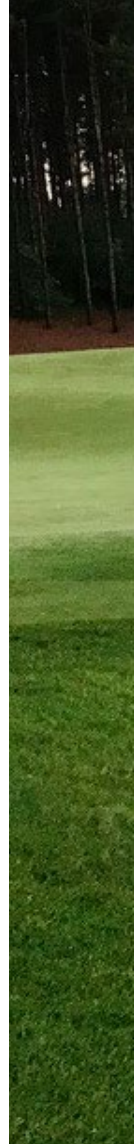
History in the making



Golf clubs with a rich heritage may favor a restorative approach to their courses. But, asks Richard Humphreys, can a design from the past accommodate the game played today and in the future?

Working on a layout that is steeped in history can be just as rewarding for a golf course architect as creating a new design of their own.

As living organisms with features that have a finite effective lifetime, even our most cherished layouts from the past will require some attention, from time to time. And while faithful restoration may seem the obvious approach to a Donald Ross masterpiece, for example, how can a course design from 100 years ago present a worthy challenge today?

"There is hardly ever a bona fide opportunity or warranted need to completely restore a golf course in the truest sense of the word," says Drew Rogers, ASGCA. "If we are to interpret the past quite literally, that may mean that the course had hardly any trees, much wider fairways, no cart paths, no practice area, bolder bunkers and features, and stronger strategic options. So, more appropriately, the architect needs to evaluate what aspects of the past continue to be relevant now and into the future – and whether they should be expressed in the same or different way.

"Most courses are now experienced by golfers of a wider range of ability, so we have to determine how the past design intent can be evolved and translated authentically, but in ways that provide enjoyment for a broader spectrum of players."

Developing a balance

"Do we reference the past in our work?" asks Rogers. "Certainly. Do we sometimes channel some of the specific design intent that may have eroded over time or was misinterpreted by past influences? Yes. We sometimes identify aspects that may have made it distinctive at some point – or may still do today – and that may play a large part in reclaiming aspects of the historic identity of a course.

"It's vital for historic venues to understand who they are and value their history, but they also have to go forward and acknowledge that not everything can stay the same. It goes without saying that golf courses are going



Photo: Andy Johnson, The Fried Egg

The course at Pine Hills CC in Wisconsin was originally laid out almost 100 years ago

to continue to evolve whether we want them to or not."

Often the most difficult conversations relate to trees. Rogers says: "The realities caused by misguided tree plantings and uncontrolled maturity can wreck a golf course, to the point that building better tees and greens becomes irrelevant if there's not enough space for those elements to exist, or for the game to be played as the design was intended."

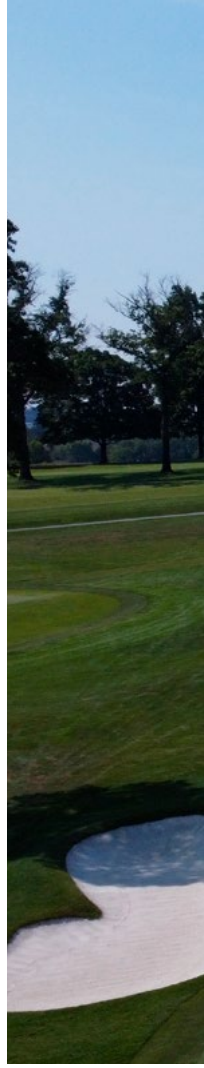
Rogers has recently completed two projects in the Midwest where tree management was crucial. "Both were cluttered by tree growth so that the intended architectural strategies were no longer possible," he says. "The proper scale of the holes was entirely compromised. We had to open them back up to reclaim basic design elements – all the details that those Golden Age architects were so intent on producing in their work deadline."

"We knew we had features that were unique and needed to be preserved, notably our greens," says Keith Robel, course improvement committee chair at Pine Hills Country Club in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, one of Rogers' clients. "If they were going to be largely untouched, the feel of the course would remain, but a renovation could highlight their unique character, the quality of the land and overall playability."

Tree removal has also helped to connect the course - originally laid out in 1928 - with the clubhouse. "The clubhouse is at the center of the property," says Robel. "It is the quintessential clubhouse on the hill, overlooking a good portion of the

"Golf courses are going to continue to evolve whether we want them to or not"





Forse Golf Design is restoring Hugh Alison's design intent at Kirtland CC in Ohio

layout, so opening vistas – to and from the clubhouse – connects the property as it was intended."

At Knollwood Club in Lake Forest, Illinois,which has a Hugh Alison design, Rogers has overseen tree removal to return Alison's original scale and width, reintroducing playing strategies that haven't existed for decades. Two green complexes have been rebuilt, forward tees have been added and some bunkers have been relocated.

"Although having an Alison bunker style was important for the club, playability was of paramount importance," says superintendent Drew Barnett. "Drew struck a balance by raising bunker floors, improving shot angles from forward tee locations and relocating a few to reflect the distance the modern ball travels."

Rogers says: "It's all about developing a balance of old and new. Unlike an original painting, a golf course is expressed through years and years of influence and adaptation – a living piece of history. It isn't fixed with hard edges and its elements won't live for 100 years. Our goal is to sensibly preserve as much of an expression as we deem appropriate with our clients."

Restoring the intent

"By restoring design intent, we are less inclined to impose our own will on a course, but rather relocate features consistent with the original design," says Jim Nagle, ASGCA, of Forse Golf Design. "What is always important to consider when relocating bunkers, mounds or ditches, is that the land allows for the relocation without making the features appear forced. The introduction of shortgrass around greens is another way to introduce creativity and variety for classic courses, with large, broadly contoured shortgrass areas the most suited."

Nagle is working on the William Flynn-designed course at Philadelphia CC, which in 2026 will co-host medal play with Merion for the US Amateur. The front nine has been rebuilt in 2023 and the back nine follows in 2024.

"Flynn wrote in the lead up to the 1939 US Open, hosted by PCC, that the club needed lengthening and features relocated or added to combat the ever-changing equipment and the new physical and mental capabilities of the modern golfer," says Nagle.



Photo: Forse Golf Design

"In the case of Lancaster and most Golden Age courses, the layout and club heritage are inextricably combined," says Rory Connaughton, greens chairman at Lancaster CC in Pennsylvania

"These are the very same issues we as architects are challenged with today."

Nagle has completed work at nearby Lancaster Country Club, another Flynn design, which is hosting next year's Women's US Open Championship. "In the case of Lancaster and most Golden Age courses, the layout and club heritage are inextricably combined," says Rory Connaughton, greens chairman at Lancaster. "These are clubs that came into existence on the strength of the pre-1930s golf boom. They survived the Great Depression and then wars and social upheaval on the strength of their courses and golf culture. Without brilliant architecture that would not have happened.

"The job of the successor architect is to ensure that the connection between course and club heritage is maintained or restored. Clubs that define their identity by their stewardship of Golden Age works of art have stood the test of time and will be there for generations to come."

Strategies for adapting Golden Age courses to modern play include relocating bunkers and extending tees, while history can be recaptured by expanding greens and widening corridors. "Each plays a role in the restoration of key strategic elements of a course," says Nagle. "Angles off tees and into greens are paramount when working with a classic course. Expanding greens to the perimeter can recapture hole locations not utilized for many decades. Widening fairways and expanding greens does not translate into easier golf, rather it makes the round more interesting."

"In the case of most Golden Age courses, the layout and club heritage are inextricably combined"

At Kirtland Country Club near Cleveland, Ohio, Nagle is restoring Alison's design intent. "Alison was a master router, and one who used fairway bunkering to a minimum when compared to his peers," says Nagle. "He often angled greens so that golfers had to choose the correct position to approach the



Photo: Nathan Crace

Nathan Crace, ASGCA, has preserved the classic feel at Colonial CC in Memphis, while also making changes to ensure the course remains a challenge

green or they might find themselves in a rather deep greenside bunker.

"He used tasteful restraint when placing fairway bunkers, but the canted and large putting surfaces require an approach that enters the green on the proper angle. Kirtland is not short on wide fairways, treacherous greens and massive, deep greenside bunkers."

Mark Petzing, general manager at Kirtland, says: "Looking through old pictures, Alison's design consisted of high, flash-faced bunkers that create a visually stunning scene. And with today's members wanting consistent playing conditions from bunkers, Jim has been able to use thoughtful creativity and technological advancements to create an experience that is appealing and strategic."



Photo: Colonial Country Club

Colonial's general manager Billy Goodnight says "the club is enriched in history"

A singular vision

Nathan Crace, ASGCA, has completed what he calls a 'restor-vation' at Colonial Country Club in Memphis, Tennessee. "Over the last 10 years, the club used multiple contractors to renovate some bunkers and greens, but they never hired an architect to pull together one singular vision. The work that was completed back then was disjointed and the course felt like a patchwork quilt."





Photo: City of Boston Collections

Willie Campbell's course in Boston's Franklin Park was laid out in 1894 (pictured from 1903) and redesigned by Donald Ross in 1922

Billy Goodnight, general manager at Colonial, says: "We wanted to ensure that the classic feel of the layout was preserved during the renovation. The course has a good reputation as a tough but fair layout and we didn't want to lose that. We kept the integrity of the course in the forefront rather than making changes that would jeopardize its reputation by making it easier."

Colonial hosted the Memphis Open from 1958-to-1988, initially on its original layout and from 1972 at a new site with two courses designed by Joe Finger. In one week at Colonial in 1977, President Gerald Ford recorded a hole-in-one and Al Geiberger shot the PGA Tour's first-ever 59. "The club is enriched in history; you can feel it and smell it the moment you step foot on property," says Goodnight.

"The project included the renovation/redesign of all bunkers, the restoration of all greens, and the addition of forward and back tees so the course stretches from 4,300-to-7,630 yards to bring the course to modern standards while preserving its history," says Crace.

Among the work done to adapt Colonial to the modern game, Crace has added bunkers on the par-five eighteenth and lengthened it to over 600 yards. "The goal was to make it a finishing hole worthy of the entire project and maybe someday another big tournament," says Crace.

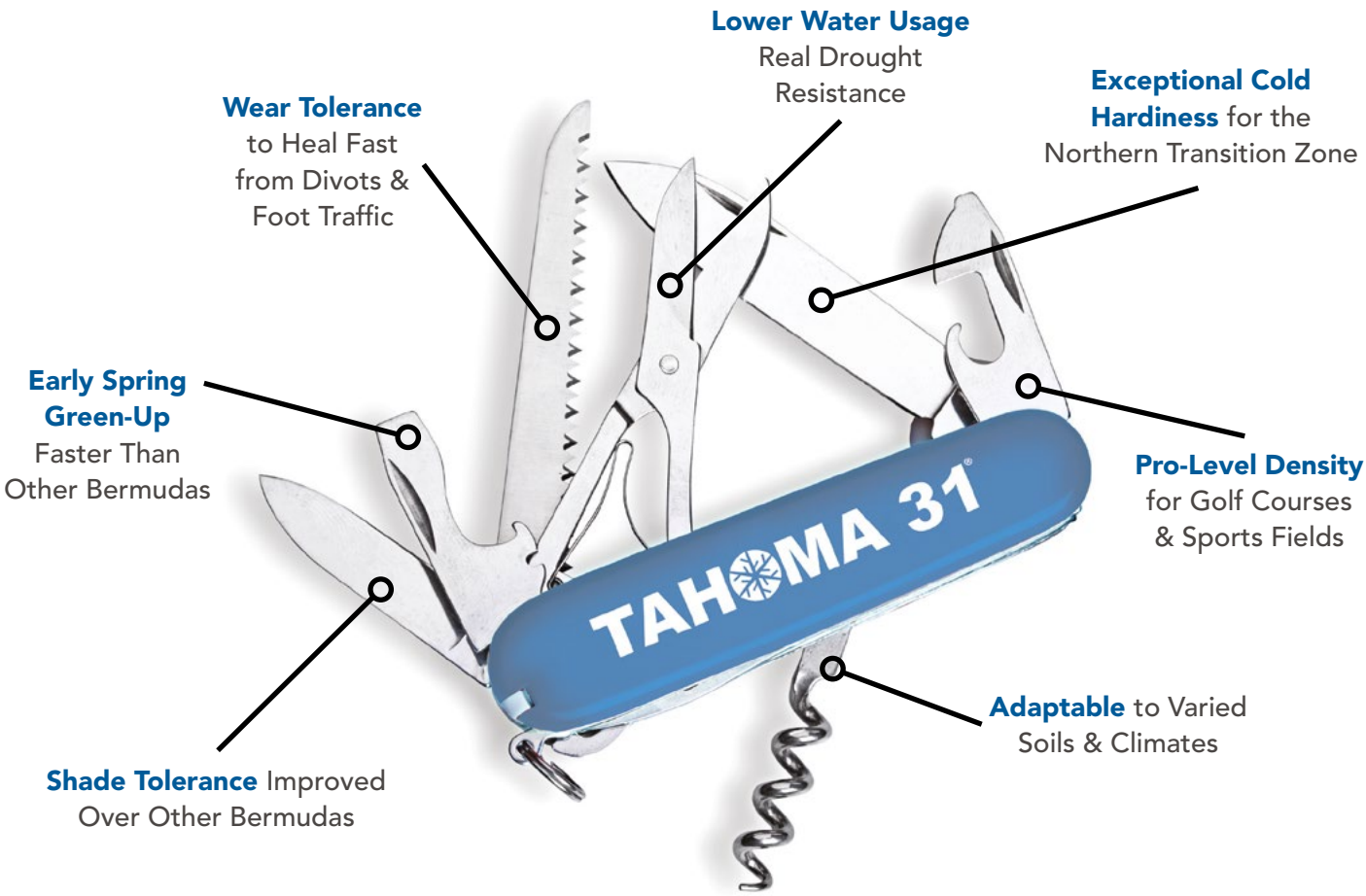
"The biggest compliment you can give this layout is that it will make you a better player," says Goodnight. "You will never get tired of playing the course as it challenges players of all abilities in many ways. With each hole, you must make decisions from tee to green and that is still very much the case. The course has a heartbeat of its own."

Bringing Ross back to Boston

Boston's William Devine course, initially laid out by Willie Campbell in 1894, was redesigned by Donald Ross in 1922 and lies within Frederick Law Olmsted's Franklin Park. The city's other municipal course, the George Wright, was designed as a private layout by Ross in the 1920s, abandoned at the start of The Great Depression in 1929, and then resurrected by the city of Boston and completed by his associate Walter Irving Johnson in 1938, with funds from the Works Progress Administration.

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Photo: Ross Mungeam

Mark Mungeam, ASGCA, has reinstated Ross features on both the William Devine and George Wright (pictured) courses in Boston

After 70 years of low-budget operation, the courses fell into disrepair. But in the mid-2000s the city decided to invest in both layouts.

"The original goals were to improve playing conditions and address badly deteriorated features, while improving playability for a wide range of handicap levels," says superintendent Len Curtin. "The city's golf commission then began to embrace the idea that incorporating restoration work with the ongoing course improvements was the responsible and logical thing to do."

Mark Mungeam, ASGCA, who is overseeing the work, says: "Neither project is a true restoration. The goal is to restore most features and bring back the Ross-designed attributes while being mindful of the need to upgrade the infrastructure for modern play.

"The original designs had no cart paths, which is a huge part of modern course use, so we are shifting and adding paths to improve circulation. Ross designed one or two small tees, which are no longer sufficient in area or options, so tee expansion is a major part of our work. Accessibility is another factor that was not considered in Ross's day, but is something modern designers have to plan for.

"Our work is to make maintenance more efficient and improve conditioning so that the wonderful Ross design features can be highlighted. George Wright has lots of ledges and protected oak trees that had been hidden by new growth. We have promoted the removal of the younger trees and underbrush to widen the hole corridors, show the terrain and improve pace of play."

Mungeam says there are many ways to emphasize the heritage of a classic course, including improving maintenance practices, reclaiming greens and fairways, creating short green to tee connections and introducing more short-grass areas – all of which improves pace of play, shot variety and overall enjoyment.

"Part of the charm and very much a selling point of these courses is their long history, classic architects, and the incredible stories of their birth, demise, and ultimate resurrection," says Curtin. "Golfers love historic courses and the stories that come with them. Understanding the history is half the fun. It's a bit like an antiques roadshow for the golf community." ●

"Part of the charm and very much a selling point of these courses is their long history"