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An Instant Northwest Classic By Blaine Newnham

With the front nine holes at White Horse Golf Club just a few days away from being ready for prime time, we couldn't pass up the chance to see what U.S. Pro Tour winner Joe Lanza, his father Vince Lanza, friend John Pasley and Seattle Times columnist Blaine Newnham thought of White Horse's front nine holes. Here is Blaine's report:

Bainbridge Island's Joe Lanza, who won more than \$100,000 on various golf mini-tours last year, started the New Year by collecting \$40,000 for his victory at the opening event of the U.S. Pro Tour series last month in Garland, Texas. Then he placed second in his next event.

He was hot, and almost didn't want to come home for spring break. So what did Joe want to do while he was home? He asked his dad, Vince, if he could play the front nine holes at White Horse.

Joe and Vince played the back nine in late November. Joe loved it, especially the three finishing holes, making birdie on the 18th around the lake. So last Friday Joe and Vince joined John Pasley, a retired airline pilot, and me for an expedition deep into White Horse's front nine.

We picked a Friday when it was nearly 80 degrees. What fun. Bob Screen allowed us out there because he wanted some early feedback on the front side. There were no tee markers or cups on the greens. We'd also forgot to pick up scorecards. It was a rare moment of true golf adventure.

I knew the basic yardages. Joe and his dad, a 2-handicapper, played the back tees, all 3,627 yards of them. John and I played the middle, or blue tees, at 3,214 yards. Neither John nor I get any argument from state officials when we order the senior discount ferry passes, but age aside we love golf and have played everywhere. John built a home on the only course Ben Hogan ever designed and built in Texas.

Back to White Horse. Without cups, we decided we would alternate an imagined tee placement, rotating front, middle and back as we went along. Joe had a plastic water bottle in his bag. He suggested we use that as the hole after we had arrived on the green. It went in the center of whatever section of the green we were playing to. You make a lot of putts when you don't care about the speed of the greens. We all played well, even though we had only the 150-yard barber poles to guide us as far as yardage went.

The front nine is a little behind the back nine in growing in, but there is no question it is the more difficult of the two nines.

"The first thing that comes to mind," wrote Joe in an e-mail, "is that three days later I can still remember every hole out there with great detail. It's been awhile since I played a course that strung so many good holes together like the White Horse front nine."

We were all taken with the scope of the first hole, the sense that this told you what kind of a course you were in for. There must be ten bunkers on No. 1, although with a good drive we found we could carry a bunch of them for a relatively short shot to the green. It told us there would be wide landing areas for our drives, and that with the sandy soils the ball would actually bounce. It told us too that shots into greens would be difficult.

"The bunkering," explained Joe, "visually confuses and challenges the player at the same time." He liked the color and the context of the sand, even though I don't remember him being in it.

He played beautifully on the front nine, shooting 1-under from the tips, although we were putting to a bottle, not a hole. Joe plays on not only the U.S. pro tour, but is exempt on the Canadian tour. He watched with great interest as a mini-tour graduate, Zach Johnson, won the Masters. "It sure gives us mini-tour players hope," he said.

There is no question that the front nine is more secluded than the back nine, not only from the view of homes, but one hole from another. They all have their own settings. The par 5s are big, brawny holes, the par 3s are also long and require some moxie to go for back pin locations.

"I really enjoy standing on every tee box and seeing the evergreens and bunkers carve unique golf holes," wrote Joe. "What a serene and peaceful environment."

The meat of the course seems to be the stretch that is the seventh, eighth and ninth holes. They are long, from the back tees measuring 441, 563 and 463 yards. From the middle tees they are just as long, for those of us who ought to be playing there, 418, 493, and 427.

"Seven and nine were about as challenging as they come," said Joe. "In fact, compared to other courses I play on tour, White Horse would give a fair and challenging test to professionals, one of the better layouts we would see on the mini circuit.

"We really don't play any courses with a similar feel. For me, it was like a walk in a forest, an instant Northwest classic."