



Q&A

The famed Pinehurst clocks are running backwards right now as No. 2 “devolves.”

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Bob Farren and his team at **PINEHURST** are doing the unthinkable – turning back the clock on the look and feel of one of America’s greatest courses.

When you think of “brand,” you probably think of Coke or Nike or McDonald’s.

Now think about brands among America’s great courses. Augusta National is perfection. Whistling Straights is rugged, sandy and windblown. Oakmont is harder than forged steel.

For two decades, the brand at Pinehurst No. 2 has been manicured but menacing. The brand grew as it became a favored U.S. Open site. As golf evolved in the new millennium, the fairways narrowed, the bunkers became whiter and tighter and flawless turf became the standard from every tee box to every buried-elephant Don Ross green.

So why is owner Robert Dedman, Jr., having his best-in-class maintenance team work with Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore to blow up that carefully cultivated brand and return the course to the look and feel of 70 years ago?

We asked Bob Farren, the guy who oversees all of Pinehurst’s courses, that very question and got some interesting answers.

Farren is a second-generation superintendent born and bred in small-town West Virginia. His pop started on a small nine-holer he’d helped to build, graduated

to an 18-hole public facility and finished his career on the private side, so Farren got to see all aspects of the business from the time he was in diapers.

Growing up, his dad’s course was on one side of the neighborhood and the elementary school where his mom taught was on the other. “I was either at the school shooting baskets on the playground or out on the course with my dad pretty much all the time,” he recalls. He started working for his dad at 12 (“I thought it was fun until I figured out they were supposed to pay me”) and by high school he’d caught the bug and decided to follow in his father’s professional footsteps. And, early on, he decided for reasons now obscure that he wanted to end up working in North Carolina. He would get his wish in a big way.

He earned his degree in parks and recreation management in 1979, went to work for the county surrounding Charleston, W.Va., and got his first taste of multi-course management. He started as an intern and worked his way up to supervisor of the country’s four courses. When a

position opened at Pinehurst, that experience – along with the fact that Pinehurst’s then six courses were being managed by fellow West Virginian Lou Metz – really paid off. He started in 1982 as superintendent of the No. 4 course at a time when the resort was in bankruptcy. He left briefly in 1984 when Club Corporation of America bought the facility and there was uncertainty about Bob Dedman Sr.’s plans, but quickly came back once CCA’s vision for the property became clear. “Looking back, he was the savior. He bought it at the perfect time and had the resources to do the capital improvements. Property values went up fast and memberships sold like crazy.”

Farren’s return in 1985 to become superintendent of No. 2 was also the beginning of his partnership with his longtime boss, Brad Kocher. He quickly moved up to become Kocher’s second-in-command and stayed in that role for 20 years of growth, major championships and success. Now, after five

years at the helm of Pinehurst’s course operations, we asked Farren to look back on his time in the Sand Hills and to lead us through the fascinating and controversial decision to take the No. 2 course back to the future.

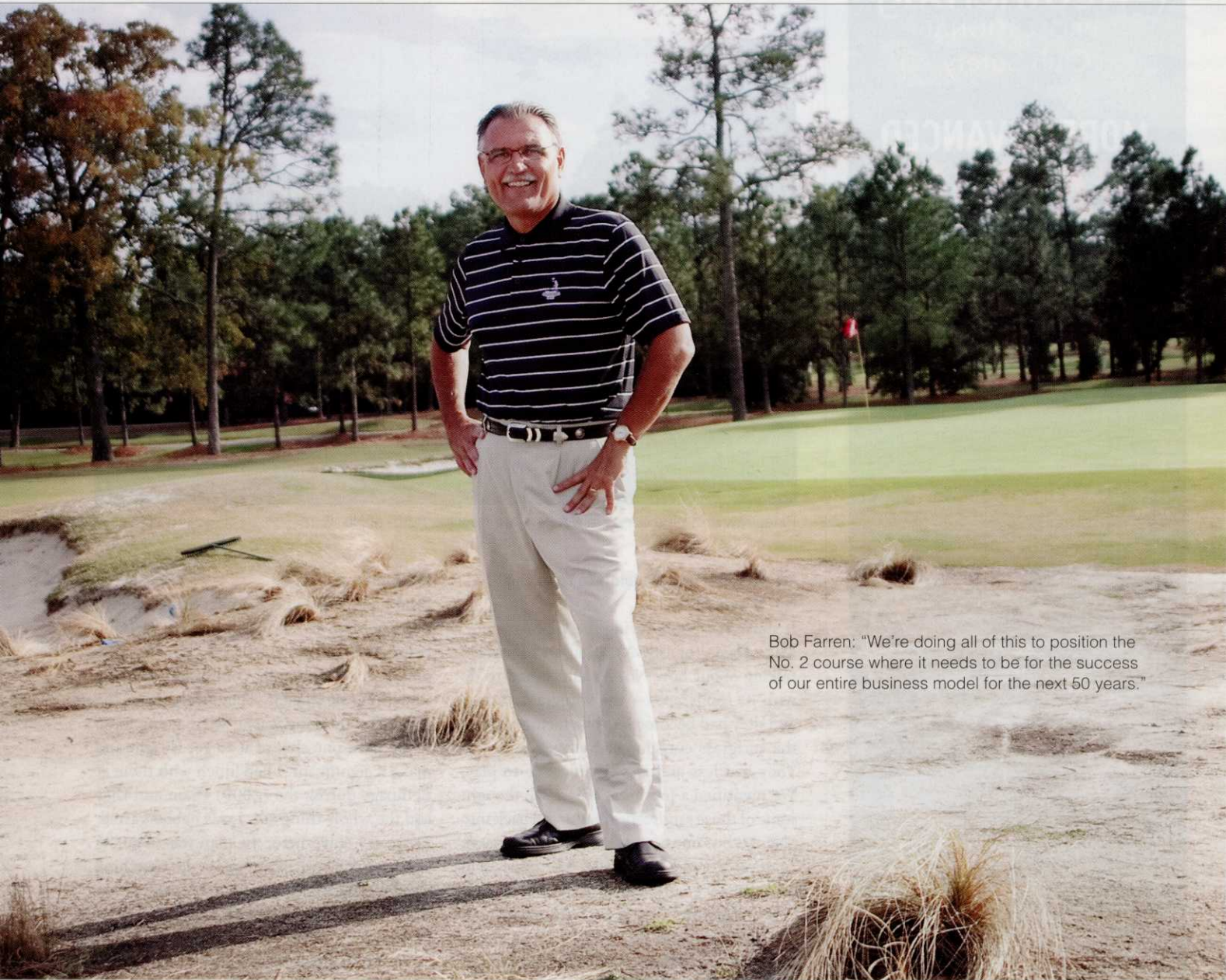
How has your job evolved over the years first working with Brad Kocher and now in the director role yourself?

Brad and I were a great team. We had awesome resources from a capital standpoint and the owners had confidence in our ability to deliver. I was able to grow myself and grow my career and be involved in so many different things from golf course construction, reconstruction, redesign, major championships, the resort component, the membership component – I got to have my finger on all of them without having to change jobs or relocate.

It was all timing. The membership grew by leaps and bounds in the ‘80s and ‘90s. The big key to success was the arrival of (legendary director of golf) Don Padgett in 1987. He’d been at Desert Mountain and was a past president of the PGA and was extremely well-respected and



Donald Ross has no comment about the changes at No. 2.



Bob Farren: "We're doing all of this to position the No. 2 course where it needs to be for the success of our entire business model for the next 50 years."

smart. He was largely responsible for attracting the attention of the golf community and getting us back into the mix for championships. It was largely because of him that we got the Women's Amateur in '89, plus the PGA Tour Championship '91 and '92. That led to the Senior Open in '94 and the Opens in '99 and '05.

Mr. Padgett really was the key. There are not very many golf destinations as historic as Pinehurst where someone from management has a building named after him, but he does. He was a very key part of our success.

Describe the Pinehurst business culture.

It's all about return on investment. Every dollar we spend, we consider an investment and not an expense. Mr. Dedman Sr. believed in reinvesting resources and capital providing you get the right return. Brad really understood and respected the business plan. He could put conditioning into quantifiable terms.

Most courses spend a great deal of money to reach the desired threshold of conditioning. Once you go beyond that, the return diminishes. We do, I

think, a good job of balancing that. You can have an 18-hole facility with a \$500,000 budget and people will enjoy that. But, if you can spend another \$100,000 and bring in \$200,000 more (in revenue) because of that increased quality, then you should. If it only generates \$75,000, you shouldn't. That's our philosophy in a nutshell.

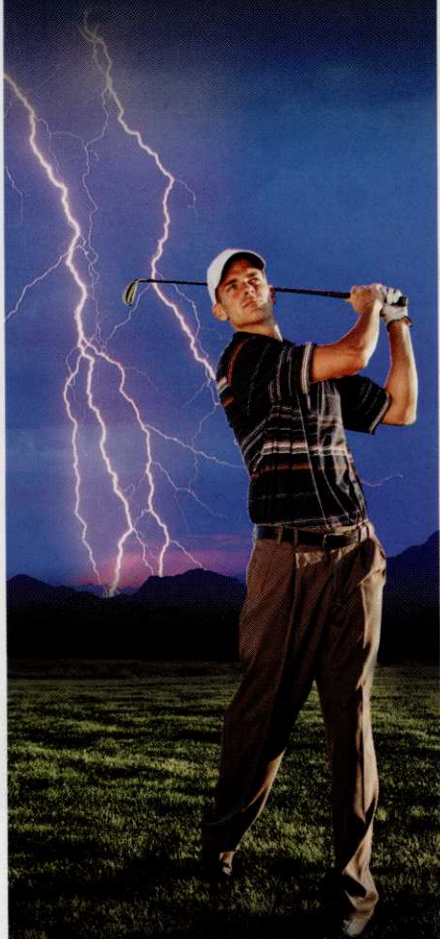
I gave a talk (at GIS) last year in San Diego on sustainability, and part of that is economic sustainability. Up until the past three or four years, people were spending a lot of money on things

that they've had to ratchet back like overseeding wall-to-wall or hand-raking bunkers. Now they're finding some of that isn't sustainable from an economic standpoint.

It really comes down to knowing what people will pay for. If you're a member-owned club and you tell them it's going to cost \$50,000 to overseed next year and they don't want to pay an increase, you have to tell them what that means. At every course, there needs to be a menu of things to spend money on and they have to choose.

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Q&A



Pinestraw and pine cones in bunkers are now the norm at No. 2.

What drove the decision to redo the No. 2 course?

It started in 2008 during the U.S. Amateur. Mike Davis (of USGA), Brad and I started talking about how No. 2's allure had to do with its sandscapes – the wiregrass areas – and they had become less of a factor because the turfgrass corridor had grown so broad. They had less and less significance to play. We identified a few areas where we thought some of those sandscapes could spill back into play. At the same time, we started seeing more “natural” courses on the rise. There seems to be a romance with the Bandon Dunes, Erin Hills, Whistling Straights, Shinnecock and the like and there was a buzz about Doak, Crenshaw and other guys doing that kind of minimalist design.

The more we looked at No. 2's history and why it got its reputation, the more we realized it went back to the '40s and '50s and that original minimalist, sandscape look. When you read the quotes from great golfers who played here, it's clear they loved the course because the ball would leave the fairway and you never knew what was in store after that. That aspect had been diminished over 20 years because of the improvements we'd made in the turf. Ironically, the same reputation that had gotten us those championships was beginning to change because of what we were doing to accommodate those championships. We had to reconsider whether to stay on that course or turn back the clock.

How did those conversations become a

full-blown plan?

Brad had retired and the next thing I knew, Bob Dedman Jr. and Don Padgett II (who came from Firestone to be Pinehurst's president) were totally committed to doing something significant. They really drove the train. The thinking was, if we're going to do it, we have one shot at it to get it right and make it significant. I had lunch with them at Bethpage during the (2009) Open and they laid the whole thing out. I was flabbergasted. As we say down here, the plan was to go big or go home. The decision was to do something dramatic to recapture everyone's imagination and change the way people think about the Pinehurst brand. So, that's when the plan to look at naturalizing a few areas became a much larger project and that's where Ben Crenshaw came into the picture.

Why Crenshaw?

Who has the respect in the industry as far as history, knowledge, passion and credibility? Who would you select to help you with a project like this from all the experts in the country today? Who's not interested particularly in leaving their personal stamp on a great course? It had to be Crenshaw.

Did you have to gulp hard when you realized that a lot of the work you'd done for two decades was about to be undone?

(Laughs). It's funny, everyone – including Bill and Ben – has been very sensitive to the fact that I'm emotionally involved in everything that's been done here for 25 years. Look, it has

been a great era for Pinehurst, but I embraced the changes very quickly. I had to convince them that I wouldn't be offended when they suggested that less turf and less irrigation was better. I'm not bothered by it— I'm excited about what we're uncovering.

Uncovering? That's an interesting choice of words.

That's what we're doing – uncovering what used to be there. It's not a restoration and it's not a renovation. We're peeling back layers of years of improvements. If you look at a set of irrigation plans, and you peel a decade's or two of heads we've added it takes you back to something different and more interesting. It's like finding an old painting in the attic with layers and layers of paint and you peel them back and to find a Rembrandt underneath.

The old irrigation plan has dictated a lot of this, right?

It's essentially back to the centerline plan from the 40s and 50s. We've gone from 1,100 heads down to 450. The old line is still out there, so we pulled a tape measure from that line about 70 feet or so both ways and that became the new fairway line. That's the backbone we're working from.

Other than the original irrigation lines, what's your benchmark for the work?

We have an aerial photo that was taken on Christmas Day in 1943. The quality is amazing considering how old it is – you can actually see people playing golf. I can't really say who took it or why it was taken, but we're pretty close to Ft. Bragg and this was during the war so you can draw your own conclusions. That photo has been an inspiration for Bill and Ben – it's been a huge source of information and ideas – but we're not trying to duplicate it.

I hear Crenshaw's been there a lot. What's it been like working with him?

One thing that's been amazing is his approachability and his casualness. He and Bill like to walk the course. They both have a great distaste with riding on golf cars. And they haven't worked on a lot of courses that are open for play so they're interacting with golfers. It's funny because Bill wants Ben's full attention and wants to get things done while he's on site, but Ben loves just to go up and talk with golfers. He usually initiates it. He loves being here and getting out there on the course and hearing what players think. Lots of our guests have gone home with stories



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about how Ben Crenshaw interrupted their round at Pinehurst.

Other than the sandscapes, the big focus seems to be on fairways, right?

Ben's goal is to put strategy back in to the course. There's no strategy with a 26-yard-wide fairway, but with a wider landing zone you have to think more about the approach.

It'll require you to think about positioning, not just hitting a landing zone. In fact, we're trying to get away from even calling them fairways – it's just turf where the ball lands.

Do you get longer to compensate for the new widths or do the tougher bunkers achieve that goal?

We have added a few tees and added a little

length to offset some of the broader landing areas. On holes 2, 7, 16 and 17 particularly where the fairways are nearly twice as wide, so we pushed them back a little. Now Kevin Robinson, our superintendent, has a big challenge getting those fairways firm again to get bounce and roll, so he has a pretty extensive topdressing program going on.

What else will be different?

We'll only have two cutting heights – putting surface and everything else. You'll start from the tee and the turf just goes from there to the greens surrounds. No first cut, second cut or rough lines. It's kind of like when I first came here and we had a guy with a tractor and a set of gang mowers. The cutting units never left the ground from first tee to 18 green if you didn't have to refuel. Everything that's not a putting surface will be mowed at ½-inch.

Kevin kind of got thrown into the middle of this process. How's he doing?

He was totally prepared and he's loving every minute of it. Kevin's a guy who started as an intern here 20 years ago. He came over to take this on from No. 6 and No. 7 in June. He's absolutely laser-focused on the concept and doing an outstanding job. He's obviously working closely with Bill and Ben – one of them is here at least once a month – but Toby Cobb is their on-site guy and he and Kevin work together nearly every day.

Okay, how much has this cost?

It's hard to characterize, but it's safe to say we'll spend more than a million dollars on this. It sounds contrary to what I said earlier, but this isn't about money. We certainly expect to make money because of it, but this is not a business plan to save money. Really and truly, it's about our role as the trustee of this property and getting it right.

Final thoughts?

We're doing all of this to position the No. 2 course where it needs to be for the success of our entire business model for the next 50 years. We want its place in history – its stature – to be ensured for generations. We're recreating our past to build our future. GCI

Pat Jones is GCI's publisher and executive editor.

Check out this month's online extras for more Q&A with Bob Farren and more pictures from Pinehurst No. 2.



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