



Rossing Around the Motor City



Image courtesy of Tufts Archives, Pinehurst North Carolina

For many the Ross most associated with Detroit would be Diana. But if you asked four dozen golf enthusiasts from 22 different states in early June, their answer would have undoubtedly been Donald. Those folks—all members of the Donald Ross Society—got to enjoy five of his courses in the Detroit area from June 2-6, 2015. Outing Committee members Mark Larson and Dave Jongleux did an outstanding job arranging golf, meals and speakers as well as our headquarters hotel.

For our first round, we ventured an hour west of Detroit to Ann Arbor to play Barton Hills. Ron Prichard completed a major renovation in 2011, removing hundreds of trees, restoring 48 bunkers and reclaiming sizeable portions of greens lost to circular mowing patterns. Despite its Ross pedigree, two of the most interesting greens had Seth Raynor features: the Biarritz 3rd (known here as the halfpipe) and the Punchbowl 8th. The highlight, however, was the “Top Hat” 9th, named for the raised 10’ by 10’ square Ross placed in the middle of the green. Superintendent Colin Seaborg made sure we got the full experience, cutting the hole in the middle of this unusual feature, and inducing plenty of three putts.

The Society made another trek on Wednesday, this time 90 minutes south to Toledo Ohio, to play Inverness. Unlike Barton Hills, Ross’s original work is less on display—the result of changes made by Tillinghast, Wilson, Fazio and current member Arthur Hills. The course was very challenging with small greens and the recoveries for a missed fairway or green. We also got to see the course’s most famous change—the tree planted by the USGA in the middle of the 1979 Open to prevent Lon Hinkle from cutting 80 yards of the 8th hole by driving into the 17th fairway.

The last three rounds were all played within 10 miles of our headquarters hotel—the Kingsley in Bloomfield Hills. Wednesday we were at Franklin Hills and it was a favorite for many. “A course you’d love to play every day,” was a common refrain at dinner on the club’s lovely patio after the round. Ron Prichard was also at work here, completing a restoration about a dozen years ago. Perhaps the most interesting hole was the short par 4 13th, requiring a delicate pitch to an elevated green.

Many approach shots failed to hold the tiny green, and when Society President Mike Miller made the climb and didn't see his ball, he assumed he was among them. Only after looking in the hole did he realize he'd made eagle. There were no eagles among the group of Carolyn Amos, Pete Deangelo, Steve MacQuarrie, and Mike White, but they played well enough to win the week's only competition.

For many members, the highlight of the trip was the visit to Oakland Hills on Thursday. The only bad weather of the week—a thunderstorm that delayed play for about 30 minutes here—was but a minor affair. While some of us got to play with members at the three prior courses, Oakland Hills member Billy Messner (who was instrumental in arranging access both here and at Franklin Hills) made certain there was a member in every group.

After the round, Society members had a chance to tour the Hagen Grille, with its memorabilia of the career of Oakland Hills' first professional. Another highlight was the Hall of Champions, with its exhibits of each of the championships played here. The club has hosted the US Open, PGA, Ryder Cup, US Amateur, US Senior Open, US Women's Amateur and Western Open, the only club ever to have done so. Replicas of the trophies of these events are on view in the Heritage Room.

All these displays are the work of the club's Heritage Committee, an assignment which is highly sought after by club members. After dinner we were treated to talks by two members of the Heritage Committee, chairman Glenn Diegle and historian Dick Howting. Dick took us through the history of the club, including the changes Robert Trent Jones made to Ross's layout to make it more difficult for the 1950 US Open.

Mike Miller also brought us up to date on the Society's latest news, including our involvement with a Wounded Warrior project that will result in the construction of nine holes in Warm Springs, Georgia that were designed by Ross nearly a century ago.

We finished the trip by playing Oakland Hills' other course—the North, just across the street from its better known sibling. Ross drew the plans for this one as well, but, unlike the South, was never on site for construction. That work was carried out by his associate, Walter Hatch. Subsequent changes have included the complete redesign of four holes as well as less obvious changes to most other holes. While the North is a fine course in its own right, it inevitably suffers in comparison with its neighbor to the South.

Those who attended were surveyed after the trip. While there were a few minor glitches to improve upon, the rest of the comments were universally positive. Some typical ones:

"Great value for one of the best weeks of golf in my life. Every course very interesting and food was great."

"Great courses, great people and great shopping!"

"Choice of courses and food was excellent. We were so well received at each club and locker room attendants and starters could not wait to help us."

None of this would have occurred without the tireless efforts of Dave Jongleux and Mark Larson. The Society is indebted to them for producing one of our best trips ever.