

Donald Ross – Establishes Design Theories in Diary

This is another chapter on the life and career of Donald Ross, the man who designed the golf course for Monroe Golf Club. He is credited with the design of almost 400 courses.

Hired by founder James Tufts, Donald Ross arrived at the Pinehurst resort in North Carolina in the winter of 1901 to oversee all golf activities. Things were all happening very quickly for a man who had come from Scotland only 2 years before. The 5 golf courses that Ross would ultimately design at Pinehurst became his largest single legacy of a brilliant career. At Pinehurst, Ross grew in many other ways as well. He spotted early the attraction of the game to families and was a pioneer supporter of women's access to golf. He encouraged and developed programs at Pinehurst to appeal to women players. His Pinehurst #3 course was one of the first with forward tees for women. In addition, Pinehurst created one of the first women's golf associations, which they called the Silver Foils.

But it was the freedom he enjoyed at Pinehurst that enabled Ross to experiment and hone his craft as an architect. At Pinehurst, he learned about the variety of grasses and which produced the best growth, the importance of drainage to a course; and the general feel for the sequence and routing of the holes. Good routing was most important to Ross and became his signature. Ross understood that individual holes could be changed over the years but once the routing of a course was established and the greens located, the sequence would likely remain that way for as long as they played the course.

Ross kept a diary during these early years that was not discovered until 1996. He wrote about everything, from the importance of good drainage to such overlooked details as where to locate the clubhouse when you laid out a course. Some excerpts:

On the course routing: *“Do not make the line of fairway always straight from tee to green. Add interest by swinging it a bit to the right or the left. Zigzag the holes. Three consecutive holes going in the same directions are far from desirable. In fact, it is monotonous. Having to contend with wind from different directions adds zest to the game.”*

On Drainage: *“Get this fact firmly in your mind: drainage—careful, thorough, drainage is the vital element in any putting green. Only well drained land will produce satisfactory turf for golfing purposes.”*

On bunkers: *“There is not such thing as a misplaced bunker. Regardless of where it may be, it is the business of the player to avoid it.”*

On Par 3's: *“Because everyone starts with the same advantage of teeing up the ball in a spot of their own choosing with a level lie and a level stance, it makes sense to me to make a par 3 somewhat more difficult”*

On the shape of your property: *“One of the desirable shapes for a piece of golf property is that of a fan. It gives you the opportunity to place your clubhouse in the center or handle of the fan and lay out two loops of nine holes each on either side of the handle. The 1st tee, the 9th green, the 10th tee and the 18th green are then all right in front of the handle near the clubhouse. You can play 9 holes without cutting in on other players. When the course is crowded, players can be started on either tee #1 or #10, which greatly relieves congestion. This layout affords another rather pleasant feature, as members can stop after 9 and have refreshments.”*

On the ideal course: *“The ideal course presents a test of golf both for the everyday player and first class player. My aim is to bring out of the players the best golf that is in them. It will be difficult to negotiate some of my holes but that is what golf is for. It is both a mental and an eye test. Hazards and bunkers are placed so as to force you to use both good judgment and mental control in making the correct shot.”*

It is almost as if Ross had Monroe in his mind when he wrote these thoughts years before he came to Pittsford. They remind us that the features we love at Monroe are not just a happy accident, but rather the result of the careful work of Donald Ross, his thoughtful observations and attention to such details.

Next: Ross becomes in great demand during a booming era of golf. From 1908 to 1922 he designs over 185 courses in 23 states and develops into a brand name among golfers.