



## Oconomowoc GC looks to restore Donald Ross character

By Rick Pledl

*Editor's note: Maybe this column should be called From Down The Road for this issue since it is about one of only two Donald Ross golf courses in Wisconsin-Oconomowoc GC. The article originally appeared in Volume 9, No. 4, August 1997 issue of Wisconsin Golf, and it appears here with permission of John Hughes, editor of that excellent monthly magazine devoted to golf in Wisconsin. Rick Pledl is the associate editor.*

Craig Schreiner was hired as golf course architect for the project. He is one of only a small number of golf course architects who holds degrees in turfgrass management (Ohio State University-Wooster in 1974) and landscape architecture (Oregon State University in 1975). He also prepared himself for a golf course design career by working for Wadsworth Golf Construction and for architects Don Sechrest (1985-1988) and Dr. Mike Hurdzan before forming Schreiner Design in 1990.

Donald Ross, who emigrated to Boston in 1899 from his native Scotland, was the most prolific and prominent golf course architect of the first half of the 20th century. Although he died in 1948, he continues to cast a long shadow in the world of golf course design. Several of his works, including courses at Pinehurst CC in North Carolina which brought him early fame, are still considered among the best courses in the U.S.

The Donald Ross Society has recognized 412 courses in the U.S. and Canada as being Ross designs, but, as a testament to his continuing popularity among golf traditionalists, numerous other clubs across the continent claim they too have courses that were designed by Ross.

That's why golf course architect, and self-described "Rossian," Craig Schreiner was skeptical when first contacted by Oconomowoc GC, one of just two Wisconsin courses designed by Ross (the other is Kenosha CC). His skepticism lasted as long as it took him to get to Oconomowoc.

Upon arriving, Schreiner said he realized Ross' imprint on the land was "pretty well unblemished." But in the 80

years since the course was built, the architect's features had grown fuzzy. Eight decades worth of maintenance reduced the size of greens and the depth, shape and severity of bunkers. And various committees over the years planted trees and removed bunkers in their attempts to improve on Ross' design.

Or, as Oconomowoc GC superintendent Harvey Miller said: "The course was starting to look tired. Over the years, the trees were planted at random without any real thought involving shots and especially no insight into when the tree grows up."

Now Oconomowoc GC has hired Schreiner to put things back the way they were, or at the very least, return the course's original character. It's a task Schreiner is familiar with, having carved out a niche for himself in the design business as a Ross expert. Oconomowoc GC is the seventh Ross course he's worked on, including 1995 Ryder Cup site Oak Hill CC.

Schreiner completed a master plan in 1995 which laid out the changes he wanted to make at Oconomowoc GC

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and which would also act as a blueprint for future maintenance procedures. Then he convinced the club membership, with more than a little difficulty initially, to install a state-of-the-art double row irrigation system.

Now members are starting to see more tangible results on the course. Specifically, Schreiner is increasing the size of the greens, which shrunk as a result of decades of mowing. Putting surfaces will be enlarged by about 30 percent around the course, bringing back some of Ross' most strategic pin placements and also reducing stress on the greens. And fairway lines are being returned to their original shapes.

While trees are being removed and bunkers replaced—Schreiner uses Ross' original plans, like those hanging in the bar at the club, and old photographs when available—there are situations that call for slight deviations from the original.

Schreiner sometimes has to make a judgment call, in particular, because equipment is so different than it was in Ross' day. But we're not talking titanium drivers here, the equipment that has influenced Oconomowoc GC the most is what's used by the staff. Ross created steep greens on Nos. 6 and 9, for instance, but greens are cut shorter—and, therefore, are faster—today than Ross would ever have imagined. As a result, those two greens will probably be rebuilt to lessen their severity.

"We're going to keep the same principle there; people really aren't going to know the green has changed when

we get done," Schreiner said. "We're just going to lessen the slopes, keep them somewhat steep in today's standards so that the character is still there that Ross wanted."

Changes will also be made to several tees because playing conditions have changed so dramatically since the course was built in 1915. In those days, players could count on considerable roll on their drives because fairways were often rock-hard.

Today's fairways are softer thanks to irrigation improvements, which has created a situation where Oconomowoc GC plays to a par of 70 from the back tees and 73 from the forward tees. Schreiner will move up some of the forward tees and make par 70 all around.

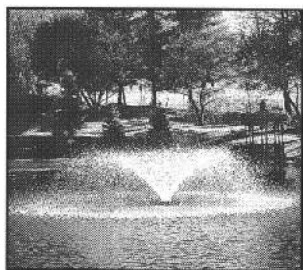
So far, four holes have been redone, and Schreiner hopes to do five more this fall.

Asked to explain why Ross is still held in such high esteem almost 50 years after his death, Schreiner says there are three reasons, and they appeal to players and course designers alike.

First, Ross' courses are fair and playable to golfers of all abilities, and secondly, he never fought natural contours; he worked with them.

Finally, Ross is revered for the wonderful contours he built into greens. His courses require skill with the putter. "You'll never find Ross greens that are just flat and round," Schreiner said. "He never did it because nature never did it." ♣

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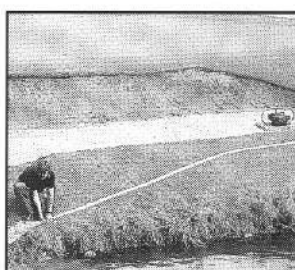
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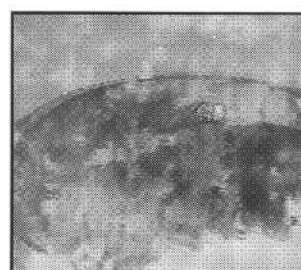
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