

a lost ROSS

SAN JOSE COUNTRY CLUB REDISCOVERS ITS DONALD ROSS-DESIGNED GOLF COURSE

by MARK
LESLIE

The original Donald Ross-designed golf course was in its burial clothes, much of it literally underground, unceremoniously interred along with memories of past glory. Then, the light finally shone on officials at San Jose Country Club in Jacksonville, Fla.

After the club decided to institute a long-delayed reconstruction of its dilapidated greens, Ray Benson presented his fellow members with proof that a classic golf course lay unseen on their property. It only needed resurrection.

Perhaps the greatest of all golf course architects, the Scotsman Ross walked the property, routed 18 holes through 115 acres of what was planned as a resort, and compiled extensive hand-written notes and drawings of the course.

Benson discovered and photocopied all this material at the Tufts Archives in Pinehurst, N.C. Tufts Archives maintains an exhaustive library of Ross's projects throughout the country. Meanwhile, the club possessed aerial photographs from 1928 and from the 1940s, '70s, '80s and '90s, showing the rapid "de-Rossing" of the club's course.

Early on, most of Ross's bunkers were filled in to reduce maintenance costs because the planned resort never materialized. Throughout the years, the remaining bunkers also were filled in, even after the newly formed San Jose Country Club bought the course. Then, a 1988 renovation departed further from the original design, focusing on aesthetics and building a system of irrigation ponds.

"Back in '88, when the last renovation was done, people weren't interested in maintaining a Donald Ross-designed course," says the club's golf course superintendent Clayton Estes, CGCS.

Sixteen years later, the members discovered what they had.

"Our members are very aware of who Donald Ross was, and they're proud to

be a member of a club with a Ross-designed course," says Charles Cofer, the club's president.

A whole new level

Like homeowners discovering a lost Van Gogh in their attic, club members took stock of this new-found blessing and decided to take their greens-renovation project to an entirely new level. Enter golf course architect Dan Schlegel of Edgewater, Md. The club hired Schlegel in the spring of 2004 to guide what had morphed into a total restoration and reconstruction. Members approved the project and were assessed \$3 million to implement it. The sting of the assessment was lessened by giving members a wide range of payment options that could be spread throughout as many as 36 months.

"Our marching orders became for Dan to do research and put the course back in place with today's technology," Estes says.

Schlegel immersed himself in all things Rossian. He spent many hours in the Tufts Archives pouring over Ross construction drawings and visited such Ross creations as Pine Needles in Pinehurst, N.C., Aronimink Golf Club in Newton Square, Pa., and Augusta (Ga.) Country Club that remained unchanged. They became Schlegel's classroom until he could return to San Jose feeling the Ross touch and strategic thinking.

"I was able to get inside the mind of Ross, or at least read what he intended," he says.

It was crucial to do so. Golfers familiar with Pinehurst No. 2 might think all Ross's greens were domed. Not so. He often designed bold contours, including a par 5 at San Jose that features a 2.5-foot-deep diagonal swale that runs away from the shot to the back of the green, which Schlegel rebuilt and called "Ross's Trough."

Modern golfers often look aghast at

blind shots, but writing about a par 3 at San Jose, Ross wrote that a bunker fronting the green should have a back mound high enough to obscure the putting surface.

And even though the course lies over only 115 acres, Schlegel still had enough space to add 300 yards in length, he says.

Ross also was more interested in strategy than aesthetics. Thus, his bunkers flash sand but only high enough to be seen and affect how a golfer plays a hole.

"The routing is brilliant, the way it flows, its sequence, the tees next to the greens making it a wonderful walking course," Schlegel says.

Calling the project a sympathetic restoration, Estes says it was a tremendous undertaking.

"When the 1988 renovation was done, everything was set up on top of the earth – the greens and bunkers pushed up, so this entailed major shifting," he says.

On 14 holes, Ross's strategy and bunkering are exactly the way he designed them, Schlegel says.

"There's not a single bunker on the course that was left over," he says. "And most all the bunkers we built are put out there the way Ross had them on his master plan to set up the same strategies he wanted. Not the same distance, perhaps, because modern technology has added so much distance to the ball, but the strategy is the same as Mr. Ross intended."

Schlegel used Ross's existing corridors, but with the bunkering and greens complexes, it's visually incredibly different, says head golf professional Todd Bork.

Water management

For Estes, the renovation made life simpler. Consistently layered greens, new turfgrasses, tree removal and an upgraded irrigation system all make the golf course more predictable, he says. Even though the old greens supposedly had been rebuilt to USGA specs in 1988, the layer-

AT A GLANCE

San Jose Country Club

Location: Jacksonville, Fla.

Web site: www.sjccjax.com

Type of project:
Restoration/renovation

Architect: Dan Schlegel

Builder: MacCurrah
Golf Construction

Superintendent:
Clayton Estes, CGCS

Cost: \$1.7 million for the golf course; \$3 million including clubhouse improvements, complete pool replacement, tennis facilities and security enhancements

Construction started:
March 13, 2006

Course opened: Oct. 14, 2006

Greens: TiffEagle Bermudagrass

Fairways and tees:
419 Bermudagrass

ing of materials was inconsistent.

"We had some greens with 10 to 12 inches of rock, 5 inches of choker and 4 inches of greens mix," Estes says. "That made it difficult to keep a consistent quality product. We had done some coring and knew where the thick areas were. We had low areas in the greens that would dry out and high areas that would stay wet."

That problem doesn't exist anymore. So far, the greens' layering consistency is much better, as evident by improved water percolation through the soil profile, Estes says.

"We're able to do much more spot-watering of the greens," he says. "We don't need to water the entire profile every day. The layering consistency helps with water management."

Additionally, individual valve and head controls were installed throughout the irrigation system, which has helped manage water better because all the heads were individually wired back to the satellite in the previous renovation, Estes says.

Turfgrass health

Before the renovation, the greens featured Tifdwarf Bermudagrass that had been mutating since 1998. Elsewhere, 419 Bermudagrass and various mutations of

the warm-season turf covered the course. During the renovation, MacCurrach Golf Construction of Jacksonville, Fla., planted TifEagle Bermudagrass on the greens and 419 on the fairways and tees, blending and grading the old turfgrass and new together.

Turfgrass health had become an issue because of excessive shade caused by a number of pine and maple trees that had been planted on the course during the past 80 years.

"Dan and I went through the golf course and marked individual trees hole by hole," Estes says. "We viewed the trees during the day to see how the sunlight would hit the greens throughout the year, then put together a map to get permitting."

In the end, 171 trees were cut down, greatly improving sunlight and air movement.

"Membership wasn't very happy about the number of trees removed, but on the first tour of the construction site, many people said, 'Wow!'" Estes says. "They were happy, and with the exception of several trees that were prominent, they couldn't tell where we had taken them out."

To a tee

One part of the renovation that added

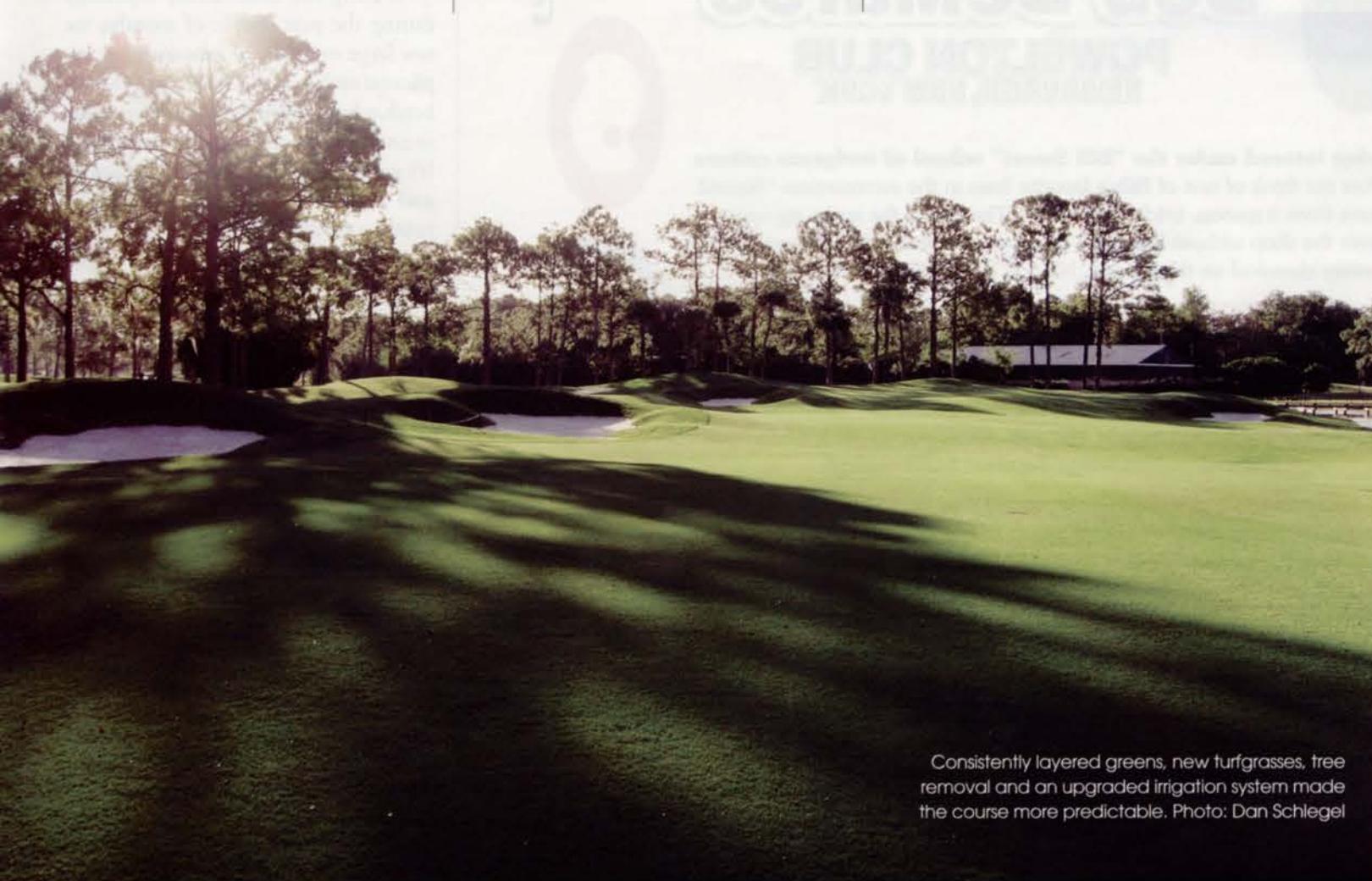


Bunkers built during the restoration were similar to what Donald Ross had on his master plan.
Photo: Chris John

to Estes' workload was the restoration of the tee boxes back to the original square shapes Ross designed.

"It's good for design concept and aesthetic value, but they require a lot more work," Estes says. "But it's a good trade-off because we have more usable tee surface than when we had a free-flowing tee design."

Estes' crew has returned to the old-style mowing, that is the fairways run right up to and wrap around the greens.



Consistently layered greens, new turfgrasses, tree removal and an upgraded irrigation system made the course more predictable. Photo: Dan Schlegel



During the restoration project, 171 trees were cut down throughout the course to improve sunlight and air movement. Photo: Dan Schlegel

Throughout the property, the mowing design has broadened the fairway cut, providing golfers with huge landing areas.

"That was part of the plan to institute the Donald Ross feel back to the golf course," Estes says. "In the old days, we used to move the tee markers off and mow with a seven-gang mower."

Estes says he wouldn't know the effect the square tees have had on man-hours until next summer when the fairways and tees are mowed four or five times a week.

Perhaps the most curious area of the project was the 12th green. It sits on the edge of what was a swamp when Ross designed it. In 1925, the construction crews laid cypress trees in a crosshatch pattern to create a pad so the green wouldn't sink into a swamp. During the recent renovation, MacCurrach dug out the cypress logs and replaced them with native soil. The area wasn't swampy anymore because lakes had been created.

Rave reviews

During construction, the entire club, except for the golf course, remained open. Bork conducted a kids golf camp and golf instruction on the practice range, and general manager Scott Irwin organized a slew of social activities, including outdoor dining.

After San Jose reopened Oct. 14, Donald Ross – and his modern design associate, Dan Schlegel – received high marks.

"Dan has elevated San Jose's status tremendously in the area," Bork says. "The members' initial reaction was very favorable. Not only is it visually far superior, but its conditioning is fantastic. Clayton and MacCurrach Golf Construction did an A-plus, yeoman's job."

Cofer says Schlegel's design work has transformed a good course that could be played without giving thought to strategy, into a course where one has to give thought to just about every shot.

"This really helps to engage the play-

er," he says. "With modern technology and instruction, our course was losing its ability to challenge the younger and lower-handicap players. Dan was able to add length and difficulty to the course that we weren't aware would be possible. Even so, his design is still very playable for the senior and higher-handicapper."

The renovated course has a lot of depth deception, Estes says.

"There are hidden bunkers that make the players become students of the game," he says. "They have to learn the golf course."

Bork agrees.

"It makes you think your way around the course," he says. "It's visually more intimidating because of the bunkering, but there's still plenty of room to play the golf course. There are a lot of ways to make par. Nobody says you have to hit driver off a certain tee box. You can always lay up. You have to play to your strengths."

Membership growth

As a result of the renovation, membership has grown already. Irwin and his staff were proactive, marketing the project to members in advance of the vote. He expected a 10-percent attrition of membership, but experienced only 5 percent and replaced them right away.

"During the renovation, especially during the past couple of months, we saw large numbers of new-member applicants each month," Irwin says. "Membership has swelled from 1,200 to 1,260 in anticipation of the course reopening. It's good to see the Donald Ross Room and 19th hole full again. The club is running on all cylinders."

The renovation sets up the club to hold high-profile amateur events in the future if the membership decides to do that.

"We want to give the course time to mature, but we've talked to the USGA, and I think we'll get a lot of exposure and a lot of interest in this area for hosting some major amateur events like we did in the past," Bork says.

Schlegel agrees.

"Absolutely," he says. "I think that given notice and being able to get the course at tournament condition and green speeds, it would present all the challenge any tournament golfer would need." GCN

Mark Leslie is a freelance writer based in Monmouth, Maine. He can be reached at gripfast@adelphia.net.

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