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# The Course That Jack Built Takes Golfers to the Frontier

BY BRAD EWART

**T**he North Star Golf Club in Fairbanks, Alaska, is the northernmost golf course in the world. It is also Jack Stalling's baby. Stalling is the owner, designer, builder, manager, greens superintendent, and, until recently, the head pro of his own, self-contained golfing world.

Coaxed out of the taiga less than 500 kilometres from the Arctic Circle, North Star is nine holes of real frontier golf. This is a part of the world where, for eight months of the year, the average temperature is 40° below zero. For four short months, from mid-May to mid-September, the snow melts and avid golfers head out onto the links.

A course in Greenland has disputed North Star's "northernmost" claim, but Stalling says lawyers have confirmed North Star as the most northerly golf course on earth. However, the course only qualifies for this unique title by two John Daly drives and a Greg Norman one-iron. Less than one-fifth of a kilometre south of Stalling's fourth green and a few miles to the west is the Fairbanks Golf & Country Club. Until Stalling fulfilled his nine-hole dream a few years ago, the Fairbanks course held the distinction of being the world's northernmost. Now the two courses are locked in a crosstown marketing battle.

Jack Stalling's unlikely dream began a quarter century ago, when he told his wife he wanted to move to Alaska. She said no. Jack said goodbye and headed to Fairbanks. He started his own trucking company and worked on the oil pipeline that extends from Prudoe Bay to the port of Valdez. Stalling made a pile of money and bought a golf course in Casselberg, Florida. But he soon sold it and moved to Alaska for good.



Jack Stalling's dream of building a golf course has come true in Alaska, complete with wolves on the fairways, permafrost under the greens, and golfers teeing off at 10 p.m. Golf in the north is a whole different ball game. Brad Ewart photo.

"From the day I set foot in Fairbanks in 1969 I wanted to build my own course. The only course in town back then was Fairbanks golf club, and they had sand greens and a minimum of memberships." In 1990, Stalling negotiated a 50-year lease on an old potato farm with the borough of North Star, bought a bulldozer, and borrowed other equipment from friends. Some people volunteered to help and others worked for wages.

The course has no automatic sprinkler system, no drainage lines under the greens, and no sand bunkers. And you won't see modern turf-mowers: Stalling cuts the grass with an old gang mower towed by a post-Second World War tractor. What you will

see are moose, black bear, fox, eagles, sand-hill cranes, Canada geese, a variety of other birdlife, plenty of mosquitos, and the occasional wolf pack crossing the course. In fact, there is a wily old red fox named Reynard that enjoys stealing golf balls.

When you stand on the balcony adjoining the three trailers that make up the clubhouse and look out over the course, it looks like a wheat field blowing in the wind. And in between the bands of knee-high, yellow-brown fescue are fairways that consist of some green grass, lots of clover, permafrost sinkholes, and rocks.

Hard, iron-biting rocks hidden under the grass can easily gouge the bottom of a club. The soil is glacial till,

and there are patches of permanently frozen ground less than a meter below the surface. In the winter, the freezing extends almost six meters down. The term *winter kill* takes on a whole new meaning on the greens in this part of the world. The hills and hummocks are a combination of Stalling's creative bulldozing and nature's never-ending design changes as the ground heaves when it freezes and thaws.

After the last snow melts in early May, Stalling and his modest two-person staff prepare the course for a busy season. On average, 40 to 50 golfers per day play the course. The days are 22 hours long in Fairbanks for much of the summer, and golfers can tee off at 10 p.m. and easily play nine holes.

On the longest day of the year, June 21, they can play for 24 hours in the Midnight Sun Tournament.

The course that Jack built is not something the PGA Tour would ever consider for a tournament. But it satisfies an appetite for golf in a land where, Stalling says, people are hungry for it. "Just like everywhere else, there's a golf explosion in Alaska, and everyone wants to play the game."

Stalling, who started golfing at the age of 13 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and played with many old-time PGA pros in the late '40s, recently hired professional Tom Mulka from Seattle to meet the demand for golf instruction. Mulka has been busy setting up a lesson program, teaching the rules of golf, and organizing the pro shop. In the golf club's three-year history, nobody has managed to shoot par. With Mulka's arrival, that record is in trouble.

One day soon, Stalling—who celebrates his 77th birthday this year—plans to finish the back nine and build a big, cozy clubhouse. But before he does that, he has to complete the front nine. There are a few more ponds to dig, bunkers to build, fairways to shape, and greens to fine-tune before he can begin to think about expansion. "I walked this property about 100 times in every direction, measuring it with a 300-foot tape. I secured aerial photos of the property and then laid out my design for the course. This is a beautiful piece of property, and I wanted to keep the course natural with the present terrain. I tried to leave the land the way the good Lord intended it to be," Stalling says.

"At first nobody thought I could do it. Most people told me I was a silly old man and should give up my ideas. Now I've got people wanting to be stockholders. To hell with that. I don't want people tellin' me what to do with my course." ■