



Above: A Tennessee Valley Authority aerial photograph of the Cherokee Golf Links.

Left: Are today's members of Cherokee C.C. playing the same Donald Ross-designed course that these original members played 80 years ago? Any information that is available regarding the original golf course design will aid in a restoration or renovation project. Golf courses designed by architects who are still living are advised to ensure they have detailed course plans and understand the architect's intentions.

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# Taking Your Course Back to the Future

Preserving important architectural documents can serve as future building blocks.

BY CHRISTOPHER C. SYKES

Sometimes you have to look to the past to see the future, which should always be the case when it comes to the classics. Cherokee Country Club (Knoxville, Tennessee) was founded in 1907, and the existing course was designed by Donald Ross in 1920. When I accepted the golf course superintendent position in 1997, the course had no plan, no vision, and no mission.

Due to this lack of planning, changes were made to the golf course with no regard to their long-term impact. Well-intentioned members implemented their own ideas for the golf course, which generally included some type of landscape planting. Architects were employed with little regard for preserving Ross's work. This classic, links-style golf course was slowly but surely

evaporating, and everything that Ross had envisioned was being erased. The club desperately needed a plan and it made sense to look to the past, since, arguably, the greatest architect of all time had already developed a plan for the golf course. This proved to be no easy task.

The club had no information about Ross's involvement, and it was rumored



Restoring a golf course to the original architect's design is much easier if the plans have been saved.

that Cherokee Country Club may not be a Ross course. Our club historian had opinions, but no facts to back them up. Every nook and cranny throughout the clubhouse was searched with no success. Although we kept striking out, with each effort we learned a little more or uncovered clues as to where else to search. Knoxville's local historical society had a file on Cherokee Country Club that contained a series of low-level aerial photographs. The photographs showed the same routing, but with bunkers everywhere and no trees. This was our first big find.

We read through old newspaper articles hoping to find a clue as to Ross's role at Cherokee. Although this question wasn't answered, we did discover a lot of history about the golf course that had been lost through the years. I started writing a monthly excerpt in the club newsletter highlighting what we had found about the course history.

The Ross Society and the Tufts archives at the Given Memorial Library in Pinehurst had no additional information, but they considered Cherokee

Country Club a Ross course. Khristine Januzik, curator at the Tufts archives, made numerous worthwhile suggestions about other places to search.

Another important find, located in the club's safe, were the minutes from past board of directors meetings that documented Ross's involvement with the club. The following are quotes from the minutes:

July 15th, 1919 — "On motion the Green Committee was authorized to employ Donald Ross to inspect and suggest improvements to the Greens."

March 3rd, 1920 — "The bill of Mr. Donald Ross amounting to \$560 for drawing new plans for the golf links was submitted and ordered paid."

This important find validated that Cherokee Country Club was indeed a Ross course. Plans existed, but where were they? Also in the safe was a safety deposit box ticket. The ticket listed the contents of the box, including a notation "golf course plans." Unfortunately, the ticket dated back to the 1950s and the bank had long since closed. We have yet to find the actual plans, but maybe someday they will turn up.

So where do you go without the actual plans? The next best alternative is photographs, especially aerial photographs. The low-level aerial photographs were helpful, but they didn't accurately show the entire course. Later it was determined that the photographs must have been taken in the early 1920s.

The Tufts archives curator suggested contacting other Ross courses in the area because he sometimes made mention of area courses on some plans. Holston Hills is a 1927 Ross course just a few miles from Cherokee. Holston Hills historian John Stiles found many of Holston's original drawings and came across some fantastic aerial photographs. He mentioned that the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) made a practice of taking aerial photographs along waterways. Cherokee Country Club overlooks the Tennessee River, and the TVA had taken an aerial photograph of our area about once every decade. We were able to obtain photographs from the 1950s and '60s, but anything older had been sent to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. It took some work, but once we got our hands on the 1939 TVA aerial photograph of the Cherokee Golf Links, we had a good idea of what Ross had intended. This aerial photograph later became the backbone for our long-range master restoration plan.

Throughout this research process we conducted interviews for a restoration architect. Ron Prichard was chosen for his interest in staying with the integrity of the original architect's design. The majority of his master restoration plan for Cherokee came from the 1939 TVA aerial photograph and from his vast knowledge of Ross's architectural style.

We also interviewed long-standing members, past members, long-term employees, past employees, and anyone else who might have some knowledge as to what had existed. The most interesting and revealing interview was with Mrs. Margaret Dickson, whose father was Jimmy Dickson, Cherokee's first golf professional and greenkeeper. Mrs. Dickson still lives just off the second

hole in the same house where she grew up. This house used to sit on what is now the first fairway, but she remembers one winter she and her mother went home to Scotland. When they came back, the house had been moved to where it sits today. She also remembers Vardon and Ray having dinner at their house when they were in town, and her father going to Pinehurst to visit Mr. Ross on numerous occasions.

You can see in the low-level aerial photographs that the course was undergoing a transition from the original 18 holes laid out by members in 1910 to the Ross routing that still exists today. Interestingly, there are no similarities between the two courses, and every hole was changed. Through the minutes it is clear that the club was implementing Ross's plan during the 1920s until the Great Depression hit. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Dickson died and as a result Ross's plans were never completed.

The 1939 TVA aerial photograph showed that some of the holes were complete, with numerous bunkers, and other holes still had no bunkers. Ironically, the holes closest to Mr. Dickson's home were the most complete. Today we still are trying to finish Ross's vision for Cherokee Country Club that he laid out more than 80 years ago. We are restoring what we know existed, and we are relying on Ron Prichard's expert knowledge for

the rest. We have an excellent long-range master restoration plan in place and are well on our way to restoring the golf course.

The following were some other sources of information:

- Talked to other golf course architects who have worked on the course.
- Contacted former contractors who worked at Cherokee Country Club.
- Talked to the University of Tennessee athletic department because the University of Tennessee used to play matches at Cherokee.
- Contacted former board and committee members to see if their families knew any historical information.
- Went to the county courthouse and talked to the metro planning commission and city engineering department because course plans may have been submitted to acquire permits.

There are still a number of leads to follow up on and we continue to do research. Maybe someday Ross's plans will surface.

## CONCLUSIONS

Having the desire to make a golf course better is easy. Making a change that improves the course in a meaningful way is much more difficult. I have discussed several ways to learn about your golf course's past in order to make sure that future changes are in line with the original architect's intentions. If the

architect who designed your course is still alive, you are much further along the road to making improvements.

The Honors Course in Ooltewah, Tennessee, has subscribed to this very theory. When the course was built just 20 years ago, it was regarded as one of the most difficult courses in the country. Things have changed, however, with increased ball flight being the largest contributing factor. The winning score in the 1999 Tennessee State Amateur was 13 shots lower than what was recorded ten years prior.

David Stone, golf course superintendent at The Honors Course since its inception, suggested they bring back Pete Dye to make recommendations on how to combat the changes that were taking place. Mr. Dye stated the best way to recapture the course's integrity was to lengthen the long holes or most difficult holes versus lengthening the easier holes. In 2003 they added 160 yards to recapture some of the integrity of Dye's original design. The course now measures 7,230 yards from the back tees.

Periodic alterations by the original architect are not without precedent, and it doesn't mean the original plan was flawed. Donald Ross made changes to Pinehurst No. 2 more than a dozen times, so if you can, keep your architect on retainer. Schedule an annual visit to talk about the different things that can be done to continue making your course better. Learn from our experience and document everything. Golf courses are living entities that constantly evolve. Greens or bunkers may change shape over the years without you even noticing. Save architectural drawings and take numerous pictures to compare them to later versions. Whether it's a brand-new course or one built at the turn of the 20th century, protect and save your past because you will need it for the future.

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It is unlikely the original architect intended for trees to block the left side of this cape hole, but tree encroachment over the years now interferes with the playability of the hole.