

Daniel Gho scans the magnificent vista that Mother Nature has unfurled on the golf course in front of him. He sees jagged-branched cypress trees on the fairways and putting greens carved into the windswept dunes that border the Pacific Ocean. Gho feels the steady breeze blowing off the ocean as it ripples his windbreaker.

No, Gho isn't standing in the middle of one of the splendid courses at Pebble Beach Resorts about five miles and a 300-yard tee shot away. Gho's location is Pacific Grove Golf Links, a municipal course in Pacific Grove, Calif. While it doesn't pretend to be the illustrious Pebble Beach Golf Links, the 5,727-yard Pacific Grove is striking in its own right.

Its Own Entity

Led in part by
superintendent
Dan Gho,
Pacific Grove
Golf Links shakes
its 'Poor Man's
Pebble' label
with revitalization
effort

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY LARRY AYLWARD,
EDITOR IN CHIEF

The course's back nine plays along the ocean and loops around a circa 1855 lighthouse. Several holes on the front nine also offer ocean views. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Pacific Grove is its low green fee, which ranges from \$40 to \$48 to walk and play 18 holes.

Pebble Beach Golf Links charges \$499, and Spyglass Hill Golf Course at Pebble Beach Resorts cost \$350. Gho will be the first to tell you that Pacific Grove is no Pebble Beach Golf Links, but ...

"Our price is a drop in the bucket compared to our neighboring courses," he says.

Ironically, the low green fee at Pacific Grove once garnered it the label, "The Poor Man's Pebble." The 35-year-old Gho, who began at Pacific Grove about two years ago in his first job as a golf course superintendent, doesn't like or hate the label. On one hand, what's not to like about being associated with Pebble Beach Golf Links, one of the greatest golf courses in the world?

"I don't look at it as condescending," Gho says. "Anytime you're associated with Pebble Beach is probably a good thing."

So, why not capitalize on the label and market your course as "The Poor Man's Pebble" in your promotion and advertising?

"Well, the label can be misconstrued," Gho says, noting that Pacific Grove doesn't want to be stereotyped as cheap. "Besides, we can stand on our own."



Pacific Grove has launched a formal program to do just that. In February, it began an extensive branding and awareness-building campaign to revamp its image to better compete against the array of courses on the Monterey Peninsula. The course changed its name from Pacific Grove Municipal Golf Course to Pacific Grove Golf Links with the tagline, “Experience golf as it should be.”

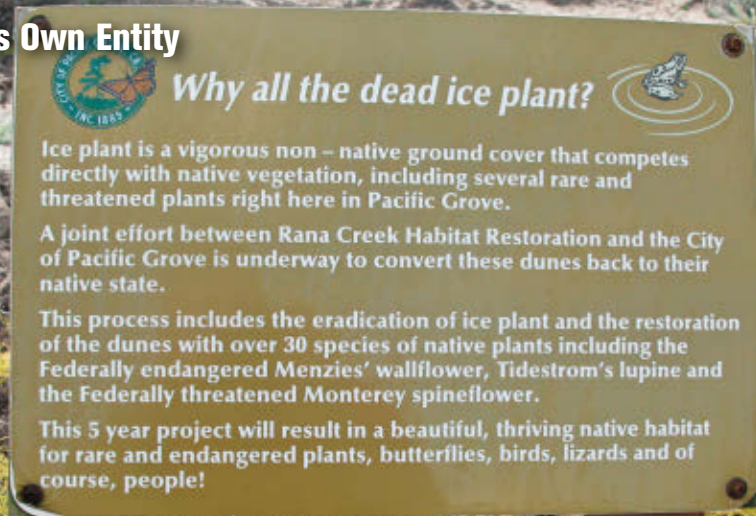
While Gho hates to admit it, municipal golf courses are often stereotyped for having less-than-stellar conditions, a notion that often isn’t true.

“When people hear ‘municipal,’ they think they’ll be playing on fairways that don’t have turf, and on greens that are bumpy,” Gho says. “You might get that at some places, but we take pride in what we do here. We’re trying to make this the best course we can.”

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Daniel Gho has helped take Pacific Groves Golf Links to a new level.

Its Own Entity



Gho and his crew have been busy eradicating invasive ice plant from the course.

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Ironically, Jack Neville, who designed the back nine at Pebble Beach Golf Links, also designed the back nine at Pacific Grove in 1960. The front nine, designed by Chandler Eagan, opened in 1932. Eagan helped redesign Pebble Beach Golf Links with Alister Mackenzie in 1929.

Pacific Grove's city government is backing the course financially because it realizes it can make money on the operation. City officials have allowed the course to make equipment purchases and upgrades, and market itself with advertising and promotion.

"That wasn't done in the past," says Joe Riekema, Pacific Grove's clubhouse pro, noting that other courses in the area have bigger budgets for upkeep and marketing and advertising. "But we're making money for the city, which is a good thing."

A turnaround

Gho attended Chico State University, where he received a bachelor's degree in recreation, parks and resource management in 1999. Upon graduation, Gho took a job as a greenkeeper at San Juan Oaks Golf Club in Hollister. Gho worked his way up to spray technician and then second assistant. He then became first assistant for about five years.

"I don't have a formal turfgrass de-

gree, but I worked my way through the ranks," Gho says.

Gho arrived at Pacific Grove about two years ago, and immediately saw the tasks he and his crew could do to provide a better golfing experience.

Gho says the course had "zero definition" between fairways and roughs. Not anymore. Cho and his crew have carved in clarity where it's needed so golfers know where to target their tee shots.

Gho and his staff are also restoring the sand dunes on the back nine, mainly to rid them of invasive ice plant, a vigorous non-native ground cover that competes with native vegetation. The five-year project will result in a thriving native habitat for rare and endangered plants, butterflies, birds and lizards.

"This area was just covered with ice plant," Gho says. "It's the biggest project we have going."

In addition, Gho is leading an in-house restoration of its 19 bunkers.

It's a lot of work for a small but hard-working, veteran staff, says Gho of his eight crew members, who also must maintain 60 acres of turf on a tight budget. Gho's maintenance budget, excluding staff, is \$341,000 for services, which includes water and utility costs, and \$81,000 for materials and supplies.

What drives Gho to do the best job possible? The answer is simple. "The

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Its Own Entity

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end product and seeing people enjoy it," he says. "That's what keeps me going."

Gho has made a positive impression on his crew. Robert Hernandez, Pacific Grove's assistant superintendent for the past 18 years, says the course has never looked better.

"Dan has turned this place around," Hernandez says, noting that Gho implemented new fertilization, mowing and irrigation programs upon arriving in 2008. "The course is better than it was two years ago and better than when I started here 18 years ago."

Holding steady

While rounds have decreased at Pacific Grove over the past few years, business remains steady in this tough economic climate. The course recorded 65,580 rounds in fiscal year 2009 (July 1, 2008, through June 30, 2009) and 54,592

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— Daniel Gho

rounds in fiscal year 2010 (July 1, 2009, through June 30, 2010). While rounds were down 17 percent in fiscal year 2010, it was expected because the course restructured the terms of its annual pass.

Local golfers had been paying \$700 to play unlimited golf, and were playing up to 40 percent of the course's rounds. Some locals were playing so much they paid an average of only a few dollars per round. Hence, the annual pass was replaced with a discount card to allow for increased revenues, even if rounds diminished.

Revenues in 2010 were down only 1 percent, and that was attributed to decreased golf car rentals and less range

play. Revenue from green fees was actually up 3 percent.

Riekema says the course is one of the busiest on the Monterey Peninsula, along with Pebble Beach Golf Links, and Spyglass Hills Golf Course. Pacific Grove was never busier than during the 2010 U.S. Open, held at Pebble Beach Golf Links in June. Fans who came to watch golf at Pebble Beach also came to play area courses—and plenty of them came to Pacific Grove, which averaged more than 300 rounds a day during Open week.

"The golf course held up well," Gho says. "I wish they could have the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach every year."

There's a lot for golfers, whether locals or tourists, to like about Pacific Grove besides its price. All they have to do is open their eyes. Gho, for one, never tires of the vistas.

"It's a great place to come to work every day," he says. ■

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