



GOLF WORLD HAS HEALTHY RESPECT  
FOR TREASURES IN DONALD ROSS GOLF COURSES

By Lee Pace

BRETTON WOODS, N.H. (August, 2007) – The phones started ringing in the Chicago offices of the American Society of Golf Course Architects shortly after the 1999 U.S. Open at Pinehurst No. 2. Members of Donald Ross designed golf courses wanted more information about Ross and how to determine how genuine their course might be after watching Payne Stewart out-duel Phil Mickelson and Tiger Woods on a course Ross first opened in 1907 and essentially completed in 1935.

“Writers and commentators from around the world marveled at Ross’s ability to use the natural landscape to create a course that has left a lasting impression on both the golfers and viewers of the U.S. Open,” ASGCA official Paul Fullmer said.

Ross designed nearly 400 golf courses across America from 1900 through his death in 1948, one of them being the championship course at Mount Washington Resort in 1915. With the advent over the last 15 years of golf clubs and balls that effectively reduce the length of older courses and the evolution of new grasses that are more tolerant to weather and disease, owners of most vintage courses like those designed by Ross have renovated and restored the old layouts. The attempt is to preserve Ross’s original shot values and playability but bring the length and agronomy into the 21st century.

The result is a course that can span one end of a century to another.

“It is absolutely unique in this country, a modern course for the modern ball; a distinct value being given to a particular shot on each hole—a course which makes you think,” Walter Travis said of Pinehurst No. 2 in 1909.

“I play golf courses on tour and we all see it, miss the green, automatic lob wedge, hack it out of the rough,” Tiger Woods said nearly a hundred years later. “That to me is not fun golf. Fun golf is Pinehurst No. 2. Fun golf is learning how to maneuver the ball on the ground and give yourself options.”

Ross’s style is imported directly from the home of golf, from the sandy coastline of Scotland.

He was born in 1872 in the village of Dornoch on the northeast coast of Scotland. He became a caddie at Dornoch Golf Club as a youth, worked as a carpenter’s assistant and learned the business



of greenkeeping. Ross spent a year in St. Andrews at the age of 20 as an apprentice to Old Tom Morris and to clubmaker David Forgan, then returned to Dornoch to become head professional, clubmaker and greenkeeper.

A Boston golfer named Robert Willson was visiting Dornoch in 1898 and suggested to Ross that he should consider coming to the United States, a country where golf was in its infant stages and badly in need of golf professionals. Ross did so a year later and landed in Boston, where he called on Willson and was soon introduced to a job opportunity at Oakley Country Club. Ross was hired by the club and immediately set out to remodel the club's eleven-hole layout. He staked out a new course, arranged for labor and began working toward a projected opening in the fall of 1900.

Ross was soon introduced to a man named James Walker Tufts, a lifelong Boston resident who was now in the resort business in Pinehurst, N.C. Tufts hired Ross to work the winters in the south, overseeing his fledging golf operation, and Ross set up winter shop in Pinehurst in late 1900.

Ross was delighted with the land forms in Pinehurst. The earth was gently rolling and sandy, similar to what Ross knew from Dornoch. Rain water flowed through the sandy soil at Dornoch; it did so as well in Pinehurst. He remodeled and expanded the original nine-hole design; he unveiled the stout No. 2 course as a full 18-hole layout in 1907; and he introduced in 1910 the No. 3 course, one that would prove popular with women and seniors with its shorter holes and small, elevated greens.

Pinehurst No. 4 was completed in 1919.

Though Ross wore a number of hats at Pinehurst (golf instructor, tournament director, caddie master and clubmaker among them), he enjoyed the design and construction of golf courses the most and by 1910 was devoting the majority of his time to architecture. At that time he began making frequent visits to New Hampshire.

The White Mountains of the state were a haven for grand resort hotels in the late 1800s as they drew the socialites by train from New York, Boston and Philadelphia during the summer months. Hotel owners recognized the value in a golf course as an amenity, and the sport has been played in New Hampshire since the latter part of the 19th century.

There were more than 30 hotels and guest houses in the area surrounding Bethlehem by the late 1800s, and in 1898, Fred White formed the Bethlehem Park Association, built a clubhouse and developed a nine-hole golf course on land alongside Park Avenue. Eleven years later, the Park Association hired Ross to rework and expand the course to 18 holes, and the new layout opened in 1910. The town of Bethlehem acquired the country club in 1949 and still operates it as a public course.



On the other end of the town, an 18-hole course at Maplewood Country Club was completed in 1914, with Ross expanding an existing nine-hole course. The golf course is privately owned today and open to the public.

An early brochure for the Balsams Grand Resort Hotel in Dixville Notch references a six-hole course designed by Scotland's Charles Thom as being in active play in 1902. Millionaire hotelier Henry Hale intended to make the Balsams the "Summer Resort Pinehurst," so it was only appropriate that he hire the Pinehurst architect to do the work. Ross began design and construction on the Panorama Course at the Balsams in 1912, and the course opened for the hotel season of 1915.

Ross also designed a nine-hole course in Portsmouth called Wentworth-by-the-Sea in 1910. He designed Manchester Country Club in Bedford in 1923, and his design at Lake Sunapee Country Club in New London opened in June 1929.

"At his start, Ross's courses possessed a very gnarly and a charmingly awkward character," says golf architect Ron Forse of Hopwood, Ma. "Features were often very abrupt and looked hand-made. Often his green contours were not especially strategic and seemed more arbitrary, yet very interesting."

Ross courses are known for his seamless use of the natural landforms, minimal forced carries over hazards, greens surrounded by closely-mown chipping areas and a variety of approach angles off tees and into greens.

"There should be two ways to play a hole, one for a physically strong player, and one for the man not so strong," Ross once said.

Ross's designs were predicated on using the natural flow of the land to dictate the routing, on instituting as much thinking as swinging into the game and to demand a player be adept at every kind of shot. He particularly believed that chipping in a variety of circumstances and the ability to hit long irons as the true measuring sticks of quality players. He didn't like water, believing the loss of two shots was too severe. The two courses that most molded Ross's design philosophy, Royal Dornoch and St. Andrews, are affected by water mostly from the wind whipping off the sea. And as much as the "great course for any level of player" bromide is overused today, Ross truly achieved playability perhaps unmatched by another architect.

"He's one of the premier golf course architects of the golden age of golf courses," says architect Tom Fazio. "As many golf courses as were created in the late-'80s and '90s, many more were done in the Roaring Twenties. The quality and playability of his courses stand out in my mind. And he was responsible more than anyone else for making golf-course architecture a profession."