



# Roaring Gap Club, USA

*Heralded as the Pinehurst of the Hills and the Aristocrat of Courses*

The year 1925 had barely dawned when Hugh Chatham of Elkin (NC) called together a coterie of the region’s most affluent business leaders—names like Reynolds, Hanes and Gray of Winston-Salem—to develop a private summer hamlet sky-flung 3,700 feet above sea level in the picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains. This 1,200 acre mountaintop tableland was known as “Roaring Gap”.

One of Chatham’s key linchpins was Leonard Tufts, the second generation magnate of the Massachusetts family that founded and operated Pinehurst in the state’s Sandhills region, located just five hours away. Pinehurst had already become a popular winter enclave, but Tufts envisioned a companion golf retreat with an invigorating summer climate for his Yankee clientele, who were tiring of their long trip back north every summer to escape the Pinehurst heat.

Elected Roaring Gap’s first president, Tufts quickly enlisted Donald Ross—his Director of Golf in Pinehurst and one of the most prolific golf course architects in America at the time—to design an 18-hole, par-70 mountain masterpiece that Tufts would passionately promote as the

“Aristocrat of Courses” given its stature and unparalleled charm. Considering that Ross had already designed most of Tuft’s golf courses down in Pinehurst, including the popular No. 2 course upon which he lived, this was quite an endorsement.

The July 24, 1931 edition of *The Pilot Newspaper* in Southern Pines, North Carolina described Roaring Gap as having “the finest mountain golf course in America.” Likewise, the June 27, 1929 issue of the Elkin Tribune submitted that there was only one golf club in the east that was positioned at a higher elevation than the Roaring Gap course at the time, and there were no other courses from which the golfer could see stunning long-distant vistas that spread out to the horizon in every direction.

Meanwhile, Tufts also championed the establishment of The Graystone Inn at Roaring Gap—a grand, 65-room hotel that he envisioned as a summer counterpart to the Carolina Hotel, which he operated in Pinehurst. Named for the color of its Blue Ridge masonry and modeled after George Washington’s Mount Vernon homestead in Virginia—the palatial Graystone Inn emerged from the mountaintop boasting sweeping balcony views of the 5,962-yard

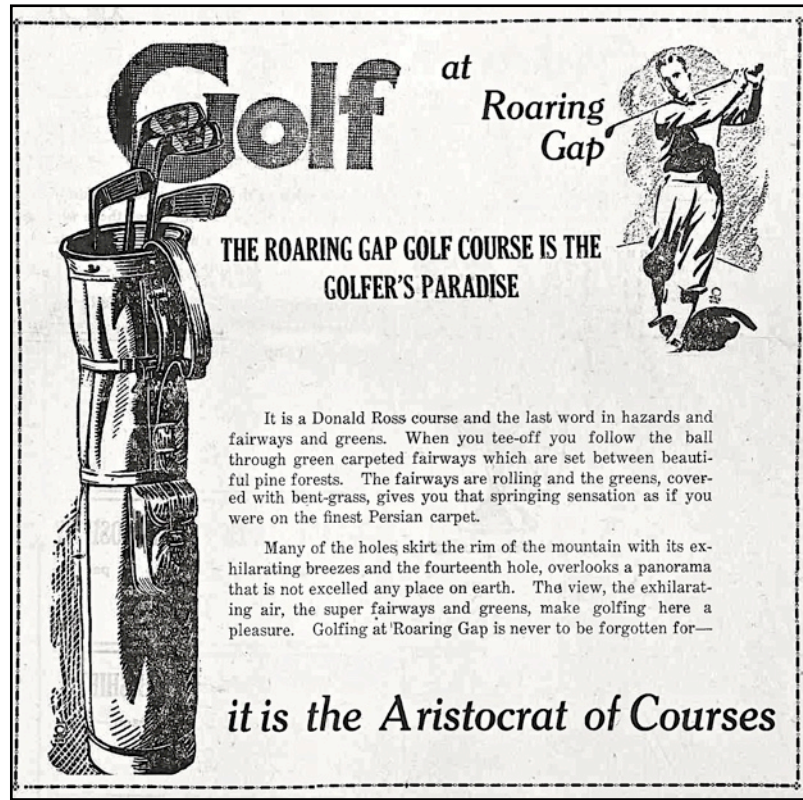
Ross layout and the North Carolina foothills below.

Before long, Roaring Gap was widely recognized as the “Pinehurst of the Hills.” The mountain colony seamlessly operated as a legitimate annex and outpost of the Pinehurst enterprise, where Tufts was able to stabilized clientele year-round, avoiding the pitfalls of employee turnover between seasons. The Pinehurst organization, their department heads and staff simply mobilized their operations to Roaring Gap when the weather turned warm every May. Adding to Roaring Gap’s Pinehurst pedigree: Ross’s professionals in Pinehurst—including Alex Innis, Palmer Maples and Ellis Maples—served dual roles by interning as head professionals in Roaring Gap during the summers.

In 1933, Pinehurst officially had to abandon their long-term plan to expand the Graystone Inn to 350 rooms. Tufts relinquished all operations of the hotel and the celebrated Ross course, where his son Richard had just carded the amateur course record at the time.

Opposite: The short sixth hole, named “Do-Drop,” is one of the best examples of Donald Ross’s prototypical volcano-holes. Others in the Ross repertoire include the twelfth at Bald Peak Colony, New Hampshire and the sixth at the Country Club of Buffalo, New York. Photo by Larry Lambrecht





Unfortunately, the Great Depression forced the Tufts family to scale back their business interests at Roaring Gap though they retained their summer cottage aloft the mountain escarpment for a decade thereafter.

When recounting Roaring Gap's distinguished origins, few clubs can claim such an illustrious start. Realizing this, club officials turned to golf course architect Kris Spence, a restoration specialist from nearby Greensboro, North Carolina, to help reclaim its architectural integrity. Naturally the club figured, a layout so inextricably tied to the

Pinehurst legacy, and established by such visionaries as Ross and Tufts, should be meticulously restored and taken seriously eighty-eight years later.

Between 2012 and 2014, Spence relied upon Ross's 1925 design plans to restore the sizes, shapes and dimensions of Ross's greens and bunkers. New tees and modern irrigation were added while outgrown trees were judiciously removed. Most importantly, however, it was the preservation of Roaring Gap's evolved green compositions, which set this restoration apart.

Too often, newly-restored classic designs come away looking brand spanking new—like they had just been constructed for the first time. Roaring Gap officials wanted to avoid this impression by retaining the antiquated look and texture of their age-old putting surfaces, which evolved naturally through the decades—giving their greens an old-fashioned, seasoned appearance—a look that could only be fashioned by Mother Nature over the course of time.

Roaring Gap's green compositions consisted of a native blend of approximately 70 percent poa annua, 20 percent bent-grass, and 10 percent mutations, which acclimated harmoniously at these levels over time. So the club decided to preserve this symbiotic composition rather than converting to one of the pure, new hybrid mono-stands of turf that had not "mottled" yet—meaning that they did not want it to appear strikingly clean without any sense of yore.

So Spence and superintendent Erik Guinther agreed to "recycle" the native poa - dominant turf compositions rather than fight its invasive nature all over again on an unblemished, pure bent surface.

As a result, Spence stripped their current old green surfaces and stockpiled the sod to the side for

Opposite Top: Two vintage postcards of the Graystone Inn (today's clubhouse), which cost roughly \$250,000 to construct in 1925. Because of its proximity to the golf course—located less than 100-yards away—hotel guests routinely started their rounds on today's fifth hole next to the practice putting green as shown on the hotel's front lawn.

Opposite Bottom: Today's fourth hole naturally served as the home hole for hotel guests. The fourth was named "Graystone" for its commanding view of the Inn. (Photo by Larry Lambrecht)

Left: an example of countless newspaper ads that demonstrate Tuft's commitment to market Roaring Gap to the world, always promoting it as the "Aristocrat of Courses". Source: the Elkin Tribune



Top Right: Ross designed humps and bumps around the seventeenth green to mimic the mountainous horizon in the background. This design technique helped golfers interpret the extent of the putting surface visually from the approach. The small oval green had retreated away from these knobby regions around its perimeter over time. Photo by Dunlop White



Bottom Right: The club expanded the putting surface, so it would once again flash-up and tie-in to the surrounding undulations. Today, these knobby exterior contours are once again integral parts of the original putting surface as Ross envisioned, and the surrounding bunkers are once again intimately tied to the green as one unit. Photo by Dunlop White



Opposite: The golf course naturally reaches its crescendo at the seventeenth green perched dramatically on the crest of a 2,500-foot bluff with 75-mile scenic vistas across the heart of North Carolina. In the distance, Pilot Mountain, Saurartown Mountain and the Winston-Salem skyline are etched in the horizon. Photo by Larry Lambrecht

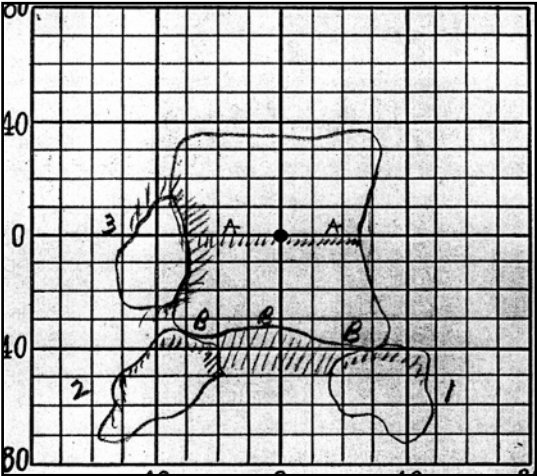




Above Right: Over the years, the fifteenth green gradually retreated away from the bunker features. Consequently, this green lost its original size, shape, and strategic corner pin locations. Photog by Dunlop White



Bottom Right: The advent of the riding triplex green mower in the 1960's helped perpetuate the obvious green shrinkage. Since the steering radii of the triplex could not handle sharp corner turns, it is partly responsible for the "rounding off" of many intricately-shaped Ross greens nationwide. Photo by Dunlop White



Opposite: The meticulous nine-step construction sequence of Roaring Gap's green reclamation. Courtesy of Dunlop White



re-use after green re-construction. Because the new green perimeters were expanded about 40 percent to their original footprints, and the evolved green profiles were softened about 12 inches to the approximate elevations of their surrounding grades, large amounts of additional sod would be required.

Guinther made certain of its availability by developing a 20,000 square-foot green nursery, which he harvested from aerification plugs the preceding season. Because the nursery germinated from their native poa-dominant green compositions that had evolved over 85 years, the turf supplementations during green expansion resembled the age-old native sod used on the rest of the course.

Here's the catch though. In order to prevent the newly germinated sod from visually clashing with the old native sod on the expanded perimeters, Guinther and Spence devised the following strategy. The additional sod needed for green expansion on the first hole would be borrowed from the green sod cut from second hole. The additional sod needed for green expansion on second hole would be borrowed from the green sod cut from the third hole. Spence and Guinther kept borrowing from the

greens ahead, until eventually, there wasn't any turf left to borrow. At that point, the amount of sod needed to cover the remaining greens — at the seventh, eighth and ninth holes, for example — would be taken directly from the 20,000 square-foot nursery. The idea being that the club didn't want to segregate greens with sods of different maturities, even though they germinated from the same evolved green compositions. While it may be obvious to distinguish old native turf from newly germinated nursery turf when laid next to each other on the same green, any differences in color, texture or maturity proved to be unnoticeable when utilized on separate greens. Roaring Gap successfully executed this process nine holes at a time over two years.

Today, Roaring Gap boasts a museum collection of some of the most authentic sets of Ross greens in all of golf. Not only did the club recapture their original green contours and dimensions, but they also lovingly preserved the grandeur and texture of their evolved putting surfaces. Indeed, Tufts, Ross and the Pinehurst visionaries would be proud today, because Roaring Gap's golf course is once again—nine decades later—the aristocrat of all.



1. Marking Original Green Perimeters



2. Stripping Turf from the Shrunken Green



3. Stockpile Sod to the Side for Re-use



4. Scraping Away Decades of Topdressing and Organic Build-up Comprising the Inner Lift.



5. Coring Out Fillpad to Expanded Perimeters and Marking Elevations of Surface Contours



6. Installing Drainage in Sub-base Floor



7. Fillpad ready to Float Out & Contour Green's Mix



8. Replacing Old Sod & Supplementing Expansion with New



9. Filling the Seams with Rootzone Mix





Above: A panoramic view of the restored fifteenth and sixteenth holes at featuring expansive, merging fairways and windswept native grasses enveloping these elysian fields of play. Photo by Larry Lambrecht



Above: The 368-yard tenth hole was fittingly named "Spring Branch", because it looms large from the tee. In addition, Ross's bold green-side bunker is another dominant hazard to avoid. Photo by Larry Lambrecht