

Renovating a Legend

Pinehurst's No. 2 gets an overhaul to go back to its roots

By J. Eric Eckard

When legendary golf course designer Donald Ross built Pinehurst No. 2 in 1907, he used the natural setting of North Carolina's Sandhills to create one of the most recognizable golf courses in the world.

But after decades of natural growth, No. 2's famed fairways had narrowed and acres of grassy rough had replaced Ross' signature sandy waste areas and wire grass.

"We had moved away from what set No. 2 apart in its storied history and followed what the masses wanted—lush, green, perfect golf courses," says Don Sweeting, executive vice president of golf and club operations at Pinehurst Resort.

So in 2008, Pinehurst decided to do something almost unheard of—restore No. 2 to its original Ross design. That meant a \$2.5 million project that featured removing 35 acres of sod, uncovering vast areas of sand, and planting 80,000 wire grass plants—all during a time when rounds were down and forecasts were anything but positive.

"It was going to either be the dumbest thing or the best thing we've ever done," Sweeting says. "It was a tough decision, and there was a lot of pressure. Pinehurst had hosted two successful US Opens [since 1999], and we kept asking, 'Are we going to ruin something special?'"

The design team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw took on the project, and their main goal was to "honor Donald Ross," Sweeting says. After studying thousands of photos and documents from the resort's early days, Coore and Crenshaw restored No. 2 to the Golden Age of Pinehurst, when it hosted events like the 1936 PGA Championship and the 1951 Ryder Cup.

The final touches were completed earlier this year, and the US Golf Association has scheduled its 2014 US Open and US Women's Open at Pinehurst No. 2 on consecutive weeks.

Country clubs and golf resorts across the nation must make similar renovation decisions annually—and not just those vying for the chance to host professional golf tournaments. Rick Phelps, American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) president, likened it to a house. Fresh paint and replacement of old water heaters ensure that homes don't deteriorate.

"It's the same for a golf course—maybe even more so because it's organic," Phelps says. "A golf course is a living thing."

According to the ASGCA, even maintained greens will wear out in anywhere from 15 to 30 years. The life cycle of a tee box is 15 to 20 years; most irrigation systems will last 10 to 30 years; and sand bunkers should need attention after about seven years.

Tom Dale, director of golf for Linville Golf Club, a Donald Ross design tucked away in the North Carolina mountains, says most golf course renovations occur for one of two reasons: to change the course or to offset Mother Nature.

"Either there was a poor design or basic maintenance was needed, or technology has made the course obsolete," Dale says.

The Ross-designed Linville Golf Club opened in 1924, and in recent years, some tees were added to lengthen it slightly, and the drainage system and bunkers were reworked.

"But none of the greens changed," he says. "We were lucky. We were left in great shape. Unfortunately, some try [to renovate a Ross design] and then they're left with [another] renovation project to try to put it back."

And it's not just Ross designs. Oakmont Country Club in Pennsylvania went through a tree-planting explosion in the 1960s, turning Henry Fownes' 1903 Scottish links-style course into a parkland course. Designer Tom Fazio had anywhere from 5,000 to 8,000 trees removed in the early 2000s, returning it to its original design.



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Photo courtesy of Pinehurst Resort

Pinehurst No. 2 has a storied history, and its restoration away from the stereotypical lush, green course it had become honors that legacy.



Eye on Design



Pinehurst No. 2, back the way it was intended, with natural sandy wiregrass areas.

In contrast, a \$7.6 million renovation at Cherry Hills in Denver in 2008 featured keeping the course's original footprint, while designer Tom Doak expanded several greens, added a new irrigation system, re-sodded the tee boxes, and lengthened it to 7,500 yards.

And projects like that are OK even for design purists like Michael Fay, captain of the Donald Ross Society, a group started in 1988 to maintain the integrity of the nearly 400 Ross golf courses still open.

"I have no problem lengthening holes wherever feasible," says Fay, who calls the Pinehurst project "phenomenal. But for average players, 6,400 yards with a good set of greens and a good set of bunkers is a pretty good test of golf."

Although it plays a little longer now, especially under US Open conditions, Pinehurst No. 2 is "the fairest test of championship golf I have ever designed," Ross was quoted as saying before his death in 1948.

"No. 2 is still about the greens," Sweeting says, referring to the "turtleback" greens that are severely contoured to challenge golfers. "We have the entire picture now. This is the best thing Pinehurst has ever done, and it should stand the test of time." ■



Think about the big picture when renovating a course to stand the test of time.

Getting Started

Mother Nature, technology, and a change in clubs' marketing mentality make golf course renovations an ongoing dilemma at most clubs across the country. But even in today's economy, clubs are finding creative ways to satisfy members and guests with their facilities under a tight budget crunch.

"Many facilities have seen a need for a golf course renovation, but they're struggling with what steps to take, especially with the financial aspect," says Chad Ritterbusch, executive director of the American Society of Golf Course Architects.

With the Toro Co. helping with the production, the society produced the 45-minute *Excellence Restored: A Guide to Golf Course Renovation* video that walks the viewer through the steps of a successful golf course renovation. (The video was distributed to Club Managers Association of America member-managed facilities in 2009. To order a copy at no charge, call 703-739-9500.)

"It covers a lot of ground," Ritterbusch says. "It shows about a dozen different ways to do things."

The DVD features case studies from clubs in Naperville, IL, and Coral Gables, FL. Both clubs were in a state of decline and needed rejuvenation. No-interest loans from the members paid for one, and borrowing against the equity in the property paid for the other project.

"Make sure you ask the right questions, and seek experience from someone who has been through it before," says Don Sweeting, executive vice president of golf and club operations at Pinehurst Resort. "Start with an end in mind."

Master plans are vital, agrees John Lawrence, Toro's director of strategic accounts.

"Begin with an end in sight," he says. "It's a cliché, but you'd be surprised how many clubs don't get that right. I've seen clubs renovate an irrigation system, and then two years later, redo the tees and greens or redo the cart paths and have to tear up their new irrigation system." ■

About the author:

The work of writer and golfer J. Eric Eckard has appeared in *The Ritz-Carlton Magazine* and *Virginia Golfer*. He last wrote for *Club Management* in the July/August issue.