

Fallbrook still all in the family - Unsinkable Cooke course has stood test of time and weather

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"Titanic" is doing monster business at the box office. El Nino is making monstrous weather.

And Fallbrook Golf Club, a course with a history that contains elements of both those current public near-obsessions, sits serenely in the Gird Valley of the community whose name it bears, unobtrusively doing what it has done for going on four decades.

That is, offering public-course players an opportunity to experience an interesting (although some might say quirky) 18-hole experience at a very reasonable price.

The history of Fallbrook is intertwined with the history of what course general manager Blair Cooke readily concurred could aptly be described as the Unsinkable Cooke Family.

Blair's grandmother, Mary Henderson Cooke, is among those credited with the idea of putting in a course on what was "bottom land" of avocado groves. Blair's father, Lawrence Henderson Cooke, was there for the course's birth, the first (now back) nine in March of 1962, the second (now front) nine a year or so later.

At 84, Lawrence Cooke still has the memory that gets consulted on questions of what happened when and why.

The Cookes weren't sole owners at first. But they commuted from Los Angeles to oversee the operation, and for two years in the late-1970s, they made the 200-mile round trip six days a week.

And in 1979, Fallbrook became a rarity among San Diego County courses, a family-owned-and-operated one, when the Cookes bought out the other partners. One reason the partners were willing to sell, Blair Cooke said, was because the course had taken a huge hit from storms.

"And they figured the ship was sinking," Cooke said.

Back then, El Nino and La Nina were not as readily identified as the cause of winter storms. But whether it was the Spanish siblings or some other culprit, the effect was near devastation.

Live Oak Creek -- which is at least marginally in play on 13 holes and under normal conditions jump-able -- flooded to cover nearly half the 110-acre course. And, when the waters receded, silt covered the same area.

Faced with a major decision, the Cookes decided to uproot from L.A., buy out the partners, repair the damage and try to make it a go.

Dealing with Mother Nature this year has been "nothing" in comparison. "We had 35 inches of rain that year, and this year we've had about 10," course superintendent Ken Holloway said late last week.

Some changes were inevitable following the late-70s flooding, but the course basically remains true to the original design of architect Harry Rainville, Cooke said.

The two nines are distinct, the front being 63 yards shorter (3,080 yards) and more open than the back. But both have the unorthodox stamp of a par-3 finishing hole that the course guidebook speaks of in defensive terms.

On the 103-yard ninth, which requires a blind tee shot to an uphill green: "Yes, it's short, but that doesn't mean it's easy. Hit it over the green and you're facing bogey or worse."

On the 170-yard 18th, which has Live Oak Creek guarding the right side: "Bad design to finish with a par-3? See if you think the same after you play this one."

Fallbrook never gets boring -- no two holes seem alike and there are only a couple of occasions when a fairway runs parallel, but in the opposite direction, of the preceding hole. Virtually every hole offers a different challenge and it's a fun course from the first shot, off an elevated tee over Gird Road, to the last, a tricky putt on the 18th.

In 1969, Mickey Wright hosted a professional tournament at Fallbrook and the locally based Golden State minitour has held occasional events there. But it remains a largely unpretentious course.

A course that enough people -- mainly from San Diego, Orange and southern Riverside counties on weekdays, from all over Southern California on the weekends -- have discovered to do roughly 65,000 rounds of business a year.

"We get more of the blue-collar-type golfer," Blair Cooke said. "That's who we cater to. We're not an Aviara, and we don't try to be.

"From a golfer's standpoint, I think it appeals to a number of levels of skill. It's a fun course, challenging, but not intimidating. It's got a good balance that way."

Most of the 42 employees have been part of the Fallbrook GC family for several years. Holloway has been there in some capacity for 20 years and followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and an uncle. Assistant manager Stacy O'Leary met her husband Mike, the teaching pro, at the course.

The thought of Fallbrook under corporate conglomerate ownership/management is as chilling as the waters the Titanic sank beneath. And Cooke said she doesn't see it happening any time soon.

"We get offers all the time, but what it boils down to is a way of life," she said. "What would we do if we sold? And what would the people who work here do?"

COURSE Fallbrook Golf Club. MEN'S RATINGS/SLOPE (par 72) White -- 69.8/117; 6,223 yards. WOMEN'S RATINGS/SLOPE (par 72) White -- 74.9/126; 6,223 yards. Red -- 71.6/119; 5,597 yards. COST \$22 weekdays, \$32 weekends. Weekday packages from \$33-\$39 per person and include cart/meal. Weekend packages \$44.50-\$54 per person and include cart/meal/tee prize. Carts are \$18, not required at any time. ADDRESS/PHONE 2757 Gird Road, Fallbrook, 92088. (760) 728-8334. COURSE DESCRIPTION Scenic, tree-lined course, easy to walk . . . Not long but plenty for mid-to-high handicap players; better players can score well but accuracy is needed, especially on the back nine . . . Several interesting, if not unique, tee shots including over Gird Road on No. 1, blind shot to uphill green on par-3 ninth and "chute" on short par-4 14th. Average-sized greens, most well-bunkered in front, taking away "run-up" game . . . Eighteen-person maintenance crew keeps fairways and greens in good shape for public course . . . Green speeds are moderate and consistent . . . Try one of the hand-made sandwiches at the snack bar and the chili in clubhouse restaurant. HOW TO GET THERE From I-5 take Highway 76/Mission Road east approximately 18 miles to Gird Road. Turn left (north) and go two miles. From I-15 take Highway 76 west for approximately 2.5 miles to Gird Road. Turn right (north) for two miles.

- Caption: 2 PICS1 CHART1. Don't slice: No. 14 is Fallbrook's shortest par-4 at 314 yards, but its fairway is narrow. 2. Drive-by swing: Fallbrook's elevated first tee is on the west side of Gird Road, but the approaching car is not in harm's way. 3. PLACES TO PLAY, Fallbrook1,2. JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune
- Memo: For chart see end of text.

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