

By W. PETE JONES

Time has claimed yet another historic Donald Ross-designed golf links. In the spring of 1997, the U.S. Army at Fort Bragg, N.C., purchased Overhills, a retreat of 11,000 acres due north of its main base.

The property is the last of an original 42,000-acre nature retreat once owned by Percy Rockefeller. In 1912 Donald Ross was told he could have any section from 3,500 acres of the retreat to incorporate his design. The course would actually be built in two stages, the first nine in 1914 and the second nine in 1916. The golf course tract would be known as the Overhills Country Club.

The location of Overhills was a well-kept secret for decades. The only access to the golf course was by invitation granted by Rockefeller management. Those who tried to enter the retreat were politely turned away. The Donald Ross Society felt history could be served if somehow the now-defunct course could be examined and its features recorded. There was also an opportunity to study the remains of sand putting surfaces. The society found the cooperation from course architect Mike Gleason of Pinehurst, Ricardo Uriarte of North Carolina State University, U.S. Army representative Glen Prillaman and the Rose Engineering Group of Fayetteville, who helped recover detailed information about the course. Unfortunately the 1912 Ross plans were nowhere to be found.

The Army and Rose Group provided copies of an early 1930s aerial photo and a topographical map. Gleason had the hardest job. He took pictures of each hole and surveyed the now-defunct 3,000-square-foot grass green sites. It was his first study of a turn-of-the-century layout.

After all, what other course could claim having only 80 rounds of golf per year? Gleason remarked: "This pristine golf course lays in a completely natural ecosystem which has not been tinkered with. I wanted to analyze the routing and how Ross used the land. Basically, I wanted to learn his thought process and how he created shot values from tee to green and then transfer those parameters onto paper.

"Also, here was a great opportunity to see bunker patterns of that time. Most had been undisturbed, except for a few pine cones and some pine straw that had fallen into the bunkers.

"There were different style bunkers on the course and strange protruding fairway sand fingers not generally found in other Ross designs. For example; the No.1 bunker was a fore-bunker left which depth measured 5 feet and the overall run of sand some 66 yards in length."

Gleason said he walked many times to Pinehurst No.2 and tried to capture Ross' thought process, "but until now I've never had an opportunity to study an untouched work of his."

The original 1914 green surfaces at Overhills were sand, which was a typical surface used on Southern golf courses. By the mid-1950s the caretakers rebuilt them with 328 Bermudagrass and later Penncross bentgrass.

Not much is known about Ross' recommendation for building sand greens, but here was an opportunity to take samples and examine them in detail.

The society wanted to know if Ross specified oil for hardening of sand greens

## Ross' Overhills gone but not forgotten

or did he recommend using water to keep the area around the hole firm. Ross' friend and associate, Frank Maples, wrote a method for implementing sand greens in the early 1900s.

In examining the greens, turf management expert Uriarte said: "The present greens are built over the original sand greens. I took core samples starting at No.1 but, due to the density of the greens, didn't get a good core sample until the 5th green. Our lab report showed a clay/sand layer which probably was the base of the

original putting surface. The core samples did not show any PCB's, which meant the greens were probably not oil-hardened."

With this discovery, there is clear evidence that during the pre-grass green era in the South the methods used by Ross were the same as on his three Pinehurst courses. Overhills remains a paradise of sorts in the "Tar Heel" state, but no longer will it be the quiet repose of just a few.

Under the direction of Rockefeller heir Christopher Elliman, Overhills provided a safe haven for native wildlife and sev-

eral rare bird and butterfly species, all which have been considered as protected in future use of the land. The retreat is now officially an Army training area whose directive is to train soldiers but somehow maintain the integrity of a natural ecosystem as best it can. As historian for the society, I find it important to recover information of any Donald Ross course. It is one thing to draw a new course on paper, but to use the course itself as input is a unique challenge. The result of our work means preserving a 1912 design on Ross' original graphs. The plans and study documentation will be sent to the Tufts Archives Wing in Pinehurst.



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