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Tuesday

Gozzer Ranch: Wow!

New North Idaho course to open next summer

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Views like this on the 431-yard, par-4 15th hole give the new Gozzer Ranch Golf and Lake Club overlooking Lake Coeur d'Alene a personality to rival the area's top courses.

(Photo courtesy of Austin Fazio)

Just when you think golf in northern Idaho can't get any better, someone turns Tom Fazio loose with a blank check and 700 acres of magnificent terrain overlooking Lake Coeur d'Alene.

That "someone" in this case is Discovery Land Company, which hired Fazio – one of the most renowned, respected and celebrated golf course architects on the planet – to design the course that will serve as the centerpiece of its ultra-exclusive Gozzer Ranch Golf and Lake Club.

The development, which will include 270 estate-sized homesites, 75 high-end single-family residences, 35 detached cabins, 40 cottage units and a private 82-slip, full-service marina, is perched majestically on a hilltop on the east side of the lake and offers homeowners unparalleled lake, mountain and golf course views.

The 61-year-old Fazio, who has offices in Hendersonville, N.C., and Scottsdale, Ariz., was in Coeur d'Alene last week to check on the progress of his considerable contribution to the development and took a few minutes to discuss his latest creation, which is scheduled to open next July.

"Isn't this amazing?" he asked, looking over the lake from the elevated championship tee box on the third hole. "How can you explain it? You can't."

Well, let's try.

For openers, Gozzer Ranch has the potential to overtake The Club at Black Rock as the region's premier layout. Stretching to 7,226 yards from the back tees, it offers all the golf course even the most accomplished of players could want – along with some world-class vistas.

In true Fazio fashion, white sand bunkers define landing areas and direct golfers away from trouble. The bentgrass greens, fairways and tee boxes have all been seeded and most are filling in more quickly than expected, thanks to the near-perfect growing conditions that prevailed during the spring and summer months.

The sodded bluegrass rough is already thick, gnarly and menacing. The views – whether they be of the surrounding mountains, the lake or the densely treed valleys below the ridge – are dazzling. And to Fazio's credit, it all seems to fit naturally into a vast expanse of terrain that features many dramatic elevation changes.

"The objective is always to move the least amount of land and disturb the least amount of the existing environment," Fazio said in explaining the philosophy that went into his Gozzer Ranch design. "There's

so much natural beauty in the property that all we needed to do was to fit a golf course into it and not destroy what was already here. Because what was here is better than anything we could ever build."

Still, in order to help frame some fairways and hide cart paths, a total of 170 trees – 70 of which are taller than 20 feet – were dug up and transplanted. And another 200 new ones are expected to be planted this fall or next spring.

"The goal is never about making a golf course tough," Fazio insisted. "The goal is fitting golf into the environment by working with angles and tee positions. Here, we have a golf course that is fun, enjoyable and easy – but, also, if the best players in the world showed up, they would be challenged."

One of Fazio's favorite holes is the 431-yard, par-4 15th, which plays down a wide fairway to a green that offers some of the best lake views imaginable.

"This is one of the strongest, most special and unique golf holes there is," he said, "We're not just talking Coeur d'Alene, northern Idaho, the Pacific Northwest or even the Western Hemisphere – we're talking the world. You can't find anything better, anywhere."

Fazio, who tends to involve himself in only the most exclusive and expensive of design ventures, lists casino-owner Steve Wynn's \$37 million Shadow Creek Golf Course in Las Vegas and Barton Creek Country Club in Austin, Texas, among the most well-known courses he has created.

He also designed several courses in the Pacific Northwest, including Iron Horse in Whitefish, Mont., and one of the two championship layouts at Pronghorn in Hamilton, Mont.

And while he remains reluctant to rate his projects, you get the feeling he holds Gozzer Ranch as dear to his heart as any.

"If I said it wasn't one of my greatest challenges, it would sound like it wasn't a challenge, and it was," he said. "But it's hard to beat the kind of environment I was given to work with.

"Let's just say it fits as one of the most rewarding projects I've ever been involved with, because the end result is so special – so 'Wow!'

"I'm looking forward to next summer, because I'm going to come back out for a much longer period of time to see the finished product and play some golf."