

The Golf Course  
17th Hole

History

# Donald Ross

One of the game's most prolific course designers stands the test of time with his classic layouts



Donald Ross (center) in a 1934 photograph with his daughter, Lillian, and her playing partner, William Rudel, after a tournament in Pinehurst.

**T**his might be the hardest golf course in the world. I've never played Pine Valley, but this is as tough as I've seen. This is the way golf was meant to be played.

—Paul Azinger, 1992

*It is absolutely unique in this century, 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 J. Travis, 1909

The tribute is that Donald Ross's prize creation, Pinehurst No. 2, could span nearly a century and confound the great Travis at one end and Azinger at the other.

That the USGA would award the 1999 U.S. Open to No. 2 is further testament to Ross's ability to take the lay of the land, a mule, and a drag pan and create one of the world's most revered courses.

Ross is American golf's link to its Scottish roots. He was born in Dornoch, Scotland, in 1872, and, as a lad, worked on the green crew at Royal Dornoch.

He studied during his teenage years under Old Tom Morris at St. Andrews, learning the golf swing, clubmaking, course design, and greenkeeping. By the time he was 20, he returned to Royal Dornoch as a professional and stayed seven years.

By that time, he had determined that America was a land of opportunity, at least for a young golf pro, and made his way to Massachusetts in 1899.

He found work at Oakley Country Club in Watertown, and there conducted the first indoor, wintertime golf school. It also was where his interest was piqued by course design as he remodeled the existing Oakley layout.

One of his pupils at the golf school was an acquaintance of James W. Tufts, the Bostonian who had recently built a resort in North Carolina. Golf was growing in popularity and Tufts needed a professional to oversee his 18-hole course in Pinehurst.

Ross was hired and moved to Pinehurst in late 1900. He began reconfiguring the resort's existing course and designing what would later be known as the No. 2 course, whose original 18 holes were completed in 1907.

A third course at Pinehurst was completed in 1910, and by then Ross had turned over the daily club operation to devote full attention to course design. Along the way, he still maintained a first-class game, winning three North and South Opens at No. 2, one of the premier events of its time.

He would build eight courses in the

Pinehurst area, including one at Pine Needles Resort, which will host the 1995 U.S. Women's Open and was said to be Ross's favorite course to play.

Eventually, Ross would be credited with 385 solo designs, the most prolific output until Robert Trent Jones came along. If you count every course in America in which Ross had a hand, the number runs toward 600. But he remained loyal to Pinehurst, living there most of the year—except to return to Massachusetts to escape the brutal Pinehurst summers—until his death in 1948.

Ross's early design method was to walk a site for as long as it took to determine the 18 best green settings. His fairways were generous at first glance, though he often planned a narrow corridor in which to land the tee shot for the most opportune angle to a particular pin.

Often his greens, like at Pinehurst No. 2, fell off around the edges, effectively reducing the target. Most back sides of greens sloped away dramatically.

Ross often placed bunkers that, from the fairway, appeared to abut the putting surface, when in fact they were 15 to 20 yards in front of it.

He didn't like water coming into play because he felt the loss of two shots was too severe, and he always mixed in a couple of mammoth par fours with a tiny one demanding a short shot to a small, tightly bunkered green.

"You usually run through the entire bag of clubs by the 10th or 11th hole [on Ross courses]," says David Eger, Director of Rules and Competitions for the USGA, and a former North and South Amateur champion at No. 2. "More than anything, you have to think on every shot, every hole."

The 1999 U.S. Open will not be the first major championship played at Pinehurst No. 2. The 1936 PGA Championship, won by Denny Shute, was also held there.

This year's PGA, at Inverness near Toledo, Ohio, was the 14th on a Ross course and 15 U.S. Opens have been contested on his designs. The 1991 GOLF Magazine 100 Greatest Courses lists 11 Ross courses, including Pinehurst No. 2, Seminole, Oak Hill, Oakland Hills, Inverness, and Scioto.

A group of more than 750 Ross aficionados belongs to the Donald Ross Society, a group that meets every year to celebrate his work and memory.

Tom Weiskopf, a noted course designer and Ross devotee, once suggested another such organization to protect old Ross courses from modern-day tinkering.

"The membership fee would be \$200," Weiskopf said. "And half would go toward the purchase of a shotgun."

—Lee Pace

### What Makes A Ross?

You know it's a Donald Ross course if:

- Fairways are wide, but offer one prime location for the best angle of approach.

- Greenside bunkers are often placed 15 to 20 yards in front of the green.

- Greens are small and shaped like inverted saucers.

- In regions with sandy soil, greens will be surrounded by mounds and hollows, requiring imaginative chips and pitches.

- Fairway bunkers are placed on the side of the fairway that affords the best approach to the green.

- Five or six holes—at least one of them a par three—require a long-iron approach.

- There will be at least one short par three and a short par four, with small, well-guarded greens, more undulating than most.

- Greenside bunkers have concave floors, so that shots landing in bunkers will settle near the center instead of under the face.