

Monroe Golf Club—A Donald Ross Classic

This is the final chapter on the life and career of Donald J. Ross, the man who designed the golf course at Monroe. Ross is acknowledged as the first professional golf architect.

Donald Ross designed and supervised the construction of the course at Monroe Golf Club in 1923. The Monroe opening in July of 1924 came at what was probably the peak of his career, during which he designed or expanded 400 golf courses. Ross was the recognized leader of what golf historians describe as the “golden age of golf architecture,” a period that spanned the years 1915 to about 1935.

The Ross link to golf history and to great golfers began early in his career. A Ross course was first used for a major national championship in 1908 at Siwony in suburban New York, where Gene Sarazen won the PGA. The first U.S. Open on a Ross course was in 1919 at Brae Burn CC in Boston, won by Walter Hagen. When Bobby Jones accomplished his famous grand slam in 1930, his U.S. Open win was on a Ross course, Interlachen in Minneapolis.

Nicklaus, Hogan, Player, Trevino, Snead, Middlecoff, Ernie Els, and Payne Stewart have all won professional majors on Ross courses. Annika Sorenstam won her back-to-back U.S. Opens at the Broadmoor and Pine Needles. Rochester’s Sam Urzetta won the U.S. Amateur at Minneapolis CC, and Tiger won one of his three straight U.S. Amateurs at Newport CC. It seems Ross courses always bring the cream to the top.

Including the 2005 U.S. Open at Pinehurst, Ross courses will have hosted an astounding total of 106 professional majors or USGA national championships. No other designer is even close.

After another feverish run in the 1930’s, building 12 to 14 courses each year, Ross cut back on his travel schedule. He was now almost 60 years old and had moved permanently to Pinehurst. Ross never stopped tinkering with the original 5 courses at Pinehurst he designed. He converted the greens from sand to grass in the 1930’s and kept tweaking holes each year through the addition of new tees and hazards. His tinkering may have been due to the simple fact that he lived there, and had the desire to stay very active even in his later years. He was never in demand to make these same changes to his other courses. In fact, most Ross courses today want to preserve the original Ross layout, feeling that his classic design is what makes them special.

Ross spent his remaining years promoting the Pinehurst resort. A widower for several years, he married a Pinehurst widow, and they moved into a modest house on the fairway of the third hole of his beloved course, Pinehurst #2. He called it Dornach Cottage, after his birthplace in Scotland. Expanded several times, the house is still a private residence, a link to golf history, and complete with one of the most awesome views in all of golf.

During the 1940's, Ross became a sort of living legend in the village of Pinehurst, active in his church and the community. Ross was always willing to swap golf stories with the guests. Even in a "dry" town, Ross enjoyed a drink and a cigar during these moments, but one thing he never did in his life was bet on golf, not even a \$1.00 nassau. He wrote that golf was a sport for ladies and gentlemen and betting only demeaned the game.

Through all this, Ross never stopped playing golf. There are still several men living in the village today who caddied for Ross in the late 1930's and 1940's when they were young teenagers. They tell the story that on his 68th birthday in 1940 he shot his age on the difficult #2 course. Also, in visiting with one these men just a few years ago, it was stated that Ross had adopted early the metal shafts used by the pros, replacing all his wooden shafted clubs. The man further pointed out that back then, Pinehurst fairways and greens were mowed to the same height. This is how the run-up shot and even the use of a putter from off the green became a trademark of Pinehurst and a Ross course.

Donald Ross died on April 25, 1948. His death at age 75 was announced in a full column obituary in the New York Times and he was buried next to his first wife Janet, in Newton Centre, Mass. All his papers, records, blueprints and drawings that could be located are preserved in the Tufts Archives in the village of Pinehurst and made available to writers and historians.

While not born in the United States, Donald Ross lived a very American life. An immigrant from Scotland who arrived with less than \$10.00 in his pocket, he started a business and built a career on his skill, determination and love for golf. He left a legacy of enjoyment for all golfers, one that will last as long as the game is played.

Many thanks to John Purcell, who researched and wrote these wonderful articles on Donald Ross. We hope you enjoyed the series.

Sincerely,
The Golf Committee