

Not until the second afternoon of the 99th U.S. Open did it become apparent that the golf gods — and probably course designer Donald Ross himself — were keeping a watchful eye on the event at Pinehurst.

Despite rave reviews from the players and officials all week, it wasn't until late in the second round that the message arrived indicating we were in for a very special weekend. A measly 4-foot putt took one look at the bottom of the 18th hole cup and made a dramatic 360-degree turn right back at that connoisseur of classic golf architecture himself, Scott Hoch.

That missed putt caused Scotland's second biggest admirer (Earl Woods now has the title) to miss the cut by a stroke, making it apparent that divine intervention was in town just in case Pinehurst needed a lift.

Thankfully, Pinehurst didn't need it.

What followed over the weekend was not only one of the great championships of all time, but a monumental victory for short grass as a hazard, the legacy of Donald Ross, the Pinehurst Resort and staff, strategic course design, Penn G-2, the art of recovery play and the USGA. And, before I forget, 1999 Open winner Payne Stewart, too.

Just when it seemed like our friends from Far Hills had set one too many disastrous examples by fostering various harmful trends, along came Pinehurst #2 and those entrusted to maintain it. In a year when the Masters took a step backward for fans of strategic design, the folks at Pinehurst showed us how a major championship golf course should be set up and maintained. Here's a look at the tournament's many winners:

Paul Jett, Brad Kocher, Bob Farren and the 125 members of the Pinehurst maintenance staff: You followed up the architecturally faultless green restoration project with a perfectly prepared course in an unusual growing season. Ross would have been thrilled to see his course looking so "natural" and playing so pure.

Tim Moraghan and the rest of the USGA staff: You kept the rough down throughout the week to encourage the lost art of recovery play (how on earth did you get that by the executive committee?). And you didn't panic after low first-round

Thanks Pinehurst, You Were Perfect

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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scores and the unsightly but effective last-minute sod work around the greens. Thanks for not appealing television or the green mentality by dusting off the green paint canisters or burying the new sod in garish emerald green sand.

David Fay: For his "don't try this at home warnings" during telecasts. He couldn't have said it better about course maintenance expectations and the labor involved in hosting an Open. Now, Mr. Fay, if we could just do something about the ball.

Donald Ross and strategy: If you weren't a household name, Mr. Ross, you are now. Too bad Pinehurst #2 is one of your few intact designs.

Short grass: The huge "chipping areas" surrounding each green complex proved that short grass may be the best hazard of all. Why? Because it presents the players with options, meaning they have to think, make decisions and display great skill. We all got to see what happens when PGA Tour pros were challenged to use their brains in a positive way. Some capitalized on it, others struggled, and John Daly lost his marbles.

Pinehurst #2's "crowned" G-2 greens and the ground game: We saw a masterful strategic design set up the way it should be. The G-2 presented firm, perfect bentgrass greens. And they were kept at a suitable pace, maintaining the design integrity. In a refreshing twist, the ground game played a defining role in the U.S. Open, although it's almost shocking how few tour players had the smarts to land a ball short of a green and run it up. Regardless, thanks to the setup, we all saw that you do not need 5-inch rough to separate the best in the world from the rest of the pack.

So thanks for a memorable Open. Pinehurst, you were perfect. Oh, I almost forgot, so were you, Payne.

Geoff Shackelford's latest book is The Golden Age of Golf Design. He can be reached at geoffshac@aol.com