A Golfing idea: An Oxford set in a rocky valley

KIRTI PATEL
sports@sakaltimes.com

Pune: In the rocky Sahyadri ranges, an oasis is emerging.

The Oxford Golf and Country Club, set in the natural valley of the mountainous terrain, provides a breathtaking view. With lakes, white sand pits and lush green fairways, the course, which is nearing its completion, tells a story of the slog.

The world over, golf has been the sport that has gifted some of the enchanting locales — from the Augusta National in the US to St Andrews in Scotland, India, however, has been a slow starter, but steadily and surely, golf is picking up as investors realize the importance of creating such infrastructure.

In Pune, golf was limited to the Poona Club golf course in Yerawada. Not very long ago it used to be a shoddy course, but with no option the golf enthusiasts heavily depended on it.

Anil Seolekar, the man who changed the face of the Poona Club golf course when he became its captain. Seolekar got more financial muscle when he became president of the Poona Club, but still things weren't moving.

Seolekar, it seems, had it enough and went about creating a new course that would be second championship course in Pune. Creating from scratch is not easy. That too, when the topography is rocky and geography, not too facilitating.

But for a city such as Pune, a second golf course was long due. With the number of IT industries increasing, golf course is one place that provides a place for solace and workout.

In comparison, Gurugram is one-fifth of Pune in size, but it has three Championship golf courses including two Signature courses and three nine-hole courses. The DLF Golf and Country Club is an Arnold Palmer Signature course while Classic Golf Resort is Jack Nicklaus Signature design.

Golden Greens is probably the lone links course in India. And, on the other side of Delhi, the Jaypee Greens is the Greg Norman Signature course located in Greater Noida.

Since Pune had no such land to offer, the only way out was to look beyond the city limits. Seolekar located a spot just 5km from Pashan and set out to create a dream.

A Signature course would have cost much more. But he wanted something that could rival the best in the country.

So came in the Pacific Coast Design, an Australian golf course designing firm. And, that brought Phil Ryan, the director of the firm, to Pune.

"It was a unique site. A severe and rocky terrain, but we were given full mandate to create best out of it," Ryan said of his early days in Pune.

Creating a golf course in the valley was as much an arduous task as making one in desert. In monsoons the fairways and the pits would have been inundated and destroyed so the first task was to maintain the path of the seasonal springs and design the course around it.

"We managed to do re-harvesting of rain water and give the course so many water bodies by using the seasonal flow of springs," Ryan said.

He described the site as one of the lungs of the city as they have planted thousands of plants besides laying vast patches of grass.

The course now has 14 holes and is expected to be completed by March. It will have a six-hole mini course to house a golf academy for the starters.

The vibrant business that Pune offers needed a world class golf course and we believe it will be one that serves both Pune and Mumbai as it is conveniently located on the Bangalore Expressway.

Another unique feature that Oxford has set rolling is Flame University on the nearby hill. It will be the first center in India to offer courses on A to Z of golf management.