

# WIDE *Open*

**Robinson readies  
for double duty.**

**By Trent Bouts**

**W**hen Kevin Robinson's mother saw the Olympic Club on television during this year's U.S. Open, she was taken aback. Mottled fairways and greens bound by straggly rough had her shaking her head. Later, on the phone to her son, who will prepare Pinehurst No. 2 for the 2014 Open, she said of Olympic, "It's not such a pretty course." Robinson sucked in air: "Oh, mom. Wait until you see us."

Thanks to an overhaul, labeled a restoration as distinct from a renovation, Pinehurst No. 2 will bear little resemblance to the sea of green that spellbound the golf world for the Opens of 1999 and 2005. Depending on your tastes – and the weather leading up to the early summer date – the golf course will either look like heaven, or like hell. There will be no room for ambivalence. As Pinehurst Resort chief executive officer and owner Bob Dedman Jr.



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## ALUMNI UPDATE

“Before going to Syngenta’s SBI conference, I had heard from a few of my close friends who had previously attended the conference about how great an experience it was for them. I left the SBI this past December truly changed as a superintendent. It wasn’t about learning how to grow grass in the harshest climates or what new products are out on the market today. It was about learning how to effectively lead and manage a group of individuals toward a desired goal and how to be a better leader for your operation.”



Randy Samoff  
Superintendent  
Redstone Golf Club  
Houston



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## PROFILE



The most striking change No. 2 is the absence of rough in the conventional sense. That turf is gone. Thirty five acres of it.

has said: “...it will probably be the smartest thing we’ve ever done, or the dumbest thing we’ve ever done.”

To date, expert consensus leans strongly toward the former. No. 2 is every bit the memorable experience the restoration sought to provide.

The most striking change is the absence of rough in the conventional sense. That turf is gone. Thirty-five acres of it, replaced largely by wire-grass and a lottery of low-growing natives across sandy waste areas that may be hard pan under one foot and beach soft beneath the other. What turf remains is mowed at two heights – greens, and everything else.

With the rough gone, those Super-model-thin fairways of '99 and '05 have put on some flesh – up 13 acres to 41 now – but they won’t necessarily play any wider. Architects Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw ditched 650 of 1,100 irrigation heads in favor of an austere centerline system. If it’s hot and dry in the run up to the Open, the edges will be lightning fast and sepia-toned like some of those old photos Coore and Crenshaw based their work on.

After decades of American golf characterized by excess – wall-to-wall grassing, ornamental bunkering

and checkerboard mowing patterns – the 21st-century Pinehurst No. 2 stands as a 180-degree turnaround. Minimalist is the mantra. The golf course – that is, where you’re supposed to hit it – still gets all the care and attention it needs. But stray from that path and you’re subject to the elements. As Robinson says of the new “old” philosophy for No. 2, “We’re no longer picking up pine cones before they hit the ground.”

So, Mrs. Robinson may indeed be in for an eyebrow-raiser but you have to think that somewhere the spirit of Donald Ross is grinning from ear to ear. The golf course looks more like the one he designed, where strategy and skill counted for more than sheer strength in the rough. Others like USGA executive director, Mike Davis, are also smiling. No. 2 is now a showcase for the kind of sustainability the USGA says is vital for the future of a game that needs to be more economical to maintain and, consequently, more affordable to play.

Kevin Robinson grew up in Linville Falls in the mountains of western North Carolina before the family moved to the foothills in Morganton when he was a teenager. Ross

courses were nearby at Linville Golf Club and then Mimosa Hills Golf and Country Club but while Robinson played some with his father and older brothers, his primary interests were baseball and wrestling. He loved the outdoors and was aimed at wildlife science when he went to North Carolina State University.

There, he met up with "some guys from the agronomy club" including Ron Kelly, now certified golf course superintendent at the

Country Club of North Carolina. Through Kelly, Robinson picked up some work and pocket money on the crew at North Ridge Country Club under the tutelage of Carolinas GCSA past-president, Butch Sheffield, CGCS. His career path was turning before he realized. But he caught on soon enough and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Agronomy with a concentration in turfgrass in 1992.

Now, 20 years later, he is pre-

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## Not *Rain*, Nor *Sleet*, Nor *Snow*

Come June of 2014, all the focus will be on how the A1/A4 bentgrass greens on Pinehurst No. 2 are handling the heat in the lead up to back-to-back men's and women's U.S. Opens. But heat wasn't always the major concern. Indeed when the greens were being laid during the restoration, the biggest obstacle was the cold. "It was snowing sideways when we were laying some of the sod," Kevin Robinson, CGCS says.

Even getting to that point was a challenge.

Originally a grower north of Pittsburgh was to supply the sod but a brutal early start to winter set 18 inches of snow over the grass. The supplier did his best and managed to ship some product but his equipment was damaging more acreage than it was harvesting so in the end he had pull out of the deal. Alternative suppliers were found in New Jersey but the cold issues weren't over.

The new sod froze solid en route south. "We'd come in and let their trucks into the shop at midnight," Robinson says. "We would set up banks of space heaters to thaw it out so we could get it down the next day." He even secured thermal blankets from a local concreting contractor to help the process.

Grass for the final green came locally from Sandhill Turf. Robinson laughs now, and well he might. The end result is superb. But it took a lot of teeth chattering hours to get there.

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paring to pull off a feat that has never been attempted before, a feat that will be televised around the golfing world. Robinson will be the first golf superintendent to prepare a course for consecutive major championships. No.2 will host the U.S. Open Championship from June 12-15 in 2014 then the U.S. Women's Open Championship from June 19-22. Needless to say, Robinson and the entire women's field will be hoping there's no 18-hole play-off needed on the 16th.

Robinson was superintendent over Pinehurst's No. 6 and No. 7 courses when the USGA announced the double-date in 2009. He remembers thinking the concept was "pretty cool" but that making it happen would be a challenge. "Still, I thought, if any-

where could pull it off, Pinehurst could," he says. That was before he knew about the restoration project, or that he would be the superintendent in the hot seat. Robinson moved to No. 2 in 2010 when Paul Jett, CGCS left after hosting highly successful U.S. Opens in 1999 and 2005.

Is Robinson nervous? "Yeah, I am," he admits. But if preparation counts for anything, he is giving himself and Pinehurst every chance of success. He spent several days scouting at this year's PGA Championship at Kiawah Island Resort's Ocean Course. He did the same at Congressional Country Club during last year's U.S. Open and will spend time at Merion Golf Club this fall and again when the club hosts next year's U.S. Open in June.



The new sandy areas sometimes transition into bunkers with no delineation between the two.

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## PROFILE



The new "old" No. 2 continues to mature and Robinson adjusts accordingly.

His research is mostly logistical. Even this far out, Robinson and Pinehurst's director of golf course and grounds management, Bob Farren, CGCS, are well aware that manpower will be critical in 2014. "It's too much to ask any volunteer to work two weeks in a row," Robinson says. "So we are going to be careful not to burn anybody out and try and ration duties for our local volunteers as much as possible. You don't want tons of people not doing anything. But at the same time, we need to be sure we have enough people on hand if there is a big storm event."

Some decisions yet to be made will also influence just how much manpower is required. The new sandy areas sometimes transition into bunkers with no delineation between the two. Mindful of what happened to Dustin Johnson at the 2010 PGA Championship at Whistling Straits, the USGA has a call to make that could affect how bunkers are raked and whether Robinson needs to provide people to do so during a round, not just before and after play.

In the meantime, the new "old" No. 2 continues to mature and Robinson adjusts accordingly. "We got such good reviews when we reopened but we kept telling people it's still going to change," Farren says. "Kevin's done a remarkable job with it and at the same time he's had to learn as he goes."

So will golfers. As Robinson says, "The USGA wants to see some areas that are all footprinted up, some that are sparse and hardpan, some that have really loose sand and some with vegetation. There will be a lot of unknowns out there. It will be an adventure." **GCI**

*Editor's Note:*  
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