

Holes on the Range

By Jordan Poland, President and CEO of the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame

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The comedian Leslie Nielsen said it best: “The reason why they call it ‘golf’ is because all of the other four-letter words were taken.” And we golfers have heard it all: the game is too hard, the game is too boring, the game is too expensive, the game just isn’t fun! And maybe you’ve had similar feelings toward this royal and ancient game, imported from Scottish wasteland and transplanted to the prairies of Kansas nearly 125 years ago.

But, from its humble beginnings in our state, this game has captivated the time and attention of generations of Kansans and continues to make an indelible impression not only on our economy, but on our collective culture, as well. And, in keeping with the Humanities Kansas theme of Crossroads, now is the perfect time to dive into this silly game and what it means to our state.

It is no secret that our rural communities in Kansas have shrunk in the last several decades. Part of that constriction means the loss of the pieces of our communities that make us unique, like our old movie theatre (or better yet, the drive-in movie theatre), the bowling alley, or the skating rink. Yet, remarkably, for the most part, our golf courses have continued to hang on. And now is the time to recognize the importance of these places to our communities so that we can continue to enjoy the benefit they provide.

It is true that our first golf course in this state featured cups made of tomato soup cans. But, we’ve come a long way since then and this game has continued to put Kansas on the map through the people and places we play. We can boast as being the home of some of the greatest courses and golfers in the world, sure. Places like Prairie Dunes in Hutchinson and golfers like Tom Watson and, more recently, Gary Woodland, are known throughout the world for their connection to our state. But, we can also boast one of the highest golf holes per capita in the entire country. And it’s that variety of golf that makes our state, and the courses around where we live, so incredible. Add in the fact that playing golf is a great way to social distance in this time of COVID and the game, and its roots, have never been more relevant.

I have a mission to play nine holes of golf in every county in Kansas, or at least the 103 counties that I know for sure have at least one course, and this goal has taken me to all corners of the state in my pursuit of hitting that little white ball into a hole cut in the ground. And while I’m there to play golf and accomplish this weird mission of mine, this game has been my introduction to so many different communities across this state. Each course is unique. Each community is special. And each has me, and many others out there, coming back for more.

Maybe you don’t like golf. Maybe you never will. Maybe you’ll continue to call golf by some other four-letter word. That’s alright. But, it is the hope of golfers everywhere that you’ll at least come away with an appreciation for this ancient sport, the rich traditions this game has had on the culture of our state, and the impact it has on your community facing multiple crossroads. Look forward to teeing it up with you soon but until then...Hit ‘em straight!

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