

# LASTING IMPRESSIONS



THE COUNTRY CLUB OF ROCHESTER

*by* JEFF SILVERMAN

# The Ross Legacy

Sadly, Ross ordered many of his papers burned upon his death, but the essential substance of his work wasn't on paper anyway; Ross left it on the land. Appreciated, certainly, in his lifetime, it is revered today, as is Ross himself, much more so than when he was alive. Is there a golf course architect anywhere that doesn't tip a tam to his achievements? Is there a player of any sophistication that can't list at least a few of his designs?

What's so fascinating about his life in the context of his legacy is the way that even the briefest biographical sketch opens windows onto the hows and whys that shaped his thinking about golf's playing surfaces.

Bernard Darwin, the game's Shakespeare through the first half of the 20th century, was just a few years younger than Ross, and like Ross, fortunate enough to find early the golf course he would love with what he called "a blind and unreasoning affection." Welcome everywhere the game was played—captain, at various times, of Royal St. George, Royal Cinque Ports, and the Royal and Ancient at St. Andrews—Darwin always returned to the little course at Aberdovey along Cardigan Bay in western Wales because a) it was always there, and b) it was always with him when he wasn't there.

Ross's analogue, naturally, was Dornoch, and what he learned from Dornoch was only further reinforced through his continuing education at St. Andrews and Carnoustie. Etched as the links were into his golfing heart and mind, they formed his foundation for what golfing grounds should be, what they should look like, what they should feel like, and how they should challenge and tempt and, above all, embrace. It was always with him.

*“Bearing in mind that golf should be a pleasure and not a penance, it has always been my thought to present a test of the player’s game; the severity of the test to be in direct rasion with his ability as a player.”*

—Donald Ross

Dornoch gave Ross his introduction to the game's natural humps and bumps, its dramatic slopes, its open spaces and shaggy edges, its reasonable risks and just rewards, its bad bounces, and the unpredictable rub of the green; they were his building blocks. They helped him move American golf courses away from the geometric and artificial look so many of the earliest had taken on. They also helped him develop his unalloyed appreciation for creative shotmaking and playing by feel and intuition as well as his Presbyterian acceptance that not every good shot winds up with a good or even fair result.

Dornoch gave Ross something else, something less tangible but no less visible in his designs: an aware-

ness of the game's underlying democracy. On Dornoch's links, carpenters—like his master—were as welcome as the town's most important and wealthiest residents. Rich man, poor man, high-handicapper or low, the links did not discriminate; instead, they offered a stimulating journey over and around obstacles for everyone.

Since all of that contributed to the way Ross looked at the game, it's no surprise, then, that Dornoch would make itself gently apparent throughout Ross's own design work. Its hallmarks became his. Open spaces. Wide fairways. Natural features. Strategic hazards. Devilish greens. In his earliest efforts especially, as he was getting his architectural feet under him, Ross seemed intent on translating Dornoch's essence onto the inland locales—like CCR's—he was presented with. It wasn't just what he knew. It was what he loved.

Ross preferred working with open land because the game he'd learned was a game for open spaces (and because it was just too damned hard to hack

through a forest with early 20th century tools). He wanted land with movement in it—swales and hollows, valleys and hills—but unencumbered by trees. He was quite clear that as beautiful as trees may be, they did not belong on golf courses, and certainly not in ways that would interfere with play by direct obstruction, by lining fairways to create narrow corridors, or to protect against whichever way the winds blew. Golf, for Ross, was a game of options, and the wider the patch, the greater the choices available for playing the hole. The land was his canvas. It didn't need to be blank, just uncluttered.



An uncomplicated man, Ross built remarkably uncomplicated courses on those canvases, which is not to say they lacked charm or complexity; they had enough charm and complexity for Ross to work with, not paint over. Like Dornoch's, his routings were economical—he was not a profligate man either; he used the space he needed and nothing more. And since the game he learned was a game conceived close to the ground, he designed his courses for comfortable walking. Tees sat near the greens that preceded them, and he tried, whenever possible, to let the land rise gently, over several holes, rather than elevate too abruptly. Of course, Ross also understood that the land sometimes required exceptions; he yielded to that at CCR in his conceptions of No. 3 and the hike between the 8th green and the 9th tee.

He had a marvelous ability to listen to the land, and—unlike so many modern designers intent on bending the landscape to their whims—he simply let the land tell him what it wanted. Because he worked with nature instead of trying to tame it, his courses weren't flashy—he might not have been the right man for Augusta, after all. He was honest and humble; his courses are, too. He

avoided routings or even individual holes that called undue attention to themselves—no waterfalls, no canyons, no fountains, no signature holes; but then the pious Presbyterian never called undue attention to himself, either. Nor did he repeat himself the way, say, Macdonald and Raynor repeated themselves by reproducing classic Old Country designs like Redans, Edens, Alps, and Saharas on each of their courses. Again, Ross listened to the

land, and since each track in its unspoiled nakedness was different, so was what he coaxed from it. Each was original and individual.

His designs were sensible from a player's standpoint and practical from a greenkeeper's. His belief that the game was more a pleasure than a penance was fused into the strategic alternatives he provided for every level of competence, and with the relative ease with which the bulk of his hazards could be escaped; they might extract a few ounces of flesh, but hardly ever a pound, another conceptual and stylistic departure from what preceded him on American soil. And while he instilled each hole with one ideal line both off the tee and into the green, he made sure to offer alternative variations. It was as if he beckoned players to scour the landscape, and pick a path, though he left it up to each player to pick the path of either least or most resistance, the line and angle of play that incorporated the appropriate risks and rewards for his or her own shortcomings. It's hard to be more sensible—or democratic—than that.

So, then, what makes a Ross course and what features help define it?

Let Ross answer the first part of that himself, though the answer also reveals itself across Elmwood Avenue:

ing the city championship that summer; Oak Hill took on the event with thanks from CCR's Stewards. By October, the Green Committee chair sought—and received—an additional \$1000 for work on the new greens, and in June of 1914, with Irving Robeson now running the Green Committee, the minutes reveal that Ross asked for—and was granted—another \$4,000 to finish the project. Which implies his presence on site for at least part of the final phase toward completion.

The new golf course was indeed completed and opened for play that spring. That should have been enough excitement for one year. But not even a new golf course could trump the young head pro, Walter Hagen. He'd returned to Rochester the previous September irate about his fourth place finish behind Francis Ouimet, Harry Vardon, and Ted Ray in the U.S. Open—his first—at Brookline. Despite some bad shots and missed opportunities, it wasn't the way he played that so rankled him; it was the way his fellow professionals had treated him. That he was barely 20, virtually unknown, and hardly tournament tested was irrelevant; The Haig was The Haig, and his brashness—on display from the moment he entered Brookline's locker room and announced he'd come to help America win the trophy—didn't sit well. "They pushed me off the tee," he explained, "and told me I could practice when they got through." Then he made this vow: "I'm going back next year and win the tournament."

He almost wshed on his word.

In the spring of 1914, Hagen worked out some in Florida with the Phillies, and the team's manager was impressed enough with what he saw to invite Hagen to spring training the next year. Hagen never hid the fact that baseball was his first sporting love, and he was convinced it still held his future. "Golf," he wrote in his memoirs, "had just sidetracked me temporarily."



Enter club member Ernest Willard, editor of the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*. He'd walked into the pro shop one day to hear Hagen bragging about how he'd murder big-league pitching when he got the chance, and no longer had plans to head to Chicago the following month to the Open at Midlothian.

Hagen himself will tell the rest.

"Haven't you plenty of time for the Open and baseball?" [Willard] asked. 'You did so well at Brookline last year, I think you should try again this year.'

"I told him I was sort of discouraged, that I'd begun to believe that golf was not my game.

"Rochester was mighty proud of you, Walter. You're the first pro we've ever had who has been able to qualify for the Open, let alone finish in a tie for second like you did. I'd like you to go to Chicago and win it.'

"He waited a few seconds, then said, 'If you'll go, Walter, I'll pay your expenses.'"

He went. And he won.

Hagen shot a record-breaking 68 in the first round, one better than Ouimet, and never looked back. His 290 total—the lowest, to that point, in Open history—was enough to stave off a late charge by Chick Evans, and enough to keep The Haig focused on golf for the rest of his life.

One question remains, though, another of those pesky conundrums that haunts the saga of Ross and CCR: How much did the new golf course help Hagen sharpen his game?

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Hagen won his first U.S. Open the same summer that the new course debuted

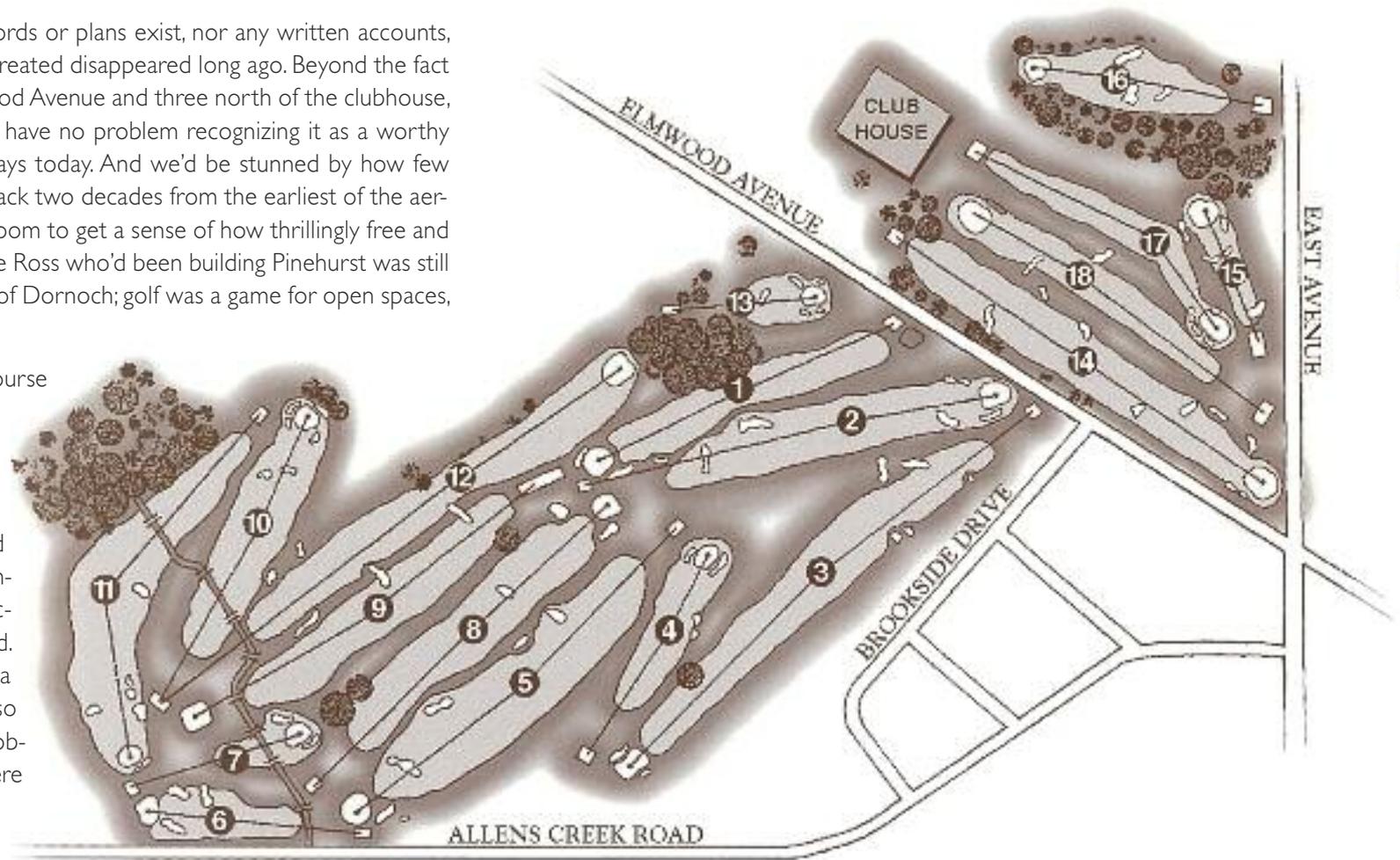
# The Ross Course, Part Two

And the mysteries continue.

What wouldn't we give for an open window into the past to look back in time and onto the new golf course? With Hagen no doubt leading the tour, what would we actually see?

It's hard to say, exactly. No records or plans exist, nor any written accounts, and whatever blueprints Ross created disappeared long ago. Beyond the fact that 15 holes sat east of Elmwood Avenue and three north of the clubhouse, nothing is certain, though we'd have no problem recognizing it as a worthy ancestor of the course as it plays today. And we'd be stunned by how few trees there were; just project back two decades from the earliest of the aerial photos in the men's locker room to get a sense of how thrillingly free and uncluttered everything was. The Ross who'd been building Pinehurst was still the Ross schooled on the links of Dornoch; golf was a game for open spaces, not tight corridors.

So little is certain about the course that debuted in 1914 because Ross returned in 1916 to make changes. Why? Most likely because he was back in Rochester, hired to design and build nine holes for the new Iron-dequoit Country Club, his second course in the neighborhood. While in town, he gave CCR a significant overhaul. Did he also make cosmetic adjustments? Probably. But the whole of the where and what we'll never know.



Ross's revised 1916 layout lasted less than two decades



Dick: And it proved to be the case. Returning the course to Donald Ross was what he was interested in.

Paul: We kept using the phrase “he gets it.” It was like when we hired Al. We just knew from the minute we met him he was our guy. He understood what a small club was all about, how it was supposed to react, and he could add value for a long time to come.

**What happened next?**

Dick: Gil goes home and does a plan. He brought that plan to the committee in three stages, six holes at a time. With each, people became more and more enthusiastic and understanding of what he was trying to do—and less and less en-

thralled by the number of trees he was trying to take out.

Paul: I think it’s important to understand that we didn’t do a pure restoration. It’s 95 percent restoration, but Gil added some bunkers and gave us some more length. We wanted to maintain the essence of Donald Ross, and that’s what Gil did.

**What do you do after he presents his Master Plan?**

Dick: The next stage was getting it through the board, which was an interesting process, wasn’t it?

Paul: Oh, yeah.

**How so?**

Dick: There was an element that didn’t want to spend the money. There was an element obstructing just to obstruct.

Paul: Then you had the tree-hugger constituency that thinks that a golf course is a place to have arbors. Those people were probably the most vocal.

**Was tree removal the thorniest issue?**

Dick: Absolutely.

# Restoration Timeline

<b>2000</b>	<b>May</b>	During a lunch on the Grill Porch, Dick Wilson and Paul Wold share their vision of the course’s future
	<b>May 16</b>	Gil Hanse selected as architect for the restoration
<b>2001</b>	<b>October 10</b>	RESTORATION DESIGN BEGINS: Hanse presents his plans for Holes 1-6
	<b>October 21</b>	Hanse presents his plans for Holes 7-12
<b>2002</b>	<b>November 6</b>	Hanse presents his plans for Holes 13-18
	<b>November 7</b>	Town Hall meeting with Hanse, David Oatis of the USGA, and <i>Golfweek</i> architecture critic Brad Klein
<b>2003</b>	<b>December 18</b>	Board unanimously receives Master Plan
	<b>January 23</b>	Members’ informational meeting on the Golf Course Master Plan
<b>2003</b>	<b>August 27</b>	Board approves reconstruction of Hole No. 12
	<b>September 20</b>	Work starts on No. 12
<b>2003</b>	<b>February</b>	Club hires Rick Holfoth, CGCS, as Golf Course Superintendent

Hanse toured the golf course with members to explain the Master Plan in three dimensions



Paul: We had a town meeting one night and we brought in (Ross biographer and *Golfweek's* architectural critic) Brad Klein to talk about trees and architecture, and we brought in (USGA's northeast regional green section director) David Oatis to talk about trees and turf grass—the agronomy side of the equation. And the whole focus was to educate the membership.

Dick: It definitely helped.

**It sounds like you spent a lot of time trying to keep the members educated and informed. Was that a key element of your planning?**

Dick: There isn't any question. We had focus groups. We had town meetings. We worked very, very hard on what we presented and how we presented it.

Paul: Shortly before any of this started, there was a real brouhaha over the renovation of the clubhouse.

Dick: There hadn't been good communication. So, it was my goal—and Paul was along with me—to make sure that the board, the committees, and the membership at large had a continuum of understanding of where we were in this project at all times. We produced a CD. We produced a videotape. Communication was essential. Everything was always open, which is why the criticism that hurt the most was hearing that Paul and Dick were jamming

this down everyone's throats. The obstructionists—and they were in the minority—were not silent in criticizing us on that.

**Was there also a good deal of lobbying?**

Dick: There was. In the meantime, I completed my term as president. I was pleased that there continued to be a commitment to the plan, but the new administration stopped short of the complete restoration. My sense is we can still get it all done in the future. But we needed to get what we could get. We got the new irrigation system.

We got the rebunkering. We got the forward tees. And we got Ross.

**What went on in the Master Plan meeting to put the proposal over the top?**

Dick: Don Allen spoke in favor of it. I'm not sure that necessarily changed the whole membership view. But Don's endorsement was important backing for the plan.

**Did it then go to a vote?**

Dick: There was a long time frame between that presentation and the vote. There was a change of the guard in the officership. And there was a downturn in the economy. Much to Paul's chagrin, before I left the presidency, I went along with the board in suggesting that we not take it to a vote to the membership because I didn't think it would have had a snowball's chance in hell.



<b>April 17</b> Executive Committee opts not to go forward with the project at this time	<b>October 27</b> "The Bucket Speech" Rick Holfoth reports on irrigation system replacement and Master Plan implementation	<b>2004</b>	<b>January 27</b> Board votes to present to membership assessment schedule to fund \$2,000,000 of Master Plan (excludes reconstruction of five greens)	<b>February 26</b> Membership votes to approve assessment schedule and borrowing to implement Golf Course Master Plan	<b>July 5</b> Work begins	<b>2006</b>	<b>October 18</b> Town Hall meeting with Gil Hanse to discuss proceeding with changing the 18th green	<b>November 28</b> Board votes to authorize capital funds to complete relocation of the 18th green complex and the clubhouse patio and grounds	<b>2007</b>	<b>January</b> <i>Golf Digest</i> names CCR as #2 in Best New Remodel Category of 2006 and #14 in 2007-2008 Best Courses in New York State rankings	<b>July 25</b> Hanse returns to begin construction on new 18th green complex
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In his portrait of Walter Hagen, noted artist Frank C. Bensing captured the focused concentration of a champion



# Hole #18: Homestead

PAR 4 418 YARDS



While Ross wrote specifically on the virtues of opening holes, he left no detailed record of his thoughts on how best to lower the curtain. What he did leave behind was a legacy of grand finales—think Pinehurst No. 2, Seminole, Inverness, Brae Burn, Oakland Hills, and East Lake—all of different lengths, designs, demands, and strategies, and all worthy of deciding championships and crowning winners. By comparison, CCR's exit line has always been, well, flat.

Ross must have known that; he made significant modifications to the layout in 1931, even though the requirements of East Avenue didn't call for the kinds of wholesale alterations that were essential on No. 17. He lengthened play by 10 yards, offset the tee from the fairway and reshaped it into a boomerang, and pulled the whole fairway right to incorporate part of the silhouette of the old No. 17, recasting what had been a straightaway into a dogleg left with a bunker protecting the inside of the elbow. He then put a new head on the new body, retooling the green complex, which he kept close to the old clubhouse, from a large unprotected target to a much smaller one flanked by sand right and left with a pair of smaller pots lurking—nettlesomely—on the left of the fairway about 20 yards from the front edge. From the right side, the view to the pin was clear, though the right bunker blocked the path. From the left, the opening was broader, but unless a tee shot cleared the fairway bunker on that line, it was difficult to see the target around the hill. Better? Yes. And more interesting. But not the kind of gallant statement worthy of closing the pages on a memorable saga.

Still, No. 18 has had its moments. Like when Betsy Rawls hoisted the trophy as national champion of the first Women's Open stamped with the imprimatur of the USGA. "This was such a huge step for women's golf," says the Hall-of-Fame winner of 55 LPGA events, eight of them majors. "It was a notch above every other tournament we'd played in." Meaning history was made here.

Then there was its comic cameo in the torch-passing drama of the club's Women's Championship in 1959. Jean Trainor had held the title for six of the previous seven years—and would go on to own it for the next decade and a half, but Jane Gorsline's 20-foot putt on the 17th hole in the semi-final unexpectedly stopped the juggernaut. In the final, she met her friend—and Jean's daughter—Anne Ralph.

They were all even going into the 18th hole where each confronted nerve-jangling three-footers to halve it. Odds were they both wouldn't make it, and the title would be decided here.

It wasn't.

Good-good.

"We gave them to each other," says Gorsline. "We'd never know if one of us would have missed." What neither missed was the other. As they went to knock their putts away, they locked clubs. Anne eventually prevailed, and the two have gone on, locked together throughout their eminent golfing lives, winning championships, losing them, even sharing the spotlight on the front and back covers of the '62 Amateur program.

By 1962, a maverick trap had risen behind Ross's green, one of a variety of design insurgencies No. 18 has withstood, none of which could ever fully quell the uncomfortable question: Is No. 18 good enough?

In the club's move to toughen and modernize, it put that question to Arthur Hills in 1982. He suggested raising the green—a la No. 2—to transform a ground-level putting surface with an open front into a plateau with bunkers protecting the entry. Maybe that would be good enough.

Don Allen, then the green chair, recalls the membership meeting convened to toss it around. "Some of the long-term members were not happy about this," he says. Still, the first carp thumped with unexpected whiplash. "Mr. Allen," charged a gentleman whose club *bona fides* extended back to the '20s, "if the 18th green was good enough for Walter Hagen, why isn't it good enough for you?"

That the green good enough for Hagen shared little Ross material with its distant cousin beyond the patio hardly mattered. "No answer I gave would have ever convinced him, anyway," says Allen. "And that was the opening salvo." It got hotter.

Though the club gave Hills the green light to jack up the carpet, the hole was still less than it could be.

When an architect scours the land, he searches for potential; for Ross, he found it by positioning his 18th green close to the old clubhouse. The new, larger clubhouse, opened in 1970, stands on a more removed footprint, and as a result, the green and the clubhouse have seemed disconnected ever since. From a designer's perspective, though, the shape and location of the clubhouse kept beckoning the green to sidle up to the patio.

And now it has.

By moving the green back, Hanse has added some 40 yards to the hole, immediately transforming a shortish par 4 into a dynamically vigorous one. But length is just the beginning. Aesthetically, laying the green into a sea of tightly mown grass close to the clubhouse patio ends the journey on the kind of visually arresting grace note Ross scripted into his greatest love, Pinehurst No. 2.

Yet, this new drama wrought by Hanse is, in essence, its own revision, a last-minute edit of the Master Plan, and the kind of inspiring alternative that only reveals itself to the architect who designs in the dirt as well as on paper. When Hanse arrived to begin the final phase of Homestead's restoration, he found opportunity for punctuating this finale with even more zest than he'd envisioned. Rather than simply cling to an idea that certainly improved what preceded it, he expanded his vision to enrich that idea. How? Compare the drawings—on page 135—of the green he finally conceived with the one he'd previously imagined.

And what do you see? A stunning drama that unveils itself in layers.

It begins in the neighborhood of the old putting surface and the ridge it nestled into. Hanse erased the entire green complex, brought the fairway up to its logical conclusion in a collision with the ridge, then accentuated the ridge via a sharp slope of mostly thick rough and a hearty patch of sand—cut into its right side near the stone wall—to remind anyone intent on the right side off the tee that the more advantageous arrival is from the left. Behind the slope, the new green, shaped and contoured with mature features of a later—and larger—Ross putting surface, sits boldly, high on a horizon that segues seamlessly to the clubhouse. The elevation

change from fairway to green camouflages its true distance; couple that uncertainty with a pair of bunkers pinching an otherwise generous open front beyond the ridge, and the march home becomes a truly worthy—and memorable—one.

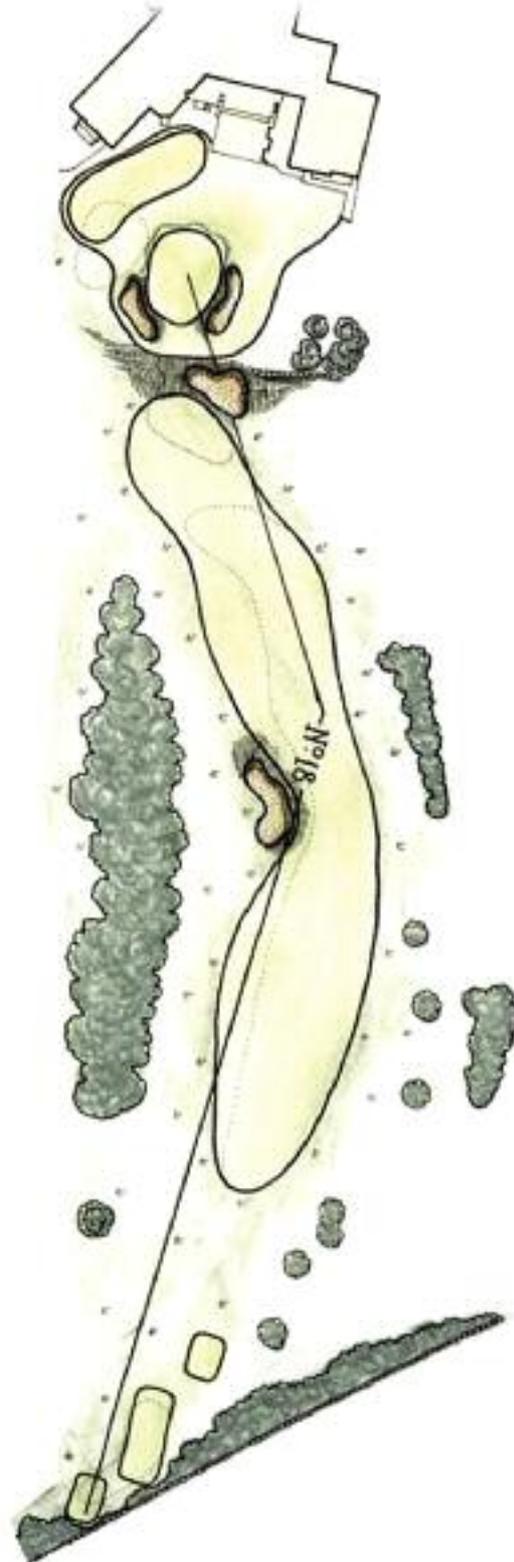
Still, there's more. At the back of the putting surface, a new rise in the land leads to a new bunker that craftily announces a wiley transition: the 18th green and the practice putting green now blend together, sharing DNA and bonhomie. The clubhouse and the course have, at last, been connected.

As the hole now ends differently, it begins differently, too. Added length called for a new forward tee, and tradition advised that the old boomerang box—a compromise installed by Ross to accommodate the odd space he encountered in 1931—be banished, with the middle tees and the tips each granted their own satisfyingly rectangular starting points. To better define the entry to the fairway, Hanse cleaned up the tree line en route, then took back the tree line around the fairway itself to let the playing surface expand and draw out its key element: the large, lone bunker in its crook.

Restored in Ross's style, the bunker's been expanded and extended; it now requires a healthier hit to traverse. To refresh the benefits of the left-side option and assure a proper reward for successfully navigating the bunker's air space, the fairway reaches out to meet the sand both in approach and beyond, and while there's still plenty of room on the right to avoid the trap entirely, the new bunker in the ridge downrange makes the path to the green from this direction a dicey proposition.

All in all, a much more dynamic golf hole. Expanded at last to fill the available land and incorporate its salient features, No. 18 is no longer constrained by its past. Instead, its renewed presence pays tribute to the past—as it looks toward the future. What a fitting legacy to the middle-aged Scotsman who first walked these grounds so long ago foreseeing a golf course that would continue to bring pleasure all these years later. By so honoring Ross and his period, Hanse has fittingly capped this story—told in 18 distinct chapters—with the exclamation point it always deserved.

NO. 18  
YDS. 418



REVISED  
PLAN OF GREEN