



The 13th hole at San Jose Country Club in Jacksonville, Fla., is just one hole that took on a dramatic new look when Robert Walker remodeled it — as shown by these “before” (left) and “after” pictures. The course, a Donald Ross design built in 1925, underwent rerouting on several holes, excavation of 11 acres of lakes and lagoons, reconstruction of all greens,



reshaping of all tees and fairways, and installation of a new irrigation system. Originally flat and poorly drained, San Jose now contains many subtle fairway contours, a lagoon system that stretches from one end to the other, and greatly improved surface drainage.

## Mastering the ‘masters’ intriguing pursuit

### Members must know: Things are not always as they seem

BY MARK LESLIE

The real and the perceived are sometimes far apart on golf courses designed decades ago by famous early masters, according to architects remaking those courses.

While golfers are proud that their course was created by the likes of a Donald Ross, Alistair Mackenzie and A.W. Tillinghast, often-times the greens, bunkers and other features may have changed a lot.

“One of the great misunderstandings of all time is that Ross built small greens. That’s very untrue,” said Silva, a student of Ross work. Because of lazy greenskeeping over the years, he said, “I’ve seen some 2,500-square-foot greens that used to be 4,000 or 5,000 square feet.”

Likewise, Silva said in most cases the bunkers have deteriorated or changed so dramatically that “they’re not like Ross and his guys intended. In those cases it’s pretty hard to

restore them.”

“Time physically erodes and changes the course,” writes Geoffrey Cornish in his book “The Golf Course.” “Time also erodes the shot values of the holes.”

Because of these great changes, Silva said that when he renovates a course he tries to add the “flavor” of the original architect’s work.

For instance, at the Country Club of Orlando (Fla.), on which he rebuilt all the greens and did other major renovation, Silva said: “My goal was to re-do the course with the Ross flavor — to build plateau greens that drop off at the fronts and edges the way Ross’ would, to cut bunkers into the sides of the fill pads below the level of the putting surfaces like Ross would, and create features in scale with ... Ross’.”

Architect Robert Muir Graves, who with Cornish teaches a seminar on long-range planning for golf courses, makes a distinction between remodeling and renovation.

Remodeling, he said, “implies that we are going to change the character of some features of the golf course, like redesigning a tee or

green, or installing a new irrigation system.”

Renovation “means to restore a feature to its original state; for example, rebuilding a tee or green to retain its original appearance but perhaps with a better turf-growing medium or better drainage system,” Graves said.

Silva said: “The type of renovation work going on today falls into two types. One is true restoration and that’s very much in the minimum, the kind that wants to get the course back to the original. The second is plain old renovation, either sympathetic or not to the original design, and that’s the great majority.”

“In most of my clubs I don’t use the word restoration. The term I use is ‘sympathetic renovation.’ I like to put back some of the original architect’s characteristics. But I need to keep in mind the game the way it’s played in the ‘90s and the way golf courses are maintained in the ‘90s.”

Silva said some clubs have the architect’s original plans and mistakenly believe those are the answer for a true renovation.

But “plans for the masters were probably as important to them as our plans are to us today. They serve only as a general guideline,” he said.

“I tell my clubs, ‘I don’t know what Donald Ross did exactly on your course 60 years ago. I don’t know if Donald Ross was on your golf course 60 years ago. I don’t know which of his construction superintendents were there. I don’t know if those greens plans you have are of any value.’”

“As an example, Highlands Country Club in North Carolina has their original greens plans. What they show is the shape of the green, the shape of the bunker. And this is the level of detail on the plan: It says, ‘Detail surface of green as naturally as possible.’”

Silva said the Country Club of Orlando was not going to touch its bunkers and the surrounds of the greens.

“They said they had a set of Ross greens,” Silva said. “But half looked a little bit like Ross greens and half had been very much made into contemporary greens... They were shocked to find out they didn’t have Ross greens.”

“What makes them Ross greens are not only the surfaces of the greens but the surrounds of the greens — the bunkers and slopes ... I told them they should do sympathetic renovation and inject more of the Ross characteristics back into their course than they had.”

Silva said there are two greens in the world. “One is a low green with high surrounds,” he explained. “When Ross was at his best, working with a site that drains, the other type was

high greens with low surrounds.

“I don’t have any Ross plans. I’m just trying to get higher plateau-style greens with lower surrounds and bunkers cut into the fill pads so they don’t block the view of the putting surface. We’re also putting some chipping areas around the greens, like Ross did at Pinehurst #2.”

Some greens designed by the old-timers are being rebuilt because the slopes are so severe that, with contemporary putting speeds, the golfer is putting the ball off the greens, according to Silva.

John LaFoy and Robert Walker, two architects involved in renovating Ross courses, also point to changes necessitated by the affects of weather and technology failure on courses.

Walker said the main breakdown at San Jose Country Club in Jacksonville, Fla., involved greens and drainage.

“The greens were all worn out. They were incapable of growing quality turf,” Walker said. “We told the members the aesthetics and playability could improve only if we redid the course and cut the lagoons in there and moved the earth that we wanted to move.”

Walker explained that the course was built in the 1920s “when all they could move was the top 1-1/2 to 2 feet of material, which is basically your organic and hardpan area. They didn’t have the means to go any deeper and hit some sand, so the golf course was built of heavy soils.”

The construction crew drained 11 acres of weed-filled, shallow ponds, dug down 15 to 18 feet in some places, and sculptured a lagoon system throughout the course.

“We hit some of the prettiest yellow sand you could ever imagine beneath those ponds,” Walker said. “We brought some of that sand up and raised all the fairways around the course, and put some contour to them so that they drained properly.”

He said that while the ponds couldn’t be seen from the fairways, the lagoon is now a clean, free-flowing system without weeds and odor and is integral to the course.

The technology, not available in Ross’ day, made the difference.

LaFoy, who is “fortunate in that I’ve gotten to do a lot of historical courses like Ross’ East Course at the Country Club of Birmingham,” said although the “masters” designed their courses, they couldn’t prevent the physical erosion brought on by time.

And as Cornish said: “More often ... the task of updating an architect’s work will fall upon a generation of subsequent designers.”

After all, Ross died in 1948.

### AquaGro® Advantage

### The Hot Shot For Hot Spots.



Advantage is AquaGro® soil wetting agent molded into a solid pellet. Instead of syringing with plain water, pop an AquaGro Advantage Pellet into an applicator and quickly move water into the rootzone.

- Touch up problem spots easily.
- Turf safety in any weather.

Available from your AquaGro distributor.

The Advantage System  
AquaGro Advantage Pellets  
AquaGro Advantage Applicator

**AQUATROLS**  
The Water Management People  
1-800-257-7797