

## Dells course beauty in waiting

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Golf Beat by Gary D'Amato

Wisconsin Dells - As I stood on the elevated sixth tee at the Wild Rock Golf Club on a glorious October day and took in the panorama of a 30-mile view, I tried to think of a more visually appealing golf course in Wisconsin.

Excluding Whistling Straits, which is in a class by itself, I couldn't come up with a course that was more beautiful than Wild Rock.

When the course opens May 1, 2008, my guess is that golfers will instantly place it among their top 10 public facilities in the state. In my mind, it's in the top five.

The scenery alone will be worth the price of admission; green fees will range from \$65 to \$105 depending on the time of season and day of the week. Wild Rock was routed along a wooded ridgeline and through an old quarry, and features a cascading boulder-strewn stream, extreme elevation changes and the kind of dramatic visuals that figuratively take your breath away (and would do so literally if walking was allowed, which it is not).



Wild Rock was designed by Hurdzan / Fry Golf Course Designs Inc., the firm that created the highly acclaimed Erin Hills Golf Course just west of Holy Hill. As at Erin Hills, which all but designed itself in the glacial dunes of the Kettle Moraine, the Wild Rock site was a golf course waiting to happen.

"Dr. (Michael) Hurdzan loved the land," said Chris Goodwick, the general manager. "He thought it would be a top-five course in the state. There are some dramatic holes out here."

But Wild Rock is not just another pretty face. It's got teeth from the back tees (7,397 yards, 76.3 course rating, 140 Slope), a good mix of short and long par-4s, and doglegs in both directions and superb green complexes. The course was seeded with Declaration bent grass, a new, disease-resistant strain.

With five sets of tees and generous landing areas, Wild Rock is very playable. I played off the Shale tees (6,379, 70.8, 129) and lost one golf ball, after a badly hooked tee shot, though I probably would have found it had I taken the allotted five minutes.

Wild Rock is not the kind of penal course on which 25-handicappers will go through a dozen balls, though at first glance it appears to be.

"The pace of play should be good," Goodwick said. "This is a water-park resort. Every golfer in Wisconsin, no matter what their ability, is going to enjoy this golf course."

It's difficult to pick out a favorite hole. The aforementioned No. 6, a 588-yard par-5, is, in a word, stunning. No. 15 is a spectacular par-3, with six tee boxes dotting the semi-circular ridge of the abandoned quarry and the green on the other side of the rim. The distance ranges from 118 to 179 yards and there's a bail-out left for the faint of heart.

I really liked No. 5, the shortest par-4 at 300 from the middle tees. The hole plays uphill, with a gentle dogleg to the right and well-placed fairway bunkers. A good drive leaves a 50- to 70-yard approach, but the shot is made tricky by a green that is partially hidden and slopes away from the golfer.

Wild Rock is part of the Wilderness Territory, home to the Wilderness Hotel & Golf Resort, Glacier Canyon Lodge and Wilderness on the Lake. Nine holes from the former 18-hole Wilderness Woods course have been retained for casual golfers and families for which golf is a diversion from the ubiquitous water slides, theme parks and Dells kitsch.

Wild Rock will appeal to the more serious golfer and will bring to four the number of championship-caliber courses in the Dells area (along with Trappers Turn, Lake Arrowhead in Nekoosa and Northern Bay in Arkdale).

I played Wild Rock on a sneak preview day and found it to be in excellent condition, other than some small patches in the fairways where the grass has not grown in and a couple fuzzy greens. It's ready to play now, though the owners were wise to delay the opening until 2008.

Trust me. Wild Rock is worth the wait.

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