Beware the *Restorer*

by Tom Doak

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You can't read about any new golf course today without its designer paying homage to the masters of the profession -- Ross, MacKenzie, Tillinghast, et al. My own exposure to some of their courses as a youth was what compelled me to enter the profession.

As I've traveled around to study the work of these master architects, I've learned how little has been left intact. Famous courses are especially likely to have received plastic surgery, but even the most unpretentious of old courses have been altered. And I'm not talking aging. I mean deliberate redesign -- removing fairway bunkers here [because they're *too penal*, or *out of play*] and adding others there, *softening* greens, adding new tees, adding ponds, planting trees.

Let's restore them, you say. Whoa!, I say.

Most of the so-called *restorations* I've seen are no more than further redesign, based on the new architect's interpretation of the original designer's style. Some are better than others, but too often the suggestions are driven by the need to create work and justify the consulting fee, or to please a green committee which has its own agenda. I see a two or three million dollar *restoration* the same way you'd be suspicious if an art restorer approached the Mona Lisa with two ten-gallon cans of Sears Latex.

The most important first step in restoration should be to preserve everything one can which hasn't already been altered. Make the golf architect document what has been done to the course over time and what was there originally, and argue like hell about changing anything. So many Ross bunkers have already been destroyed that we shouldn't rationalize away those that are left, whether or not they *come into play* for the green chairman.

The second step in restoration is to implement what I call *non-invasive* procedures -- those things which don't require the earth to be disturbed. Just changing the mowing lines of fairways and greens to the original widths can return much of the strategy of holes and recover interesting *wing* pin placements on the greens, and a qualified architect will identify these lost areas in a single visit. Personally, I consider the removal of trees to be non-invasive, if the trees were planted after the original design.

The third step in a true restoration is to obtain the best documentation possible for anything to be restored. The original plans for many old courses have been unearthed -- many of Ross' are stored in the Tufts Archives in Pinehurst. But it's crucial to understand that in most cases these plans aren't *as-builts*, and in many cases they were never followed to the letter. Indeed, on my courses it's the deviations from the plans which I make in the field which are the purest examples of my work, and I'd venture to say it was the same for Donald Ross. Thus, actual photographs of the course taken just after

completion are the best source of information on the actual finished product. Many county planning departments or the National Archives have vintage aerial photos on file to help determine bunker placement, but you need old photos taken from the golfer's perspective to really capture the look of the course. And record the recollections of your longest-standing members before it's too late -- much was lost when course maintenance funds were cut back during World War II, and it won't be long before there's no one around to remember the prewar layout.

Once you've taken the three steps above, then you can determine if it's wise or futile to proceed with further work on the course. Put your faith in someone who will devote their attention to your course. All of us revere Ross, MacKenzie, Tillinghast, and even Pete Dye, precisely because they didn't do cookie-cutter designs -- each of their best courses has its own character. So you don't want any architect or contractor who says he knows how to build a *Ross bunker,* as if they were all alike, or who would put Pinehurst #2 style greens and chipping areas at Inverness or Oak Hill. And, although I know that clubs are much more secure with detailed plans and firm construction bids, in rebuilding features I believe it's essential to have the designer on-site to eyeball the subtleties during construction, because that's how they were built the first time.

The most ironic aspect of *restoration* is that while every architect uses the word to sell his work, very few of us actually believe it's what we're doing. Some are honest enough to admit that it's an impossible assignment without documentation we seldom have; but others really believe that major changes are necessary to counter golf-ball technology or eliminate blind shots, in line with modern design theories. Those may be valid arguments, but not under the guise of *restoration.* When pressed, these designers start backsliding with rationalizations that "Ross would have designed things differently if he were here today," but how do they know? Ross and MacKenzie were always right on top of the latest equipment technology for building courses, but they weren't slaves to using it.

Yet others are too honest -- like Ed Seay, who argued at a recent presentation for the GCSAA that it was silly to preserve Donald Ross' work because he "only visited 10 percent of the courses under his name," as Ellis Maples told Seay. Well, Ross didn't run the mule teams much, but the vast majority of his courses were designed from his field notes and supervised by a trusted, trained associate -- as much or more than most modern architects' input on their *signature* courses today. Some guys also forget that since Ross wasn't regrading 150 acres to build his courses, he could focus his time on the details of bunkers and greens.

I do not believe that every golf course ought to be restored. Only a few have been jealously preserved, and they include some of the game's greatest venues -- like St. Andrews, Pine Valley, and Shinnecock Hills. Some, like Oak Hill, Inverness, or Bel Air, are more interested in championships or fashion than history; a few of these, such as Muirfield, Augusta National, or Olympic, are clearly superior to what they began with. Many courses have been changed too much for restoration to be practical; and some pieces of land will never yield a good course no matter what you do.

I'd like to see the role of the Donald Ross Society evolve to help determine where courses fall in that spectrum, rather than let competing golf architects try to sell their own take on

the subject of restoration, because there are more great salesmen than great desingers among our ranks. Modern golf architecture should be all the proof you need.