

Pinehurts as Scot's canny legacy tests club loyalty

Baltasar Garzon says a jovial course architect of yesteryear is enjoying the last laugh while top players grimace

SCOTTISH blood and sweat trickles through many of the classically-designed American golf courses, such as Oakland Hills and Augusta National, but this 1999 US Open at Pinehurst No 2 has been a pertinent reminder of the Scottish legacy.

Some players have claimed that it is Donald Ross, the Dornoch-born architect of Pinehurst, who has already won this 99th championship. We have watched three days of play unlike any US Open in recent mem-

ory. With turtle-backed greens that have slopes and dips falling away in different directions, the world's best players have used 3-woods 20 yards from the pin, and even 5-woods, depending on the humps and hollows before them.

"This is," Greg Norman observed, "the most interesting challenge of golf you'll ever see."

Phil Mickelson, having shot a first-round 67, said that No 2 was fair to players, but it was still "as near to impossible as you can get

without actually labelling it impossible."

Colin Montgomerie, after experiencing the soggy conditions of the first two days, said that the course was "incredibly difficult", yet still "about as easy as it will ever be after weather like this".

It is not known how many golf courses were built by the inveterate Ross, but No 2 at Pinehurst is his most famous and most distinguished. Ross wanted golf to be both demanding to play and creatively-pleasing to watch, as he wrote in a missive about Pinehurst in 1935.

"If you watch tournament play over No 2, you will be interested to see how many times competitors will be disturbed by these innocent-appearing slopes," Ross noted prophetically. "I have used

contours and slopes deliberately to 'break-up' these greens."

Augusta's greens, built by another Scot, Alister Mackenzie, are renowned for their stealth, but Ross's greens over Pinehurst No 2 are near-unique in their style of treachery. The fifth green here, for example, must rank as one of the most complex in the world: a sprawling surface of shaven, bent grass that falls away dramatically from back of centre, leaving players with a realistic 30-foot circular landing area on a 482-yard par 4. On greens such as these, we have seen the likes of Corey Pavin and Hale Irwin dribble putts from one side of the surface to the other.

"It is classically Donald Ross, absolutely true to his integrity," says Norman. "By that I mean, he's

built this as a second-shot golf course by the way he's made these greens. There's not a lot of trouble off the tees; there's not a lot of fairway bunkers. But it's a second-shot course: there are so many run-off areas, the second shot is the test. You can't go for the flags on many occasions. You're just hitting 4-irons, 5-irons and 6-irons in there, and looking maybe for the safest 20- or 25-footer you can find. It's a fantastic test of golf."

When in US Open history have we seen players using 3-woods to putt from just off the greens? Colin Montgomerie might have said: "A 3-wood makes no sense to me from

15 yards," but Norman and Tiger Woods have confirmed that it is the club to negotiate Pinehurst's double-contoured greens. Per-Ulrik Johansson certainly brandished his 3-wood to chip-in during Thursday's first round.

Around Pinehurst's 14th green, Woods has also used the 3-wood to navigate an up and down.

"In Australia, I grew up using this type of shot, and it's needed around here," explains Norman. "It's like having more loft on your putter, so you're ball bounces up on the grass more quickly, giving the ball plenty momentum and even a bit of topspin. On greens that Ross designed,

the backspin from a 5-iron or 6-iron could bite the grain on the hill, and cause the ball to stop too quickly."

Ben Crenshaw, a historian of the game and toiling to keep pace with the US Open field, said that he still enjoyed Pinehurst, as "there are bits of St Andrews and bits of Dornoch in Donald Ross's layout".

It still seems remarkable that this old designer, famously pictured in his three-piece tweeds and puffing on his pipe, should be so regularly cited by modern players so near the close of the millennium.

Ross's daughter, Lillian Pippet, now aged 89, still lives in Pinehurst Village, and says the thing that she remembers most about her father was his loud, raucous laughter. Ross died in 1948 at the age of 75 - and 51 years later, he's still having the last laugh.

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