



Put in Good

'Original' greens restorations are in,
but they're not always the right thing to do

BY HAL PHILLIPS

The act of refurbishing vintage green complexes, always a preoccupation for superintendents tending America's classic layouts, simply isn't good enough anymore. Mere "renovation" is out. "Restoration," on the other hand, is *way* in.

This isn't any sort of revelation, really. The sea changed some 15 years ago, during the mid-1980s, when superin-

tendent Bill Spence oversaw restoration of The Country Club's greens prior to the 1988 U.S. Open in Brookline, Mass. Since then, it has become almost routine for classic courses to "restore" their putting surfaces prior to major tournaments, especially those conducted by the USGA.

However, of the 1,500 to 2,000 golf courses built between 1915 and 1935, many have either recently concluded a vintage green restoration, are currently in the midst of one or are considering taking the plunge. Only a small portion



Repair?

The membership at Merion Golf Club's East Course in Ardmore, Pa., wanted the green contours unchanged, so Greg Armstrong simply fumigated and regrassed. But the club digitally mapped the finished product to aid future restoration work.

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of these projects are championship-driven.

While the effect has trickled down, most of today's classic green restorations can be attributed to a new wave of appreciation for vintage design — a wave that has taken on something of a fundamentalist tone. With a fervor that sometimes threatens to spill over into orthodoxy, members at classic layouts are insisting that superintendents — with help from various course architects — maintain and/or restore the “original” green contours.

This seemingly noble attitude, unfortunately, is fraught with practical inconsistencies because restoration projects involve regrassing vintage putting surfaces with state-of-the-art bentgrasses maintained at microscopic heights by modern mowing equipment. Members want to keep the existing contours (which they take to be “original”), but they also want these greens Stimping at 11 to 12 feet.

This is a problem. George Thomas and A.W. Tillinghast

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may have foreseen a day when putting surfaces could yield this sort of speed, but they surely didn't design their greens to accommodate it.

"They designed their greens based on what 'state-of-the-art' happened to be at that particular time," says Greg Armstrong, who oversaw the 1996 regrassing of all 18 putting surfaces at Merion Golf Club's East Course, in Ardmore, Pa. "I've seen old pictures showing pin positions in the front sections of certain putting surfaces here. If we tried to cup in those places today, we'd get thrown off the property."

Tim Moraghan, director of USGA championship agronomy, is more to the point.

"I get a kick out of people who say, 'This is what (Donald) Ross or (Alister) Mackenzie would have wanted.' Well, how do you know? They're not around for the asking," Moraghan says. "Would George Thomas or Donald Ross build that sort of contour today, knowing they would feature today's turfgrasses? No. These guys were too smart. If a club wants to rebuild and regrass with the new drought-resistant bents, that's fine. Just don't ask for 12-foot green speeds."

Unfortunately, says Moraghan, most club members don't understand this dilemma — or they refuse to accept it.

"I'm in a position to tell a membership they're full of it," Moraghan says. "But the superintendent is in a different position — one that we can all appreciate. He has three kids and a mortgage; he doesn't want to tell members to take a leap. He's between a rock and a hard place."

Old days, new greens

In the Golden Age of Course Design (that amorphous period generally understood to be 1915 to 1935), the pre-eminent putting surface was South German bentgrass, which rolled anywhere between 6 and 9 feet. Without aid of the yet-to-be-invented Stimp meter, architects from this period nevertheless factored this speed quotient into their green-shaping schemes.

Flamboyant contour and pitch (up to 6 percent and 7 percent) were routine during this period because South German bent rolled slow enough to provide a reasonable challenge. Also, these older greens were not constructed with any subsurface drainage; they drained fine, but they relied on their considerable surface contour to do so.

To put that 6 percent to 7 percent figure in perspective, modern architects — who work with today's slickly spectacular bentgrasses — feel uncomfortable pitching greens at anymore than 2 percent.

Since no one today is regrassing vintage greens with anything less than the best possible bentgrasses, the current restoration craze would seem an opportunity to at least consider regrading some of these severe slopes. That would increase the number of cuppable areas, better distribute foot traffic, and soften the severity of slopes rendered some-

what goofy by the speed of modern turfgrasses and the improvements in mowing equipment.

Yet, just the opposite is true. Driven by their need for speed and a decidedly orthodox design sensibility, club members insist that superintendents take the greatest of pains to maintain these "original" green contours, regrass with state-of-the-art bents *and* keep the putting surfaces Stimping at 11 and 12. The result? Greens that mid- to high-handicappers simply can't handle; and greens that are difficult to maintain from a price and labor standpoint.

"The sad irony is that it's the average player who's demanding this situation," Moraghan says. "Vijay Singh can handle greens like that, but you and I can't. What's more, superintendents are sometimes provided the technology, finances and labor to pull this off. In other cases, they aren't. The superintendent says, 'I can get you this speed, but I need more guys, more money and more equipment.' But sometimes, even if he gets [all three], the speed requirements make that turf vulnerable to disease."

'It's getting impractical'

In 1996, prior to regrassing all 18 greens at Donald Ross
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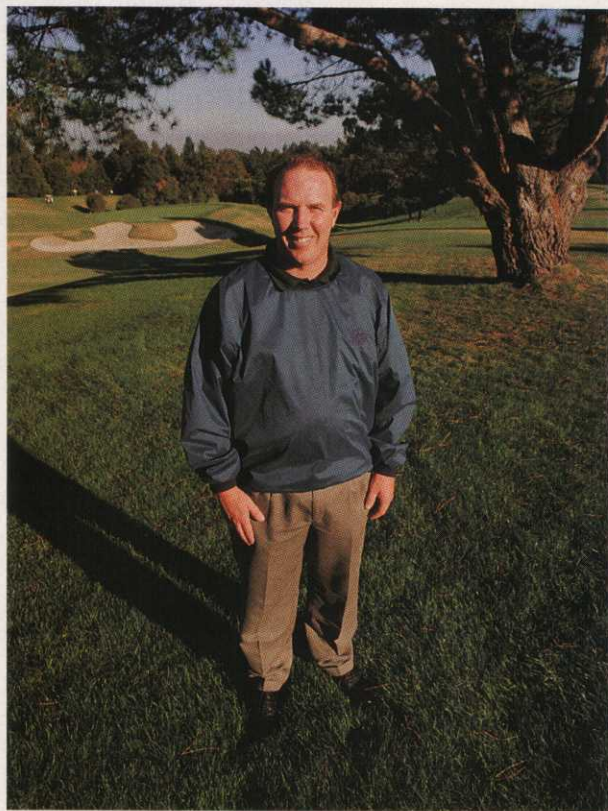
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designed Pinhurst No. 2, superintendent Paul Jett digitally mapped every putting surface to ensure that each contour would survive the process unchanged. The same digital process was employed at George Thomas-designed Los Angeles CC, where superintendent Bruce Williams recently oversaw a 36-hole green restoration project.

The membership at Merion East, a Hugh Wilson design, wanted the green contours unchanged, so Armstrong simply fumigated and regrassed. Still, the club digitally mapped the finished product to aid future restoration work.



"If you have greens that have been toppedressed over the course for 70 to 80 years, the chance that you've got 'original' contours isn't very good." – Bruce Williams, superintendent at the Los Angeles CC.

At the Ross-designed Inverness Club in Toledo, Ohio, where superintendent Tom Walker is currently regrassing his 18 greens, green contours will not be changed. "We were determined that the putting surfaces remain as identical as possible to what they had been there before the regrassing," Walker says.

Walker didn't go digital, but he's confident the new surfaces are identical to the pre-construction contours, "plus or minus a quarter inch."

Superintendents are understandably reluctant to question their employers publicly when it comes to reconciling the issues of ever faster green speeds and the maintenance of

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put them back as they were originally designed or built?

In addition to being a great architect, Ross was a practical man. He knew that eventually someone, usually a green chairman, would tinker with his course and change bunkering, rebuild greens, relocate tees and more. His problem with that was not that the course would be changed, but that there would be no continuity in the work that would take place.

Ross thought – and rightly so – that the ever-changing cast of green chairmen and other club officials would have a different view of what should be done and there would never be any consistency to the changes. His solution was to spend the necessary money to hire a bona fide golf course architect to oversee the changes and prepare a comprehensive long-range plan.

Exactness can spell disaster

Some of the greatest mistakes I've seen on the renovation/restoration of Ross courses came when rebuilding them "exactly" to the original Ross plans. I'm sitting in my office looking at old Ross drawings and contemplating the letters I might receive when I inform the lady members of a Ross club that I'm going to renovate (sorry, restore) that there will only be one tee per hole. That's the way Ross designed it, and that's the way I'm putting it back. I'm sorry, Miss, but you're going to have to play the 600-yard 7th hole from 590 yards.

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You ladies (and seniors, and juniors too) will just have to find a new course with four or five sets of tees. But before you drop out of the club, we will do some research and see if Ross himself blessed the addition of forward tees. If they were approved within the allotted "back time," they can be added to the restoration.

A few years back, a group of ASGCA members played an original Ross course that had been virtually untouched since its construction nearly 75 years earlier. The group wasn't particularly impressed with either the aesthetics or playability of the course. I got the impression the course would have made a great museum to honor one of our greatest architects – or would have made a great place to play using hickory shafted clubs and early generation wound balls.

As a modern venue, however, to be enjoyed by modern golfers using modern equipment, it didn't measure up. As architects, are we obligated to make museums out of all the courses designed by significant designers? It's probably a stretch to suggest that anyone wants to do that, but that's sometimes the impression we get.

Although I have focused on Ross, let's look at a few modern courses designed by significant designers to give us additional insight into the role of the original designer and subsequent work done by later architects. Let's start with one of the best – Augusta National.

I was fortunate early in my career to have completed numerous renovation projects at Augusta under the tutelage of George W. Cobb, who taught me most of what I know about golf course architecture. One of the more influential characters on my remodeling career was Clifford Roberts, co-founder of the club with Robert Tyre Jones Jr. Roberts was perceptive, and unlike many longtime members or administrators of golf clubs, he knew the course changed significantly just by the process of aging and routine maintenance.

When rebuilding the 12th green in 1974 and the 13th a year later, Roberts requested the contours be exaggerated, as he felt they had mellowed substantially by virtue of topdressing. He was correct.

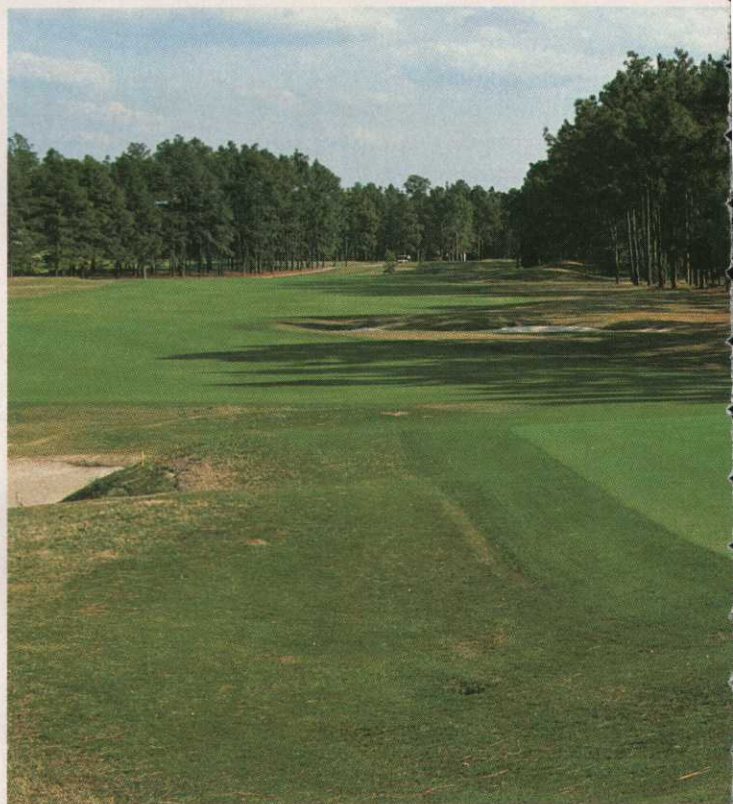
I've worked on older courses where as much as 18 inches of topdressing created a "turtleback" on top of what was originally a large "platform" green. These types of greens were very much a part of the design philosophy of Seth Raynor, former associate of Charles Blair MacDonal. Sometimes subtle changes to a course, just through routine play and maintenance, add to its character. Sometimes changes take away from the character. Someone has to make that call, and I've found no better way than by using a professional architect working with club officials.

Maybe the most significant thing I learned about restoration and renovation as I worked on Augusta was not so much what to do, but how much a course can change or evolve in 40 years.

This point was driven home by a list of 112 major course changes at the club that had been completed by at least six architects from 1931 to 1978. You could add another several architects and 30 or more changes since then. Some of these include a redesign of the greens by Perry Maxwell (1937), rotating the direction and building the pond on No. 16 in 1946 by

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"original contour." However, better than anyone, they see that golfer expectations are less practical and potentially more perverse (from design and playability perspectives) with every passing leap in technology.

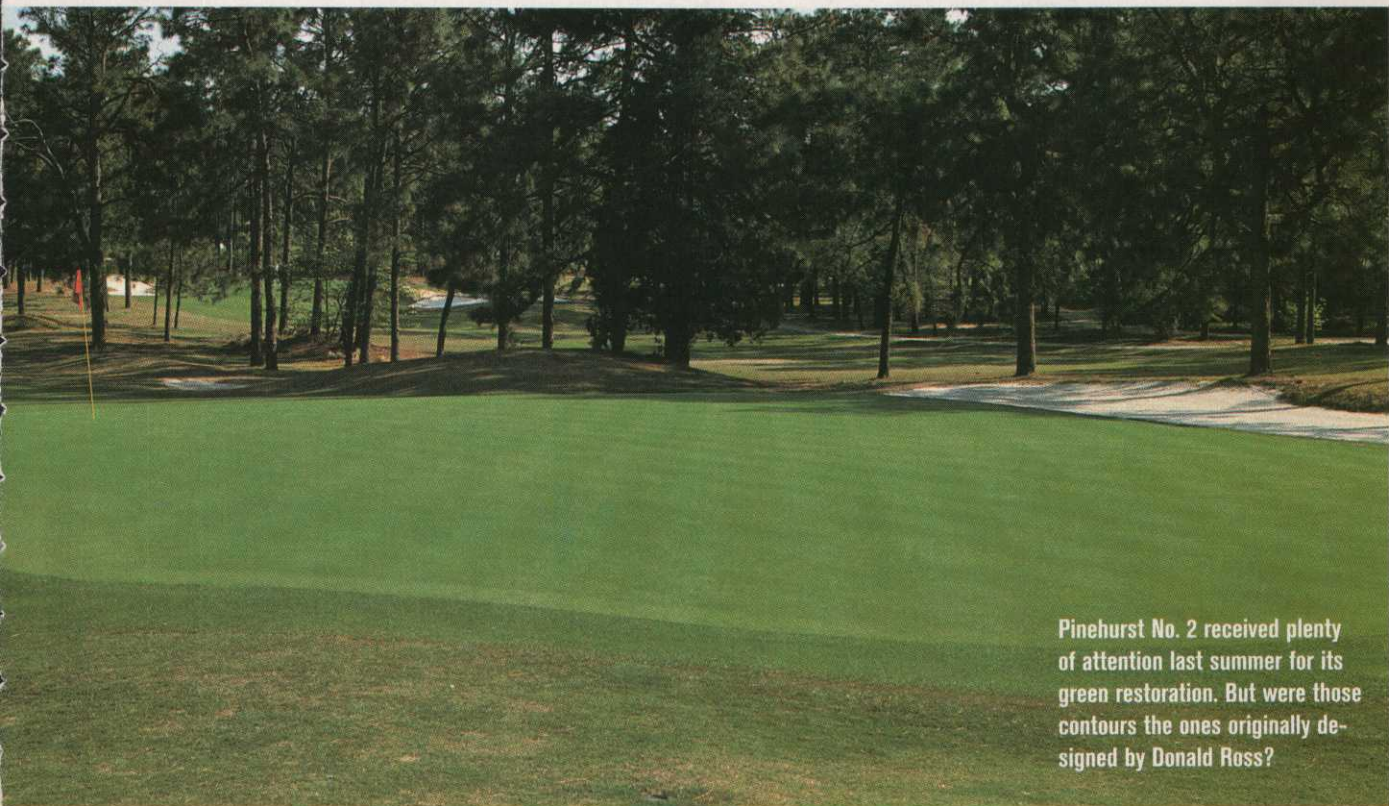
"Not speaking from an architectural standpoint, but from facility management standpoint, the biggest thing I hear about [from members] is green speed," Walker says. "People are very much into maintaining or increasing that speed. Golf today is reaching unrealistic goals for green speed and it really hits home at older courses, where the green contours tend to be more severe.

"We had no intent to change the green contours to accommodate new grasses."

TOM WALKER, Inverness Club

"We had no intent to change the green contours to accommodate new grasses," he says. "That said, I'd rather the industry not demand 11- to 12-foot speeds. We keep raising the bar and going further and further, and it's getting impractical."

That golfers demand 11- to 12-foot roll on modern greens is one thing; similar expectations on restored/regrassed vintage putting surfaces, with their attendant slopes, is quite another. Not all clubs demand this sort of ball roll. Arm-



Pinehurst No. 2 received plenty of attention last summer for its green restoration. But were those contours the ones originally designed by Donald Ross?

MIKE KLEMM

strong says he keeps Merion's greens at 10, with no directives (and few complaints) from the membership.

Williams, for one, believes golfer expectations can be managed. But he also believes there's an important difference between restoring a green's integrity and its purity.

"There's no question that when you deal with the new bentgrass varieties, it creates certain challenges for golfers and superintendents. We have a couple 6 percent slopes [at LACC], and it's more than most players can deal with," says Williams, who sees still more irony in the notion of "original" contours. "But if you have greens that have been topdressed over the course for 70 to 80 years, the chance that you've got 'original' contours isn't very good. Front to back, maybe. But internally, no chance."

Pinehurst No. 2 received scads of attention last summer for its green restoration, yet no one in any position of authority — at Pinehurst or the USGA — will seriously argue that those green contours (the ones so meticulously preserved during the regrassing) were the contours laid out by The Original Donald. For starters, the greens at No. 2 had been regrassed several times prior to 1996, and that process can alter contours considerably without the use of digital aids or the supreme commitment to maintain it. There's also the combined effect of topdressing over the course for 50 years.

Whether contours are truly "original" or whether restorations can plausibly yield something close to original is subject to debate.

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Robert Trent Jones, adding the double bunkers to the left of the 18th fairway by George Cobb (1966), filling the pond in front of the No. 6 green (1959), re-design of the 8th green (1956) and (1979), and on and on. I'm having a difficult time deciding what year to return Augusta when I will undoubtedly be asked to restore it.

Continuity keys success

I don't recommend that many changes or that many architects, but Augusta operates much like the English clubs, as described by Donald Ross. These clubs have "club secretaries" who look after the club on a long-term basis and nothing is done without their oversight. Like the club secretaries, Roberts was the glue or continuity that held Augusta together.

I attended the Memorial Tournament at Jack Nicklaus' outstanding golf course, Muirfield Village GC in 1999. To my surprise, I learned that Jack had rebuilt the 8th through 14th

Having defended restoration, it must be said that such work does bring up a lot of legitimate questions.

green complexes in 1997 and 1998 and had added and repositioned many fairway bunkers. Practically all of the greenside bunkers were deepened. What a great improvement to a course most golfers would have guessed needed no improvement. The truth be known, Jack has continually tweaked Muirfield since its completion in the mid 1970's — not unlike Ross did at Pinehurst. When Muirfield is restored 50 years from now, what year do you choose to return it?

Muirfield and Augusta National are just two of the fine old golf courses that have been tweaked over the years.

All of us could name a dozen others that have changed, and quite often the changes are what propelled the courses to fame.

Architect Ed Seay uses the expression, "It's just a golf course" — and he's right. We're all guilty of thinking that who we are or what we are doing is much more important than it is. When we have groups declaring that courses are shrines, they are dealing more with emotion than reality. As much as I love golf, golf courses, golf course architecture and Donald Ross, I try to keep them in perspective. The things that I hold reverent are not related to golf.

Golf courses are living entities that either get better or get worse. If your course is not constantly being improved, it's going backwards. Certainly, this does not imply you should constantly be changing your course on the whims of the green chairman or club president — or an architect for that matter. If your course meets the criteria and demands of the membership, no person should tell you to be unhappy with it. What it

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It's probably more instructive to note that No. 2's post-restoration green contours — original or altered over time — remain severe by any standard (just ask John Daly). And here's the bottom line: The USGA had those greens Stimping at 10.5 for the 1999 U.S. Open, and Jett's crew have them rolling that much slower for normal resort and member play. That's called restoring your integrity.

Flashback another 12 months to June 1998: It's the third round of the U.S. Open at San Francisco's Olympic Club. Arms crossed and lips pursed, a stoic Payne Stewart watches his uphill putt on 18 fall short, make a U-turn, then roll back down the hill and onto the apron. An example of green pitch (6 percent, according to Moraghan) made absurd by modern turfgrass, right? Well, sort of. It just so happens that Olympic had *not* restored/regrassed its venerable poa annua putting surfaces prior to the '98 Open. Just imagine the scenario had the 18th at Olympic featured one of the new bentgrass varieties cut to 5/64s of an inch.

One wonders whether Willie Watson could imagine it when he designed Olympic's finishing hole back in 1924. ■

Hal Phillips is a freelance writer from the backwoods of Maine.



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