

Former instructor at Lake City Community College builds a practice on his growing reputation as a Donald Ross scholar.

Key to this architect's future lies in the past



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Golf course architect Brian Silva likes to tinker with the past.

He lives in the quiet, old New England textile town of Whitinsville, Mass. His home there is a post-and-beam house built in 1759.

Silva restored all the original wood, including the low-slung, 4-by-8-inch ceiling beams. He rebuilt the original heating system — a centrally located fireplace. The wooden staircases are appropriately creaky, old quilts adorn the upstairs beds, and the kitchen sports a 36-inch Glenwood stove that looks more like 1890 than 1990.

Four miles away stands the gray Victorian wood frame house where Silva has located his five-room office. A fine old sculpted walnut table in the meeting room is covered by various blueprints. Off in one corner is a glass-fronted bookcase filled with the classic literature of his trade. And every day on his way to the office, Brian drives by the regionally renowned nine-hole Whitinsville Golf Course — perhaps the purest design work of Donald Ross found anywhere in the Northeast.

The 37-year-old native of Framingham, Mass., began his boyhood fascination with golf courses in the company of his father, John Silva.

"My dad used to be a feature shaper,"

he says. "He was in the light construction business. Dad was real handy on a D-4 bulldozer, and that's what he did for 20 years. At age 8 or 9, I was riding on my dad's lap while he ran the bulldozer.

"Geoffrey Cornish tells me that I met him before I was 10 years old. Initially, I thought I would go into feature shaping. They don't get enough credit, these feature shapers, and they are wildly, wildly talented. But like many dads, mine said, 'No! I want you to go to another level up.'

"So I decided to try golf course design."

Silva worked on golf courses during the summer and attended the Stockbridge School of Agriculture and Turf Management at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Cornish, who was on the faculty at Stockbridge, then urged Silva to combine turf management and landscape architecture.

So Silva went on to the four-year program in landscape architecture and finished up in the mid-1970s, just as the golf course business was enduring a prolonged slack phase.

He wrote letters of application to every architect whom he could locate. And to this day, Silva holds in high regard the few architects who wrote back.

No one offered him a job, so he returned to the University of Massachu-

By Bradley S. Klein

sets for two years of graduate study in plant and soil sciences.

Silva then took over the teaching load of former Stockbridge professor Bob Carrow, who had left to go to Kansas State and who now heads the turf program at the University of Georgia. He enjoyed teaching so much that he took a job at Lake City Community College's School of Golf Course Operations.

For three years, Silva combined classroom instruction with on-site visits to his interning students. In 1981, the Florida Turfgrass Association awarded him its highest honor, the Wreath of Grass.

In those three years, Silva got to see courses that varied markedly from those he had known back home. It was a formative experience to see the likes of Seminole, Turnberry Isle and Harbour Town, and to see so many new courses under construction.

But besides exposing him to new architectural styles, the experience enabled Silva to appreciate more than ever the design strengths of Donald Ross.

Silva had seen many Ross courses in New England. But Ross himself had devoted varying degrees of attention to these projects, sometimes paying little more than a single visit and letting his field crew, under the supervision of Walter Hatch, execute the design plans in the field.

Not so at Pinehurst No. 2, to which Ross devoted painstaking attention over several decades. Without doubt, this was his masterpiece, and when Brian Silva saw it, he knew that he had witnessed something unique.

He left Lake City in 1981 to become the USGA Green Section's northeast agronomist. In this capacity, he began to acquire a reputation as a Ross devotee, someone to whom clubs could turn for advice on restoring their Donald Ross features that might have suffered over the years.

Many of Ross's fairway bunkers were taken out in the 1930s. His greens, characteristically crowned at the top, and carefully shaped to provide ample space for a run-up shot, often became rounded off and shapeless over the years because of careless mowing. Mechanical rakes often tore up bunker

Donald Ross Courses in Florida

According to *The Golf Course*, the definitive history of golf course architecture by Silva's partner, Geoffrey Cornish, Donald Ross designed 30 courses in Florida, of which 27 still exist. The first were the Bellview-Biltmore Hotel & Club in Clearwater and St. Augustine Links South Course (which no longer exists) in 1915. The last was San Jose CC in Jacksonville in 1935.

Bellview-Biltmore Hotel & Club, Clearwater ...	1915	New Smyrna GC	1922
Bobby Jones Muni (American & British), Sarasota	1927	Palm Beach CC	1917
Brentwood GC, Jacksonville	1923	Palma Sola GC, Bradenton	1924
CC of Orlando	1918	Panama CC, Lynn Haven	1927
Coral Gables Biltmore (North)	1924	Pelican GC, Clearwater	1926
Daytona Beach G&CC (South)	1924	Pinecrest on Lotela GC, Avon Park	1926
Delray Beach G&CC	1927	Ponce de Leon CC (North), St. Augustine	1916
Dunedin CC	1925	Punta Gorda CC	1927
Florida CC, Jacksonville, NLE	?	Riviera CC (South), Coral Gables	?
Fort Myers G&CC	1918	San Jose CC, Jacksonville	1935
Gulfstream GC, Delray Beach	1923	Sara Bay CC, Sarasota	1925
Hyde Park GC, Jacksonville	1925	Seminole GC, North Palm Beach	1929
Keystone G&CC	1927	St. Augustine Links (South) (NLE)	1915
Lake Wales CC	1923	Timuquana CC, Jacksonville	1923
Miami CC (NLE)	1919	University of Florida CC, Gainesville	1921



BRIAN SILVA COLLECTION

walls.

And many clubs simply made changes in their design over the years in the name of "modernizing" and "upgrading" their courses just to keep up with the Joneses.

In 1983, Silva formed a design partnership with Geoffrey Cornish. A full-time architect with several of his own 18-hole projects in the works, Silva also received inquiries from clubs looking to rework their courses.

But here, Silva is careful to distinguish what he does from pure golf course restoration.

Despite his admiration for the work of Donald Ross, Silva does not claim to be doing restoration in the literal sense of the term. Instead, he provides what he terms a "sensitive renovation" — sensitive to the feel and concepts of Ross, but not a scrupulous duplication based upon long-lost blueprints and the way things used to be at the club years ago.

According to Silva, a golf course can be most successfully renovated when the architect is allowed the creativity

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to present his version of classical design principles.

Pre-eminently, this means following a principle of modestly raised greens, with bunkers placed at the base of the fill pad. It also means allowing for chipping areas and alternative routes to the greens. He is also not afraid to buck the modern trend of large, sprawling bunkers and prefers to incorporate Scottish-style pot bunkering, replete with intricate mounding.

Silva's version of classical Ross will

be on display at the Country Club of Orlando, where he will redo the 18 greens and surrounds including many fairway bunkers and approach areas.

It appears that Ross put his stamp on the CC of Orlando without having visited the site. The greens were built with locally available muck and thus developed problems of thatching and drainage. In the mid-1960s, several greens were redone by Joe Lee, so that today the course is of hybrid design. Silva's goal is to tear up the greens and



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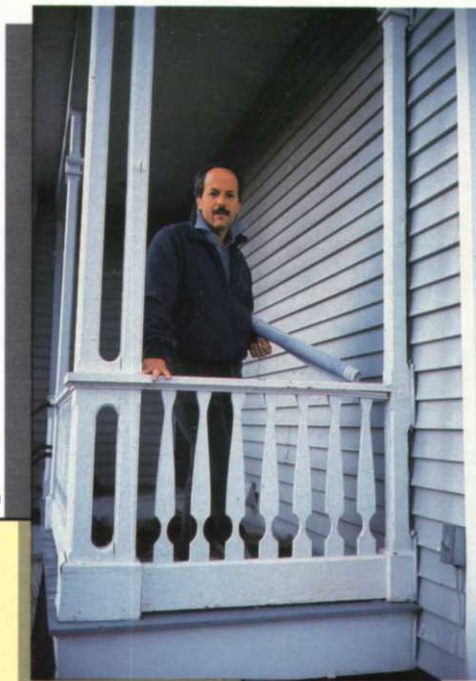
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Brian Silva restored this post-and-beam house in Whitinsville, Mass., including the original heating system — a centrally located fireplace. The house was built in 1759.



BRAD KLEIN

Silva's Florida work

Country Club of Orlando, Orlando (Donald Ross, 1918) — major renovation of greens and bunkers.

Sara Bay C.C., Sarasota (Donald Ross, 1925) — long-range plan.

President C.C., West Palm Beach (North, William Mitchell, 1970; South, William Mitchell, 1972) — preliminary work on long-range plan.

rebuild them completely, in the process bringing them as close as possible to the original putting surfaces or to what it seems likely Ross would have done with them.

To this end, Silva has worked up drawings scaled 1 inch to 25 feet, detailing the current green outline and bunkering, juxtaposed against the proposed new green and bunkers.

Accompanying each green site is a narrative explaining the intended look and feel of the putting surface and surrounds. He is meticulous in his redesign work and strives to create the ingenuity of putting, chipping and strategic approach shots that characterized classical courses.

As with any creative man, Silva has

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-Robert Johnston, Superintendent

his critics.

At the Wampanoag CC in West Hartford, Conn., Silva renovated a Ross course that already had suffered many compromises in its 60-year

history. With all the redesign work going on in New England at the time, it was difficult finding a suitable shaper. Moreover, the membership was by no means united in its vision of the renovated course.

The greens chairman was intent on making the course more challenging, not necessarily in preserving classical design features.

When Silva's redesign was finished, many members were left with bitter feelings. Several new greens were surrounded by severe mounds or bunkers that faced into the greens — scarcely characteristic of Donald Ross. In the aftermath, several members quit the club and one — Barry Palm — started a nationwide organization, the Donald Ross Society, in part to promote the strict preservation of Ross design principles.

"You'll always stir up a controversy about course design," says Robert Johnston, Wampanoag's superintendent. "But Silva's renovation is successful because it made Wampanoag a more exacting course while not taking its toll on maintenance requirements."

Elsewhere, Silva's redesign work has been less controversial. At Interlachen in Minneapolis, Silva worked hand in hand with the greens chairman and with long-time superintendent Doug Marshall, CGCS, to recreate subtle Ross-like bunkers and greens.

Silva had some freedom to improvise and he added his own distinctive mounding. The overall effect is to have sharpened the golf course's visual impact without having sacrificed its design integrity.

As Silva admits, it helps to have a solid working relationship among greens chairman, superintendent, and shaper of one's choice.

All of those elements are in place at CC of Orlando.

Cary Lewis, CGCS, has studied Silva's plans and is excited about what they portend. And a proven builder, Central Florida Turf, has been contracted for the shaping.

Silva already has won high marks for his own design work. His Captain's Club on Cape Cod was well regarded from the day it opened in 1985. He has five other courses on the drawing board in various stages of progress, including his first new course in Florida.

For a student of the game, however, there may be nothing more important than his work on Donald Ross courses. It has not been an easy path, but Silva has learned that the best way to honor the past is not to try to do too much with it.

Bradley S. Klein joins The Florida Green as contributing editor for architecture. A former PGA Tour caddie, he is a member of the Golf Writers Association of America and writes a monthly column on architecture in Golfweek. He also holds a Ph.D. in political science and is assistant to the president at the University of Hartford (Conn.).