

Final round: An emotional goodbye to 'the golf course for everyone'

By Patricia Logan

First Hole

A hawk whistles as it lands on the giant cottonwood just behind the first tee. It's an appropriate send-off as I begin my final round at Haystack Mountain Golf Course. As always, there is something that takes my attention away from the little white ball when I'm here, whether it is the wildlife, peach and purple sunsets, stately trees or the tawny slopes of the odd bump on the horizon, Haystack Mountain itself.

This late summer day is the last time I'll play the nine-hole course off Niwot Road. For 20 years, I've come here a handful of times a year. Like so many others, I was lured in by its welcoming charm, beauty and easy-going vibe. "It's like no other," said Operations Manager Mike Hammerstone, who calls this place his second home.

This weekend, Haystack's loyal community came in foursomes, pairs and singles, hundreds of them, all ages and stages of golf. They lined up one after another to play one last time, packed the tables of the beer garden, listened to music, grieved together, reminisced, expressed gratitude and raised a glass to the course that embraced them all.

"We have guys who will be tarring roofs and they'll come in after work in their smocks with tar on it, like covered in mud," Hammerstone said, "and they'll say, 'Can we play nine?' And I'll say, of course you can. This is the golf course for everyone."

But the course for everyone will soon be for no one. This spring, it was sold to a developer Michael Markel by the family that owned the property since 1963. Markel plans to build his own home here. The Land Use Code allows two other houses on the roughly 100 acres that was the public golf course.

"It's the saddest day - so that a guy could build a house," said George Antoine who has played here since the 1970s. "Thousands and thousands of people enjoy this course, and to build a few homes... I understand it's a market economy, but that doesn't take away the hurt."

Sad was the word used over and over again on Haystack's final Sunday. "It feels like a huge loss. There are zillions of stories here," said Carol Hathaway-Clark whose kids learned to golf here.

Some stories are actually related to golf, but most are about the fun, togetherness and even transformational moments that happened in this one, unique place. This article celebrates a fraction of 55 years worth of memories.

I push my sunglasses tight to my face as I prepare to hit my first drive, hoping I can see the ball through the mist in my eyes. Those who have spent far more time here than me have watered the course green this summer.

My ball fades right. It may be lost to the driving range which skirts the first hole. Prairie dogs yip as I go looking. They've already reclaimed the 200-yard marker and beyond. Soon they'll get the rest. But they haven't been the only critters here.

Hammerstone says two neighbors were feuding and one sabotaged the other's electric fence. The cattle roamed free and found greener pastures at Haystack. Having cattle on the range apparently seemed natural to some golfers who still wanted to practice. "I said, 'No, no, you cannot use the driving range,'" Hammerstone recalls with an incredulous tone.

Fortunately, my ball has avoided the range. I hit my 7 iron out of the sparse, natural grass, skirt the big blue spruce, score a respectable six and move on.

Second Hole

My husband and I are already waiting for the people ahead of us to make it down the wide fairway. They are two people, one bag. Most courses won't let you do that. The man skies his shot onto the green. The woman whacks along in her tank top and shorts. "Our dress code is, please be dressed," said Assistant Manager Kelly Christensen.

I find the scene romantic. She's trying to learn the game he loves so they can spend time together. One of the beauties of 'the course for everyone' is that there is no pressure to play fast. Everyone walks. Electric carts are not allowed.

The relaxed pace makes me leave my work week edge behind. It's Friday afternoon, warm, sunny. My husband and I sit on a bench under a shade tree. On this day especially, I am happy to savor my time at the foot of Haystack Mountain.

When it's my turn, I pull out my neon green ball instead of my white one. Experience tells me that there are white wildflowers in the rough on the right. Other than that, it's a pretty easy hole, helps build confidence early in the round.

"The course itself is challenging but not difficult. It will give you a run for your money if you don't hit it where you should. It's got something for everyone," said 63-year-old Christensen, who learned to play here with her dad when she was 10.

She grew up, moved to a different state, had a life and returned when she was going through hard times. Nearly 50 years after hitting her first balls here, Christensen asked for a job and was hired. "This place healed me. The property, the mountain and all of it has got an energy to it that is just good juju. Anyone who spends any time here, they will agree with me, it's just good energy."

Like Christensen, the course has captured generation after generation. "Probably every week a granddad comes in with his grandson and says I'm going to teach my grandson to play," she said.

Third Hole

Turns out the couple in front of us is now waiting on the people ahead of them. We start chatting. They moved here a couple of years ago. He just discovered the course and is

bumped it's closing. "It's beautiful and interesting too." They invite us to play with them. We do. Haystack is like that.

Before she even tees off, the woman apologizes for being terrible at golf. We tell her that's why Haystack is here - to learn. Take your time, don't fret, and remember to look up and enjoy the view. There's nothing Haystack Mountain hasn't seen - shanked drives, worm burners and tons of hacked earth launched into the air.

Anyway, we're not moving much faster than her. My husband routinely drives to the left and on this hole that's a problem. Deep grass, brush and enormous cottonwood trees, 100 years old, make up the riparian ecosystem that winds along Lefthand Creek, the heart of the course.

The number of lost balls over there is rivaled only by the number of mosquitoes. I call this the Off hole. Go in after your ball, find four or five others and leave with just as many bug bites.

Fourth Hole

There's talk that somewhere around this hole the developer who bought the course will build his house.

But I'll forever picture the view as it is now - a straight shot, par 3, with evergreen trees as a backstop and the foothills on the horizon. I have the perfect club for this distance. I almost always hit the green. I'll always love this hole for that.

Fifth Hole

I drag my pull cart across the little footbridge over the creek and toward the fifth tee. Shadows stretch from the tangle of bushes and trees to the west, nearly concealing a pile of scat the size of a dinner plate. Red berries were on the menu.

Hammerstone said that bears come around, especially late summer and fall when the apple trees bow down to serve up their feast. He says Lois Ebel told him one bear got into fermented apples from the orchard by the parking lot. It climbed up on the roof of her house in a drunken stupor and somehow made it down without a splat.

Haystack's other wildlife includes herds of elk that deposit milk duds on the course, deer that enjoy a round of grazing, bull snakes that disappear into their holes like a perfect putt, hidden winged spectators rustling the leaves, and bald eagles patrolling the sky.

"It's the Haystack Zoo," said Hammerstone, who tells the story of Marty Marmot who lived under a boxcar close to the old first tee and sat on top of an old tractor. "He'd watch people tee off and would run up to them, only so far, then he would scurry back. He would do that with everyone. Marty was the best," he said.

Then there are the stories of Haystack's wild life. In the 1970s, Christensen wanted to go camping with her teenage girlfriends. They went to the mountains but there was too much snow. One girl said she knew someplace else to go.

“No one is paying any attention,” said Christensen. “It’s an easy walk, we find a nice place to camp, no rocks, it’s soft. There is firewood all over the place. We had a bonfire. When dawn came along, we realized we were camping on the fifth green. All my friends from high school have stories about shenanigans at Haystack.”

Sixth Hole

The sixth looks pretty easy, open and straight, but then golf always pulls its surprises.

This course opened in 1966, three years after Bud and Lois Ebel dreamed it into existence. Zhanna Pauluhn was one of their six children who grew up on the property and later helped run the business. “Our slogan was everyone learns to play golf at Haystack,” she said.

Some of the Ebel kids took to golf more than others. After their mother died, the siblings couldn’t agree on a way to keep the golf course. Estate taxes came due and they decided to sell. “I know the family would have liked a buyer that would have kept the golf course going. But we knew that it wasn’t that realistic. It’s not a huge moneymaker,” Pauluhn said, acknowledging that “It’s going to be a huge loss for the community.” She plans to stay in her home next to the property. “I’m hoping I can be here and not be too sad.”

The family still owns Haystack Mountain and the land around it. Pauluhn said they don’t plan to hold on to it. It’s not clear what the fate of the iconic formation will be. Before European settlers arrived, the mountain was important to the Arapaho people, including Chief Niwot, whose band spent part of the year in the area.

Seventh Hole

There is a tee box above the pond on the seventh and one to the side. I have water-seeking balls, so I stick to the side. The fairway is always some shade of green thanks to the Canada geese that live here.

Seven is supposed to be a lucky number. I wonder if Hammerstone chose it when he bought the lotto tickets. He and the other clubhouse employees ponied up \$10 a week for lotto tickets this summer, hoping for a miracle, “Even if we could just keep the clubhouse and the driving range. It would at least be a piece. We could still have the beer garden, we could still have music. People would still come out. It wouldn’t be the same, but just a little piece...”

Hammerstone started golfing here 13 years ago. “I was one of those people, I didn’t want to play a full-size course because it’s intimidating.” He became a regular. His career was in risk management and claims adjusting. But he left his job to take care of his father who became ill and passed away. It made Hammerstone reconsider his life. Jobs were scarce in the Great Recession so he took a summer job at Haystack for \$8.50 an hour. He cut back on everything to survive. It was worth it.

Hammerstone said Lois Ebel became his second mom. He calls the course home and the people around it, family. Eventually, he ended up running the place and is often there seven days a week, playing or hanging out when he isn't working.

"I love the game of golf. 'Golf in the Kingdom,' it's a great book. It's a spiritual book. That's what I love about golf more than anything. It isn't about the score - I mean it can be if you want it to be - but why not just go be part of nature and walk around? That's the spirit. That's what Haystack is really about. I'm going to be a mess when this place closes. I'm going to be lost."

Eighth Hole

"Mike, the golf course is gone," Ebel said to Hammerstone in September of 2013. Floodwater from Lefthand Creek and neighboring ditches devoured the course along with a torrent of mud and debris. Bridges were wiped out, whole tree trunks battered the land.

When the rain finally stopped, the employees and a cavalry of community members flowed in to clean up, including Nikokai Baer. "The maintenance guy had a helpless look," Baer said. "He said we needed to clear off the greens. Without that, they're going to die and they won't come back."

For 27 days straight, sunup to sundown, he volunteered his time. "It came down to manually shoveling all the dirt and silt out very meticulously so as not to damage the grass underneath, then squeegee it off once that was done," Baer said.

"He single-handedly cleaned off and kept the 8th green alive," Hammerstone said. "It was 95 degrees after the flood, so it became like clay. Two inches of silt caked on. Five square feet a day was all he could do. A little tiny patch."

The eighth green was nicknamed the Baer Trap. The work saved Haystack for eight more years, but not forever. "Heartbroken is really the only word," Baer said.

9th Hole

The ninth is a par-3 that requires hitting the drive over Left Hand Creek. It's fun to see balls ricochet off the rocks. Not that it's ever mine.

My 9 iron is perfect for this hole. It belonged to my dad who loved golf with all his being. He shared his passion for the game with his kids and grandsons before he died. He's with me every round I play.

Haystack was the place I took his grandsons, my nephews. There was never any pressure for dawdling, just an easy-going, fun, outdoor adventure with Aunt Pattie. I even filmed a short movie on the ninth with my oldest nephew who has since passed away. I'm forever grateful to have that memory of him and the times we shared at Haystack.

10th Hole

Wednesday grill night brought out golfers and non-golfers alike who came for the community, food, music, beer and views. “There is something about the sunsets at night, sitting out there having a beer and looking out at the landscape and thinking, my God, this is paradise,” Hammerstone said.

He and Christensen are unsure of what’s next. Hammerstone is staying on for another month to wrap up the books. “I think when the final day comes, I want to grab a bunch of grass from all over the place and go to different golf courses and throw the grass down and be like, maybe the grass will grow, and maybe a little bit of Haystack will live on.”

Cover photo CUTLINE

Photo by Patricia Logan

CUTLINE: Haystack boy putting - Arran Machado makes a final putt at Haystack Mountain Golf Course. “You can’t replace it,” said his dad, Alex Machado.

CUTLINE: Haystack Hammerstone - Operations Manager Mike Hammerstone (left) knows many of the golfers by their first names. He said Haystack has a spiritual vibe. “We’re a golf course unlike any other.”

Photo by Patricia Logan

CUTLINE: Haystack celebration - Hundreds of people came out to Haystack Sunday to enjoy the music, view, share stories and grieve the loss of the golf course they loved.

Photo by Patricia Logan

CUTLINE: Haystack kid driving range - Eight-year-old Mike Blank has been coming to the driving range four days a week. “We love this place. We’re very, very sad,” said his mom, Emily Blank.

Photo by Patricia Logan

CUTLINE: Haystack golfers waiting - Golfers line up at the first tee to take their turn to play Haystack Mountain Golf Course one last time.

Photo by Patricia Logan

CUTLINE: Haystack photo op - People took photos and shared memories of the good times playing “the golf course for everyone.” Haystack Mountain Golf Course closed Sunday after 55 years.

Photo by Patricia Logan