

UNCOVERING DONALD ROSS

Sporting a Pinehurst pedigree and a legendary golf course architect, Roaring Gap Club, an Old South gathering spot in the picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains, has been lovingly restored to its Golden Age grandeur.

Courtesy of Erik Guinther

By BRAD KING

The year 1925 had barely dawned on the day a handful of Winston-Salem's most prominent businessmen — names like Hanes, Reynolds and Gray — gathered at the downtown law office of Manly, Hendren & Womble. Led by Hugh Chatham, the group would finalize long-banded plans to develop a private vacation community in the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains — an Alleghany County area named Laurel Branch for the creek that fed its centerpiece, Lake Louise. Yet hearing the tremendous roar the wind produced as it passed through the prominent pair of peaks, the mountaineers more commonly referred to the picturesque hamlet as “Roaring Gap.”

Also in attendance at that Winston-Salem meeting was Leonard Tufts, second-generation scion of the Massachusetts family that founded and operated the relatively new and highly successful Pinehurst Resort in the state's Sandhills region, about three hours from Roaring Gap. Leonard's friendly relationship with the Winston businessmen was a win-win: The well-to-do investors were less profit driven than they were interested in creating a relaxing gathering spot for their friends and families in an invigorating mountain climate. They sought Tufts for his marketing savvy, as well as his database to mine for prospective members. Meanwhile, Tufts knew he could help transform Roaring Gap into an attractive resort enticement for his mostly Yankee Pinehurst clientele who were tiring of the trip back North every summer.

Voted Roaring Gap's first president, Tufts quickly commissioned the most

famous and prolific golf course architect in the world, Donald Ross, to design at 3,700 feet above sea level a mountain masterpiece that Tufts would promote as the “Pinehurst of the Hills.” Ross also was director of golf at Pinehurst, where the Scot had designed most of the courses including the popular No. 2 layout on which he lived. Beginning in the spring and during the latter half of 1925, Ross would reside at Tuft's Roaring Gap cottage for lengthy periods during which he carefully oversaw construction on the Roaring Gap golf course. Adding to Roaring Gap's Pinehurst pedigree were Ross's Pinehurst assistants Palmer Maples Sr. and Ellis Maples who interned as Roaring Gap head pros in the summer months.

Meanwhile, The Graystone Inn at Roaring Gap — a 55-room hotel that Tufts envisioned as a summer counterpart to the Carolina Hotel in Pinehurst and named for the color of its Blue Ridge masonry — proudly served as the backdrop to the No. 4 green of Ross's marvelous layout. Resort guests often started their rounds on Roaring Gap's fifth hole until 1939, when the current golf shop was erected directly behind the par-3 18th hole. The course naturally reaches its crescendo at the 17th green perched dramatically on the edge of a 1,000 foot bluff overlooking the valley below and off in the distance to Pilot Mountain, Sauratown Mountain and Hanging Rock.

Measuring fewer than 6,200 yards without a single par-4 longer than 400 yards, Roaring Gap was relatively unsung among Ross's 413 designs, which include the sites of 100-plus USGA national championships. However, as Michael Fay, long-

time executive director of the Donald Ross Society insists: “Roaring Gap would be one of the first chapters of any book on the special hideaways in golf.”

Around the turn of the 21st century, a popular trend of studying the historical evolution of classic golf courses and their restoration emerged in the U.S. and spread around the world. As a proponent of this movement, Dunlop White III of Winston-Salem, a longtime member of Roaring Gap's greens committee and a member of the USGA Architecture Archive Committee, made numerous trips to the Tuft's Archives — the Ross repository at the Given Memorial Library in the village of Pinehurst. Here, White uncovered some rare Roaring Gap artifacts, including old aerial photos of the golf course, as well as Ross's original routing plans and field drawings showing exactly how the original course was intended to look and play when it first opened.

What White passionately describes as “like finding a long-lost treasure” allowed the club to make before-and-after comparisons that proved invaluable when it turned to Kris Spence — a restoration specialist from nearby Greensboro — to help reclaim the course's architectural pedigree while also updating it for modern play. They discovered that throughout its 85-plus years, Roaring Gap's fairways had sacrificed nearly half their original width resulting in razor-thin corridors flanked by lush walls of vegetation. Meanwhile, the advent of riding triplex mowers gradually rounded-off all of Ross' intricately shaped greens causing them to lose their original shape and strategic corner pin locations, while reducing the greens more than 35

percent in size to mostly postage stamp-sized ovals.

So much of Roaring Gap's green complexes had been lost over time, White said, that current golfers assumed the knobby regions outside the perimeters were chipping areas. Instead, they were integral parts of the original putting surfaces. Worse yet, decades of topdressing had caused the shrunken putting surfaces to rise nearly a foot above original grade level, effectively amplifying the awkward disconnect with the green surrounds.

Today, full-blown copies of Ross's 1925 renderings that Spence used to return Roaring Gap's greens to the approximate size, shape and dimensions of their original identity hang on the walls of the golf shop. “Uncovering such wonderful Ross greens is certainly a highlight of my career,” says Spence.

Among the distinctive ways Roaring Gap has been able to retain its rustic charm was by preserving the old turf mutations on their putting surfaces that had naturally evolved over time — a native blend of approximately 80 percent *Poa Annua* and 20 percent *Bentgrass*. “Often restorations appear too modernized when classic courses elect to use one of the new hybrid turfgrasses that have not ‘mottled’ yet,” said White — a fancy way of saying it would make their restored greens appear brand new again without any sense of yore.

Head golf professional Bill Glenn — son of legendary Bailey Glenn, Roaring Gap's head pro from 1956-93 — contends that a clean mono-stand of modern bent

Continued on page 15

grass would inevitably become contaminated with *Poa Annua* anyway. "I'm afraid we would have lost that battle," said the younger Glenn, who agreed it would be better to embrace the native *Poa Annua*-dominant turf than fight it on a new type of surface.

As a result, Spence recycled Roaring Gap's native green sod by stockpiling it to the side for re-uses after green reconstruction. Because the new green perimeters were expanded to their original footprints, additional sod was required. Superintendent, Erik Guinther, recently hired by Roaring Gap from Atlanta's famed Peachtree Golf Club, made certain of its availability by developing a 10,000 square foot green nursery where he harvested aerification plugs from the preceding season. Because the nursery germinated from their native green compositions, the turf supplementations tied in seamlessly on the rest of the course.

In addition to the greens, Roaring Gap's decade-long restoration project reclaimed most of the original bunkers, particularly the fairway cross-bunkers that Ross considered an integral part of the game. A new double-row irrigation system replaced an inefficient single-row system, while a judicious tree management program with an emphasis on peeling back the overgrowth returned strategic playability, opened sweeping vistas and added recovery options on many holes.

Of course, Roaring Gap had been undersized by today's standards, particularly with golf balls traveling greater distances than Ross could have ever imagined. Therefore, Spence lengthened 10 holes — where room was available — to bring their intended landing areas back into play from the tee. In addition, Spence also planted fine fescue grasses in the peripheral areas that seed-out and turn wispy-brown, to promote the classical look and feel of an early-American landscape.

At Roaring Gap Club, Glenn and White — as well as other club members including Walker Poole, Frank Edwards, and former club president, Barnes Hauptfuhrer, whose mother Barbara Hauptfuhrer was a former LPGA officer and a perennial Roaring Gap Ladies' champion — showed leadership and support that proved to be a game-changer for the club's centerpiece, Donald Ross-designed asset, now meticulously restored to its original glory.



One of the best examples of green restoration occurred at Hole 15 where the putting surface gradually retreated away from the adjoining bunker features through the years. As a result, this small circular green (above) lost its original size, shape, character and strategic corner pin locations as displayed on Donald Ross's design plan (Left). In 2012, Kris Spence cored out the original perimeters and faithfully restored it's dimensions as shown on the image below.

