



# THE DONALD ROSS LEGACY IN GEORGIA

BY JOHN COMPANIOTTE

**IN** recent years golf course architect **Donald Ross's** contributions to the game have been reinvigorated by the playing of the U.S. Open at Pinehurst No. 2 course. That course was Ross's workshop for nearly 50 years and it still retains some of the basic features associated with his design work. Open front greens allowing a run-up approach shot, a layout following the natural contours of the land, shallow bunkers and greens whose surfaces sit perched above their surrounds are some of the typical attributes of a Ross design, although not present at every course where he worked. According to **Jack Nicklaus**, "His stamp as an architect was naturalness."



**B**orn in 1871, Ross enjoyed success as a competitor in golf, winning three North and South Opens (1903, 1905, 1906), finishing fifth in the 1903 U.S.

Open and in the top 10 two other times, and placing eighth in the 1910 British Open. Originally from Dornoch, Scotland, in 1900 he was appointed as the golf professional at the Pinehurst Resort in North Carolina, where he began his course design career and eventually designed four courses. It was acclaim for his designs at Pinehurst that brought him recognition as America's premier golf course architect by 1912. Among Ross's most famous designs are Holston Hills (Knoxville, Tenn.), Pinehurst No. 2, Oak Hill (Rochester, N.Y.), Oakland Hills (Detroit, Mich.) and Seminole (North Palm Beach, Fla.). He designed or renovated around 600 courses during his prolific career as a golf course architect.

Ross significantly influenced golf course design in Georgia, creating some of the best courses as the game grew in popularity across the state from 1910 through 1930. In 1914, he renovated East Lake's No. 1 course, the course where **Bobby Jones** learned to play the game as well as anyone before him or since his time. The course provided sufficient challenge to Jones as he developed as a golfer, having him master every sort of shot necessary to go on to win Georgia's first state amateur championship in 1916 at the age of 14. He eventually won 13 national major championships during his competitive career, including the U.S. Amateur, U.S. Open, the British Open and the British Amateur. The Ross design at East Lake must have been a pretty good classroom for a budding master of the game.

Ross next worked in Georgia on a municipal course in Gainesville that opened in 1920. That course no longer exists, nor do his designs at Bacon Park Golf Course No. 2 outside Savannah, East Lake's No. 2 course (though the **Charlie Yates** course now occupies that same plot of land), and Walthour Golf Club in Savannah.

During the 1920s Ross designed another nine courses in Georgia. These include Athens Country Club (1926); Augusta Country Club (which he worked on in 1927 while it was still the course for the Bob-Air Vanderbilt Hotel in Augusta); Bacon Park No. 1 (1926); Brunswick Country Club (9 holes, 1938); Country Club of Columbus

(1925); Forest Hills Golf Club (1926), which hosted the Southeastern Open in 1930 won by Jones in his Grand Slam year; Highland Country Club (9 holes, 1922); Roosevelt Memorial Golf Course (designed 18, but only 9 were finished, 1926); The Savannah Golf Club (1927); General Oglethorpe Hotel in Savannah (1929, now known as Wilmington Island Club); and Washington-Wilkes Country Club (9 holes, 1925).

As the years passed, nearly every Ross design in Georgia was altered. Some of those changes occurred during the Depression years from 1930 through the beginning of World War II when clubs filled in bunkers to save on maintenance expense. The overall conditioning of all golf courses suffered during that era. Then World War II brought manpower short-

**Seth Raynor, Hugh Moore and Bob Cupp**, with **Brian Silva** doing the most extensive renovation in 2001, according to head professional **Tommy Brannen**. Silva identified nearly 37 sand bunkers in the original Ross plans that had been removed over the years. Moore also worked on Athens Country Club. East Lake was revised by **George Cobb** and then renovated again by **Rees Jones** in the 1990s. Cobb and **John LaFoy** revised Savannah Country Club. **William Byrd** renovated what was then the Sheraton Resort in Savannah, now the Wilmington Island Club.

To see the work of Ross in as close to the original character as possible, a golfer should visit the Ross nine at Highland Country Club in LaGrange or Roosevelt Memorial in Warm Springs. Or a golfer could qualify for the Savannah City Amateur that is con-

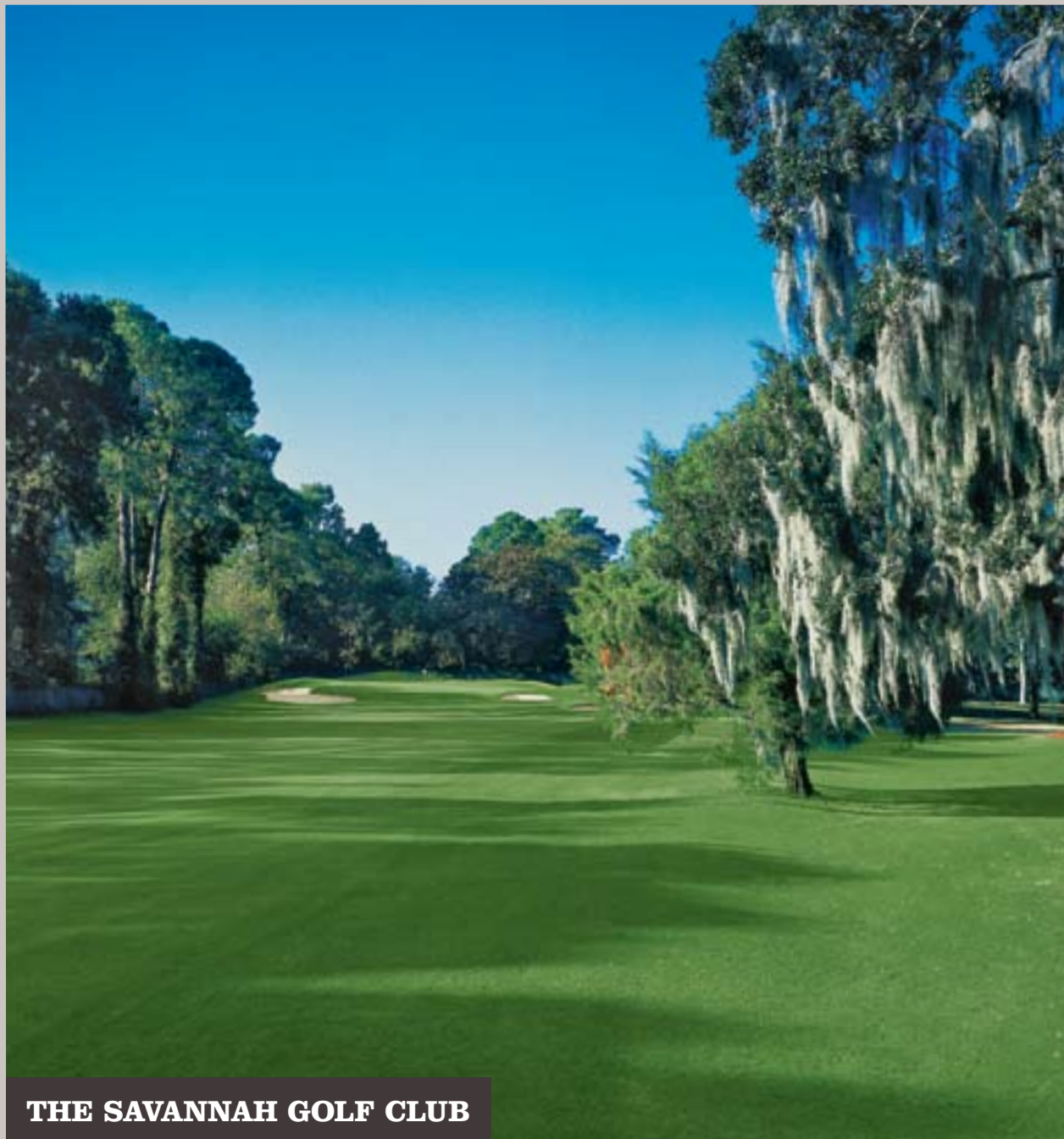


ages and decreased use of clubs because gasoline was rationed – members simply couldn't get to the club. The features of golf courses were again subject to alteration in order to save on maintenance expense.

After the war many clubs began to upgrade the quality of the conditioning of their golf course. Better maintenance equipment was developed and budgets for conditioning increased with the era of prosperity during the 1950s. Those who have worked on Augusta Country Club include

ducted over 16 of the original Ross-designed holes of Bacon Park's No. 1 course that comprise the 18 for the tournament. These holes are part of three separate nines as played on a daily basis at the facility.

The original design for The Savannah Golf Club dates from 1899, with a redesign by Ross in 1927. Ten of the holes that Ross created are essentially undisturbed, with three holes altered due to reconfiguring the land needs of the site and some features of other holes being changed. In



## THE SAVANNAH GOLF CLUB

the Southeast, Memphis Country Club, Holston Hills and Linville Country Club (North Carolina) are three out-of-state Ross designs that retain the basic character of what Ross created simply because they have not been revised significantly.

During the past decade there has been a movement among those who appreciate excellent golf course design to restore the original intent of the great designers of the era of 1910-30. Not only Ross, but other architects of that time, including Raynor,

**Alister Mackenzie**, and **A.W. Tillinghast** have all had courses painstakingly restored with reference to the original drawings done by each architect for a particular course (*see the sidebar about the Donald Ross Society*). Each architect has their own society that seeks to promote appreciation for the merits of the work done by these men prior to titanium drivers, putter-heads that resemble weapons from the age of chivalry and lawnmowers that cut grass closer than most men shave their faces each morning. Stubble on

a chin was never meant to be lower than an eight on the Stimpmeter.

Ross himself was fond of tweaking Pinehurst No. 2 on a regular basis for over 40 years, so he understood that the venues where golf was played had to evolve as the equipment changed and golfers became more adept in every skill area. It was not until the 1930s that he supervised the transition of the putting surfaces at Pinehurst No. 2 from oiled sand to bermudagrass. This was done in preparation for the 1935





## THE DONALD ROSS SOCIETY

**THE** Donald Ross Society ably states its mission: "Founded in 1989 to recognize and safeguard the integrity of courses from the Golden Era of Golf Course Architecture, the Society's particular focus is the work by Donald J. Ross & Associates of Pinehurst, N.C., before 1948. We believe that the golf courses designed by Ross are works-of-art that merit close care and meticulous preservation. When renovation work is needed, we believe that – wherever possible – the course should maintain its original look, shape, and playing character; and when accommodations are needed for the modern game, they should be consistent with the original design intent. We, therefore, urge clubs to seek out those architects, shapers, consultants and superintendents in the industry who endeavor to preserve these traditions, and that are comfortable with the basic strategies outlined in our Restoration Guidelines, wherein we distill the wisdom of countless restoration successes and provide a blueprint for clubs interested in recapturing their Donald Ross design integrity."

The members of the Ross Society regularly organize trips to play golf at clubs featuring his course designs. In March 2009, more than 20 of the Society's members came to Georgia to play at Highland Country Club, Roosevelt Memorial and East Lake. The outing's organizer, **Derek Dobbs**, is a member at the Atlanta Athletic Club as well as the R&A in Scotland and other clubs. **Wayne Aaron**, one of the participants on the journey and a noted expert on golf collectibles, is a member of Cherokee Town and Country Club in Atlanta and other clubs. For information about joining: [www.donaldrosssociety.org](http://www.donaldrosssociety.org).

**PICTURED:** Donald Ross Society members assembled at East Lake Golf Club in mid-March (l-r): Monte Van Kooten, Robert Gardner, Lawrence Rusin, Dave Upchurch, Vince McCord, Alfred Nuzny, Michael Ronan, Chris Banwell, Warren Stanley, Aziz Hasan, Steve Montminy, John Stiles, John Butler (behind Stiles), Douglas Bray (next to Stiles), Doug Bleiler, Norm Montminy, Don Chadwick, Gerry Stratford, Bill Akin, Jim Hoener, Derek Dobbs, Gordon Huey, Barry Bruggers, Charles Deehan, and Wayne Aaron. Photo by John Companiotte.



## AUGUSTA COUNTRY CLUB

option, but the course does play to about 100 yards longer now from the back tees.

Athens Country Club will be restored during 2009 and 2010 by architect **Ron Force**, who has instructions to preserve the overall layout, but increase the size of some greens that have shrunk over the years. The surface of each green will be measured exactly prior to reconstruction and nearly all the existing features will be visible after the work is completed. **Joe Devaney**, the director of golf at the club, describes the projected work as a "sympathetic restoration, accommodating for current equipment, but not spoiling what has always been a fine golf course."

Brunswick Country Club in 2006 brought in the design group of **Davis Love III**, who lives not far away on Sea Island, to enhance their club's Ross layout. Ross first worked on nine holes for the club in 1936, then returned two years later to add another nine, as well as adding length, and revising the bunkers and greens throughout the course. Working from the original drawings by Ross, Love's mission was to restore what he could of the original look of the course. In some cases when greens were taken down to the dirt it was discovered that through top dressing with sand over the years, the surface of the green had risen over a foot. **Dan Hogan**, the club's PGA professional and director of membership, has experienced a gain in membership since the renovation from 110 to over 500. With a new clubhouse coming online this spring, he expects continued growth in the membership. "We have a

PGA Championship played on the course. He also participated in the renovation of nearly 200 courses that were not his original designs, with East Lake's No. 1 course being a **Tom Bendelow** layout.

Many of the clubs in Georgia where Ross created the golf course recently have undertaken to recapture some of his magic. **Brian Stubbs**, head professional at the Country Club

of Columbus, notes that the course's 2002 revision by **Arthur Hills** was done using the original drawings by Ross as guidance. The routing of the course was retained, other than to switch the 8th and 9th holes. The 18th tee and green were moved, but the basic character of the original 18th green was restored after the relocation. With a site on 110 acres for all the club's resources, adding length was not an



golf course that is fairly simple in look — not much elevation change through the course,” said Hogan. “But it is enjoyable to play for every level of player and it’s a great course to walk. In some ways the simplicity of the course is appealing to the average golfer that can’t negotiate the more complicated designs of today’s era. Families can also enjoy a round together. Plus, we even have a contingent of national members who spend part of the year on Sea Island who appreciate the classic design. Davis Love’s design firm brought the course up to contemporary agronomy standards, which allows for better maintenance and a better playing experience, without detracting from what Ross created.”

With the realization that the Ross contribution to Georgia’s golf courses is something worth protecting, his presence here will only grow, as it has in recent years. Thousands of Georgia golfers have played on a Donald Ross design, with probably most of them not knowing who first created the course. The state is fortunate to have benefited from his influence on golf for nearly a century.

For anyone interested in the legacy of Donald Ross, consult “Discovering Donald Ross,” written by **Brad Klein** and published by Wiley. The book artfully as well as exhaustively recounts the career of one of the most ingenious and talented golf course architects of all time. The book contains a list of all the courses Ross created or revised. ©

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