

Esler to restore Ross design at Ravisloe

By JOEL JOYNER

HOMEWOOD, Ill. — A major renovation project will be getting underway this spring at the Ravisloe Country Club, a Donald Ross-designed layout located here in this suburb south of Chicago. The project will be overseen by golf course architect David Esler who completed his first new construction design last year at the exclusive, mens-only Black Sheep Golf Club in Sugar Grove, Ill. (GCN, November 2001).

Ravisloe has a variety of bunker styles — from tiny pot bunkers to massive waste areas — that Esler plans to restore to their original look. Recapturing green surfaces and pin placements, removing trees and making fairway modifications, and moving a few tees back to compensate for improved ball and club technology are the big issues to be tackled. The project is going to be executed in two phases.

"The design at Ravisloe is pretty much finished," said Esler. "The first phase will take place this spring on four or five holes, depending on the weather, and the remainder will be improved on in the fall. The schedule allows us to make the changes while keeping the course open for play."

The primary scope of the work involves the restoration of all bunkers — more than 80 altogether. "We'll be grassing over probably 15 to 20 bunkers and retaining the land form," Esler explained. "Obviously, we'll be respecting the modern distances the golf ball travels while at the same time respecting the tradition of the course and the original Ross design."

As many as seven to ten new bunkers will be installed, according to Esler. "We will be deepening a lot of the new bunkers where the drainage will allow us to do that," he said. "We'll also be restoring many of the cross bunkers and installing some of the bentgrass surrounds that have been lost as well."

"There will be expanded chipping areas and expanded collars around the greens," added Esler. "In addition to that, on eight or 12 holes, we'll be expanding the greens to their original shape, an eccentric shape in some cases, and original size."

By removing some trees and expanding the fairways, Esler expects to capture more strategy. "It provides alternate lines of play and offers more options for shot placement," he said. "Strategy is a critical element, and that also includes course conditions. The golf course needs to be dry. The drainage work we'll be doing on the green surrounds will give players an

opportunity to bounce the ball up onto the greens."

AERIAL IMAGES

The course was built in 1901, and Ross did remodeling work at the facility in the 1920s.

"We found pictures of the course from the 1920s and 1930s in the attic and in the superintendent's office that re-

veal a variety of styles from massive waste bunkers to tiny pot bunkers," said Esler.

While drawings were not available, aerial photographs were on hand. "One of the original members, Alex Bower, published a book called *Hazards*. It's a bit of an obscure book, but he was a real champion and student of golf

course architecture back in the 1920s," said Esler. "I believe he was also instrumental in bringing Ross to the property to redesign it, and may have commissioned some of the aerial photography to document the work."

'A TIGHT BUDGET JOB'

The architect is working closely with the membership to make sure that the project is economical. The work is expected to cost between \$450,000 and \$500,000.

"It's a tight budget job," Esler said. "There's not a lot of extra money going around."

We'll be using existing drain tiles where it is functional and keep materials localized so that we are not hauling them from



Continued on next page



Construction

Continued from page 13

"Florida is expected to be the top state in that region with Virginia to follow with a projected 11 openings."

Larry Hirsh with Golf Properties Analyst in Harrisburg, Pa., points to other opportunities that exist for new construction on the East Coast.

"The New York City area is

hot right now and definitely has potential," said Hirsh. "The area between New York, Philadelphia and Washington D.C currently has opportunities available."

A large market opportunity for new construction is within 50 miles or 75 miles of New York City, said Hirsh. "On Long Island — though it's very expensive land — there's opportunity as well as in Westchester County, Orange County, northern New Jersey and

central New Jersey."

One of the development and management companies taking advantage of the opportunity in the Northeast is Empire Golf. The company will be focused on two new projects this year — one in Westchester County, N.Y., and the other in Bayonne, N.J. "There are still opportunities in the Northeast for new construction, but it's certainly getting tougher because the financing is not

there right now," said Empire Golf's president Eric Bergstol.

FEASIBILITY STUDIES ARE KEY

No matter the location, feasibility studies will be essential to any new development, said McLoughlin. "Even in a good economy, you can build a golf course in the wrong place," he said. "In the past three or four years, there has been some overbuilding — not nationally, but regionally."

Good feasibility studies are a good way to stop all unnecessary projects, McLoughlin said. "The feasibility work in this country is not where it needs to be — very few consultants say 'No.' As far as new construction, everything needs to be localized," he said. "There is a massive distinction between regional and national."

"For example, I have a client in Easton, Pa., who wants to build a course. We looked around and saw that there are eight courses within a half-hour drive of the proposed site, none that we're doing more than 30,000 to 32,000 rounds at prices of \$35 or less," he explained. "We recommended that the client not do it. The same client wants to build a course in Allentown, N.J. We did a spot check on the area and found opportunity there."

Overall, across the country, new golf construction has slowed, admitted McLoughlin. "But there's ample room out there to develop if you know what you're doing and you pick your spots," he said. "Even in the middle of World War II, this country was still averaging around 250 courses a year. Golf is a tremendously resilient game, and there will always be places for it." ■

Esler, Ross

Continued from previous page

one side to the other. We'll also save existing bentgrass where we can and move it to spots where we need it. We will try to minimize the use of bentgrass sod which is a very expensive item."

Members were reassured about the bunker restoration work when course superintendent Ed Esgar built a sample bunker at the club's practice area. "Along with my crew, we actually built a trial bunker and showed the membership what we had in mind," said Esgar. "It's a grassed-faced bunker like the ones we will be restoring out on the course that have that flashed-sand style."

"The practice bunker was not only successful in educating the members, but promoting the concept and showing them what they had to look forward to," explained Esgar. "The members had discussed restoring some bunkers for a few years now, but there were some difficulties in obtaining the necessary funding. We put the bunker in last September, and it certainly helped provide some incentive to the members."

The superintendent also has finished the ongoing project of squaring off the tee boxes at the club. "We will continue from that stage and, again, address some drainage issues around the tees," said Esler. "We may even have to eliminate some cart paths in the process." ■

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