Hanna said superintendents should operate from the standpoint that dwarfs can produce 20 to 25 percent more thatch than taller members of their species. Their internodes (branching points) are much closer together, so the foliage produced in a given space is greater. That can be managed by mechanical and nutritional practices.

More foliage means a slightly higher nitrogen requirement. Hanna recommends balancing nitrogen with potassium while keeping track of micronutrients. When starting to manage a Bermuda like Tifeagle, he said, regularly test tissue samples for nutrient levels, then adjust applications to meet the turf's needs without generating excess growth.

One important point of comparison among the new Bermudagrasses is the way they accept overseeding, Hanna said. Any time a turf's density is increased, its ability to receive seed broadcast on the green can be decreased. Since the seed of poa trivialis is smaller than perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*), it overseeds in the dwarf Bermudas better. Overseeding performance is one reason Hanna feels it is impor-

tant for superintendents to see one or more of the 33 trial sites before choosing a variety.

"The denseness of the dwarfs forces the overseeded turf to be more erect," Hanna said. That provides a better turf year-round.

However, some varieties can be so dense they rapidly become thatchy. Select one that fits your management program from a qualified sod producer who can guarantee purity, he urged.

The changes in maintenance are worth the benefits of faster and truer greens, both summer and winter.

"We encourage superintendents to become familiar with the dwarfs before they switch," said John Foster of West Coast Turf in Palm Desert, Calif., which worked closely with Hanna during the development of Tifeagle. "There are differences which you need to know about."

Fill-'er-up!

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nected to the end of the pipe.

"The sprayer operator simply drives under the fire hose, lining up the sprayer fill-up hatch and making for a very fast fill-up."

All the galvanized piping is hooked up to the irrigation system, which has an operating

pressure of about 125 pounds per square inch when it leaves the pumphouse.

Another 1-inch-diameter pipe, ball valve and high-pressure hose can be used to wash off the equipment or fill up smaller, under-100-gallon sprayers.

A 24-inch-diameter concrete cylinder was installed to protect all of the galvanized piping from an accident.

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Thronson hands-on

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and wetland and half in tall pines. It measures from 5,250 to 7,187 yards.

Trendwest hired Palmer Design to create the course, but wanted Thronson's participation.

"Ed Seay and Eric Larsen [of Palmer Design Group] were just wonderful to work with," said Thronson. "They were receptive to a lot of my ideas. We've built a playable, fun course with five sets of tees that can be enjoyed by any golfer."

Trendwest's Mountain Star destination resort in Washington is still in the permitting process. Thronson's design is well under way, but he estimates two to five years before construction will begin on the 54-hole complex.

Meanwhile he and Anderson are actively involved in promoting junior golf at Eagle Crest.

"I have to give so much credit to Terry for not just giving lip service," Thronson said. "He allows the kids to play for free after 3 p.m. on slow days."

Thronson's ultimate plans are to be a full-time course designer. "I look at it, from beginning through construction to completion, as a piece of art," he said. "When you're a painter, you need a canvas. My canvas is the earth. Course design is something that gets into your blood."