



The Pitch for Preservation

MAKING A CASE FOR GOLF COURSE RESTORATIONS

By W. Dunlop White III

Walker Taylor IV operates a family owned insurance agency in Wilmington N.C., but the toughest plan he's ever had to sell was a golf course restoration at Cape Fear Country Club. Taylor concedes that his biggest challenge was cultivating membership support for a restoration.

"It was mostly a timing issue with us," says Taylor. "Some members didn't want to follow too closely behind other capital projects. Others didn't want to shut down our fairways for a year."

In 2005, Taylor, who always considered Cape Fear an historical artifact, helped convince his club to return their 1926 Donald Ross design to the approximate look, shape, and playing character of its original identity. Naturally, the club realized, a Ross design deserves close care and meticulous preservation.

But Cape Fear is not alone, and Donald Ross courses are not the only candidates for preservation. Time-honored clubs throughout the Carolinas are making the same pitch to their memberships on the virtues of classical golf course architecture.

Tradition is a time-acquired asset, which clubs should nurture and exploit. Certainly, a classical golf course is an attraction, but its **authenticity** makes it one of the most **powerful marketing tools** available for clubs today.



EDUCATING THE MEMBERSHIP

Golf courses naturally evolve over time. But memberships need to develop a better understanding of the detrimental impact that Mother Nature — and some past green committees — may have had on *their* golf course.

It's difficult to notice the damage in any one season, but over the course of 80 years, many classical golf courses have lost much of their original design character.

It can be a real eye-opener to the average club member once they are able to visualize the cumulative effect of these transgressions. Historic aerial photographs can be quite revealing, especially when aligned in a chronological sequence for comparison.

Nolan Mills, a member of Charlotte Country Club's architectural committee, arranged a series of aerial overlays — with each page representing a decade.

As Mills flipped through changes to the course over the decades, members immediately recognized that Ross' distinctive cross-bunkers had been abandoned over time, and his spacious fairways had been overrun with secondary tree plantings, hedgerows, and overgrown vegetation.

At Yeamans Hall outside of Charleston, S.C., superintendent, Jim Yonce and former assistant pro, Jeffrey Fraim, collaborated to form an historical account of all man-made hole modifications dating back to famed architect, Seth Raynor.

They color-highlighted and captioned every design feature, distinguishing those that were original from those that had been added or removed through the years. Other rare photographs yielded discoveries that

their greens once possessed square corners with bold internal patterns.

"Before and after" photography also serves as a convincing visual aid for memberships. Here, clubs can demonstrate how run-down, dilapidated bunkers can be cleaned of excessive sand and spray build-up and expanded to their outer clay shells — recapturing original floor depths, shoulder contours, and their intended grass-lined edges.

FINESSING CLUB POLITICS

Because club members are always concerned with course conditioning, it's smart politics to approach restoration plans with the emphasis on producing quality turfgrass.

Rob Wilson, committee chair at the Country Club of Charleston, admits that restoration is an attractive alternative when your fairways and greens suffer.

"Reclaiming healthy playing surfaces was our primary motivation," explains Wilson. "Had we not had agronomic issues, a restoration wouldn't have even been on the table."

Club officials are also better off talking individually to important constituents of the membership, slowly developing a backing throughout the ranks. Architects, consultants, and other guest speakers are better positioned to give PowerPoint presentations before the entire membership. These third-party experts are normally more persuasive, because memberships tend to trust those who don't have a personal interest or agenda in club politics.

Club officials, however, can struggle when addressing their entire membership

in a "Town Hall" setting. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, they usually retreat into a defensive mode from the outset.

In these situations, it is important to show a genuine respect for membership sentiment. Members tend to recoil when club officials make architectural pronouncements — however sound — if they are delivered from a self-conferred perspective.

What's more, Kris Spence, a restoration specialist from Greensboro, N.C., contends that memberships aren't normally interested in what other clubs are doing. Spence has found that memberships respond much better when you show a genuine respect for their particular golf course and their own design history.

Rival clubs are a possible exception. When clubs are competing for prospective members or for higher course rankings, "they usually want to know what their competition is up to," says one anonymous observer. "It's a matter of keeping pace in your market or keeping up with the Joneses next door."

PROMOTING ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Club officials also need to stimulate a greater sense of pride and appreciation for their architectural heritage. There are many tactics to put them in the proper frame of mind.

Roaring Gap Club in Roaring Gap, N.C., for example, armed clubrooms with original field drawings, green sketches, black-and-white photography, newspaper articles, and other Donald Ross memorabilia.

Should a debate ever arise over Ross' intentions, members need only to consult

their own dining room wall — a full-blown copy of the architect's 1925 routing plan hangs there.

Other clubs convert revealing aerial photographs into informal placemats for members to examine before meals. Still others reserve a historical page in their monthly bulletins for commentaries and perspectives of yesteryear.

Old Town Club in Winston-Salem, N.C., commemorated their architect, Perry Maxwell, by commissioning a renowned artist to paint oil renderings of his noted golf holes throughout the country.

Today, the member's bar resembles a museum, boasting famous landscapes of Prairie Dunes, Crystal Downs, Augusta, and Pine Valley. And just in case anyone misses the point, the feature painting hanging over the fireplace across from a charcoal portrait of Perry Maxwell is Old Town's own 12th green.

THE ECONOMICS OF TRADITION

Club members too often underestimate the value of tradition and heritage. Tradition is a time-acquired asset, which clubs should nurture and exploit. Certainly, a classical golf course is an attraction, but its authenticity makes it one of the most powerful marketing tools available for clubs today.

Donald Ross, for instance, is a brand name of great reverence. Ross left behind an impressive legacy of 418 courses, where 100-plus USGA national championships have been played.

Today, 25 Ross thoroughbreds are ranked in *Golfweek's* "Top 100 Classical Courses," many of which gained this fanfare following a thoughtful restoration.

Golf course restorations also enable clubs to raise initiation fees and enjoy a full membership. Case in point: Carolina Golf Club in Charlotte, N.C., which passed a four-phase restoration plan in April 2005.

"Since that announcement, we've raised initiation fees from \$9,000 to \$16,000," says club president, B.T. Atkinson. "We believe our restoration was a major contributing

factor for all 112 members who have joined in the last eighteen months."

Today, Carolina GC has reached its cap of 550 members — and boasts a short waiting list, a telltale sign that the golf club is thriving.

"This phenomenon has been well documented at many other Ross venues around the country," says Michael Fay, executive director of the Donald Ross Society. "Raleigh Country Club (NC) once faced an uncertain future, but has prospered on the heels of a Ross restoration," he says.

More recently, Sedgefield Country Club in Greensboro, N.C., was able to attract 50-plus new members just on the promise of new Ross beginnings.

Fay also cautions that there are numerous examples where drastic modernizations have had the opposite impact. This strongly implies that tradition still has dominance and relevance in the modern-day marketplace. Small wonder clubs throughout the Carolinas are buying into classical golf course restoration and fortifying their "brand names."

PLAYING THE CLASSICS

The best tactic may be to take a reluctant member on a visit to a restored course.

Ron Prichard, a restoration specialist who will break ground at Charlotte Country Club this spring, believes that classical golf architecture best sells itself. He claims that you can never fully explain to memberships the magic of these grand old classics, no matter how hard you try.

"You can speak of generous fairways, optional lines of play, meaningful bunkers, and undulating putting surfaces — which are fearsome to putt and awe-inspiring to study. But classical architecture is more than the sum of these elements," claims Prichard. "The magic must be experienced and felt first hand."

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Behind Every Great Course ...

One way the Carolinas Golf Foundation helps Carolinas courses is by funding turfgrass management scholarships. Many Carolinas golf course superintendents — key players in a course restoration project — come from Clemson University and North Carolina State University, two top recipients of CGF scholarship grants.

North Carolina State grad David Bibler, now the course superintendent at the recently remodeled Sedgefield CC in Greensboro, N.C., is a prime example.

Bibler first worked on a golf course at age 14. After high school, he drifted away from the course, but discovered he missed his early days. He entered horticulture school at age 26, and worked at NC State's field center to offset costs.

The school's faculty was aware of his financial hardship and his desire to work. They helped him get a CGF scholarship (among three he acquired). He also worked at Prestonwood CC in Raleigh, N.C., to assure lunch money.

After graduating in 1991, he worked on the maintenance staff at MacGregor Downs CC in Cary, N.C. He has been superintendent at Sedgefield CC for more than a decade.

Until the recent course renovation, Bibler maintained the high-profile course on a somewhat smaller budget. "I wanted to keep within the Donald Ross design philosophy," he says. "I want hard and fast greens and to maintain Ross' style."

— Michael Dann

David Bibler

