

## Resurrecting Donald Ross

By: Nathan Crace Date: August 28, 2007

It's no secret to those who read this column on a regular basis that I am of that group of individuals who believe the unbridled advances in golf technology in the past ten or so years (specifically the ball, the driver, and the newer wedges) have damaged the game of golf and endangered the classic courses of the past by rendering them defenseless against the long ball and the "bomb and gouge" approach. But recently, I have been watching more and more of the classic courses working to "restore" themselves to their former glory. And as with any other niche industry, there are a number of smart golf course architects making a name for themselves by channeling the architects of the glory days while they restore these courses.

I'm the last person to second-guess another architect because (by the very nature of what we do) there is no one right way to renovate or design a golf course. It's their project, let them do as they wish and leave the second-guessing to the pundits. But I do wonder why there is such a rabid fervor by some to put courses *back* to the way they were. While in my opinion, a properly designed/built/managed golf course is a work of art, is it not Michelangelo's Statue of David or a Van Gogh painting. Those can be restored. Golf courses are organic living things that change and adapt over the years. One of the reasons the game itself is so unique is that each course is unique and that creates diversity. So why do we want to keep courses the way they were or spend millions to turn back time? Is it for the nostalgia?

Enter the ghost whisperers. Most will use old sketches or photos of the course in question or maybe even the original construction drawings that were found in the footlocker of the original club president when his great grandson was cleaning out the old family stable. They spend a lot of time to painstakingly recreate what used to be there and resurrect the designs of Donald Ross, Tillinghast, MacDonald, MacKenzie....the list goes on and on. To their credit, most do an excellent job of re-creating the features the way they used to be and should be commended for their ability to do so. But is that really the best thing to do? Would it really be what they want? And by "they," I mean the original architects.

I must profess that I am a student of the history of the game and love the rich history of the architects of the Golden Age and am at times awed by what they did with limited resources. That being said, not once during any renovation project in the past 13 years have I ever asked myself what the original architect wanted. Not to be aloof about it, but the client hires me to renovate a golf course and make it aesthetically pleasing, easier to maintain, and fun to play again. And things have changed in the past 20, 30 or 50+ years since the course was originally built. Not only have changes in golf equipment changed the game, but improvements in agronomics have also made drastic changes to the older courses by improving the quality of turf.

The core point of my argument is this: The men who designed the courses so famous from the Golden Age of golf course architecture were obviously intelligent men who understood the game and how to fit a course to the land they had at their disposal. They were not stupid people. I have to believe that if we could magically resurrect these great architects and show them the way the game and the industry has evolved, they would not want to "restore" their courses to the way they were. They would want to help them evolve and adapt. Pinehurst's greens were originally sand, not grass. And the courses with turf for putting surfaces most certainly were not running 9 to 12 feet on a Stimpmeter—which was invented in 1935 because Edward Stimpson thought the greens at the US Open that year at Oakmont were unfairly fast! Most greens in those days (the US Open notwithstanding) were more akin to the fairways of some of the better courses of today. Who do you know that would settle for putting on the fairway at your course? Greens in their day had to be humpbacked to assist in drainage and subsequently were not receptive to approach shots. If you were to reconstruct a green from the 1930's and mow it to stimp at 13, you would never be able to keep a ball on the green.

So the next time you see where an architect has been hired to "restore" an old Donald Ross course to the way it was in the original photos, ask yourself what Mr. Ross would think given today's game of golf. There's a difference between bringing back some of the original design elements in the context of today's game and trying to create an exact replica of what once was, but restoring the course of yesterday may actually do a disservice to the game and is shortsighted given the advances in technology. History is to be appreciated and I hate more than anyone when a classic course is forced to change by adding hundreds of yards or dozens of bunkers to trick it up against technology. Evolution of a golf course is a natural progression that should be embraced and properly planned—not retroactively regenerated. That is, of course, unless we will all be playing the courses with hickory-shafted niblicks and feathery golf balls. Now that would make for an interesting Tour event!

*Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from his archives, log on to [www.lipouts.com](http://www.lipouts.com) and let him know. Copyright 2007.*