



[de]CONSTRUCTION ZONE

TREE REMOVAL IS RETURNING OLD-SCHOOL COURSES BACK TO THEIR ROOTS

By Dunlop White III

The removal has emerged as the most significant trend in golf course restoration today. And courses throughout the Carolinas are sharpening up their saws in an attempt to recapture their architectural heritage.

The trend has its roots at Pennsylvania's historic Oakmont Country Club. Shortly after hosting the 1994 U.S. Open, the club began a 10-year tree removal program. The club's green chairman, Mark Studer, couldn't drop trees any faster; he had to tread lightly.

While members were home asleep, a small squadron convened regularly before dawn, armed with high-powered spotlights and a battalion of 20-inch chainsaws. Chippers, stump grinders, vacuums and fresh sod were all brought along to tidy up the mess. As they cut deeper through the impinging hardwoods, Studer rediscovered the innate beauty of Henry Fownes' 1903 masterpiece — long before the membership noticed any transgressions.

"If Fownes returned today, his comment might be — what's all the fuss, it looks like it did when I was last here," says Studer. "Through old, black-and-white photographs, we simply acted as the custodians and caretakers of his legacy, an agenda our membership would never have supported at the outset."

As a critical part of their long-range restoration plan, Oakmont — site of the 2007 U.S. Open and home of 13 USGA national championships — removed more than 4,500 trees, leaving only a handful of specimens standing. Today, Oakmont serves as a bastion of tradition for all clubs attempting to reclaim their architectural heritage. Dozens of America's most treasured venues — including Winged Foot, Shinnecock, Olympic and Baltusrol — have followed suit, clearing away decades of tree plantings and overgrowth.

THE CUTTING EDGE

Proponents of tree removal at North Carolina's most distinguished Donald Ross designs point toward Oakmont for inspiration as they embark upon judicious tree management plans.

Instead of indiscriminately cutting, numerous club officials across the Tarheel state have made the short pilgrimage to the

Tuft's Archives, the Donald Ross repository in the village of Pinehurst, to uncover rare photographic evidence that reveals exactly how their courses looked when they first opened.

"We maintain more than 7,000 documents of more than 300 Ross courses," says archivist Audrey Moriarty, who catalogs all artifacts — including original green sketches, routing plans, field drawings and business records — relating to the legendary Scottish-born architect.

In addition to the Tuft's Archives, the United States Department of Agriculture operates natural resources, soil and water-conservation agencies in local counties throughout each state, which typically house collections of historic overhead photographs.

"This is another valuable source," says Michael Fay, executive director of the Donald Ross Society. "Just look — Ross courses were never stuffed with vegetation," he says while examining a 1939 aerial of Roaring Gap Club in Roaring Gap, N.C.

It's not a coincidence that many Ross layouts were once fallow and barren. Ross once wrote, "...as beautiful as trees are, we must not lose sight of the fact that there is a limited place for them in golf." Classical architects like Ross were influenced by The Old Course and links golf in Scotland, so they naturally embraced open, windswept landscapes as ideal sites in America. If woodland areas were marked for construction, the clearing plans were generally spacious and wide.

A GROWING CONCERN

As golf courses have evolved, it's hard to determine which have been more damaging — newly planted saplings or mature hardwoods that have outgrown their welcome. Oddly enough, trees have a peculiar habit of growing larger — far more expansively than their planters ever envisioned. It's difficult to notice during any one season, but over the course of 70 years, some hole corridors have lost nearly half of their intended playing areas.

The problem escalated over several decades. In the 1970s, club officials began planting heaps of ornamental saplings in virtually



every open space on golf courses as part of a nationwide beautification measure. In the 1980s, the contention was for safety between holes, as awareness of liability escalated. Thousands more trees took root in the 1990s as part of a widespread movement to “toughen” courses and defend par.

Nowadays, countless golf holes are simply too narrow, as trees tend to choke fairways from both sides. Unfortunately, good shots are restricted to the dead center of play. As a result, golf can no longer be approached like the game of billiards — where the lateral angle of the first shot is chosen with the diagonal of the next shot in mind. Strategy is all but lost when alternative angles of approach are straightjacketed by runaway tree plantings and unchecked vegetation.

JUST A TRIM, PLEASE

Golf architect Richard Mandell, who has been commissioned to revive the Donald Ross flavor at Raleigh Country Club, plans to move a few hundred ill-advised plantings just off the sides of fairways. “Most of the tree work here will involve thinning out the edges,” he says.

Kris Spence couldn’t agree more. “Tree removal helps re-establish preferred lines of play along the outer perimeter of golf holes,” says the Ross restoration specialist from nearby Greensboro, N.C. Spence has reinstated broader fairway widths at Roaring Gap, Mimosa Hills in Morganton, Grove Park in Asheville, and Gaston Country Club in Gastonia.

“Because memberships are more concerned with course conditioning than with strategic shot values, it’s always smart politics to approach tree removal with the emphasis on growing healthy turf,” says Spence. “You don’t need to go any further than your own backyard to see how grass suffers near trees. Their canopies and foliage screen air circulation and conceal essential morning sunlight. Plus, trees are dominant plants to grass, and when competing for nutrients and water, trees will invariably win.”

CHAINSAWS: A HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE

Last summer, when Pine Needles Lodge and Golf Club in Southern Pines re-grassed their fairways with an innovative turfgrass called TifSport Bermuda, golf course architect John Fought also removed several hundred towering pines. Even if the best grasses in the world were planted, it would still be hard to grow anything without sunlight and air, according to club president, Kelly Miller.

After all, shade and damp areas go hand-in-hand. Without six hours of unfettered sunlight each day, critical turf areas cannot properly dry. Moist turf attracts diseases, which must be chemically

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treated with herbicides and fungicides. Too often, a chainsaw is the better remedy.

During the winter, trees also block precious sunlight, which prolongs ice coverage and delays

thawing. The end result is winterkill. Evergreens are too often the culprits, as they don’t lose their dense leaf material that shields the low-lying winter sun.

Evergreens also possess low-extending limbs that interfere with golf swings and stymie fair opportunities for recovery. Golfers are simply forced to punch the ball laterally out of harm’s way.

“Recovery play is much more thought-provoking from wooded areas that have been selectively thinned of these low-branched species,” says Spence, who ordinarily recommends a program of cleaning out the underbrush and raising tree canopies to a reasonable height. Under these conditions, golfers may assess the risk of their next angle of attack and, depending upon their skill, may shape the ball through alternative openings to safety.

ROOM FOR A VIEW

Tree removal can also expose signature trees. Removing dense undergrowth and unattractive neighbors can bring hidden trees back into prominence.

Extracting cheap varieties from the interiors of courses also has a remarkable impact on aesthetics. “Golfers are usually astonished with the beauty of distant site-lines that can be uncovered through a well-thought-out plan of tree removal,” says Spence, adding that more clubs should embrace the appeal of long, sweeping vistas.

Bradley Klein, a prominent golf course consultant, contends that a tree’s capacity to screen is best suited for the perimeter of the premises, to partition the course from outside structures and distracting noise. Klein, author of the award-winning biography, *Discovering Donald Ross*, acknowledges that there are proper places for trees in golf. “Trees are fine if they don’t shade or compete with crucial turf areas, or if they don’t lead to vertical walls that turn golf holes into one-dimensional bowling lanes. Ultimately, trees should complement the dominant function of the site, which is to enable golf to take place.”

Thanks to Oakmont — the leader in the clubhouse — tree management has emerged as an essential component of golf course restoration. And as noted architects re-evaluate how various species interact with their surroundings to impact course strategy, agronomy and aesthetics, golfers in the Carolinas and beyond will benefit.

W. Dunlop White III is a Winston-Salem based writer on issues of golf course architecture.