

Donald Ross's Sandhills Evolution & Pine Needles

Having pursued for a number of years the delightful occupation of visiting the best golf courses in this country and Europe, it is a real pleasure to find here in my old running ground an ideal golf course. The design of the holes, the construction work and the natural contours combine to produce at Pine Needles - I do not hesitate to say it - one of the finest golf courses. I doubt if he has done anything better than this.

Robert Hunter (Alister MacKenzie's design partner at Cypress Point, upon the opening of Pine Needles)

One of the keys to Pinehurst golf's early success was Donald Ross's variations within a common theme. In Ross's day, being overly repetitive was not the optimal path. This remains the case today. Maintaining fidelity to this aspect of Ross's approach to design has been a cornerstone of our restorations here.

The most important part of describing the restoration work we have undertaken at Pine Needles, is that we have tried to make all three projects – Pinehurst No. 2, Mid Pines, and Pine Needles – slightly different from each other. It has always been my goal to exhibit different periods of Ross's evolving Pinehurst style, between the 1910's and 1940's, on each course.

1. Pinehurst No. 2 - As part of the Pinehurst No. 2 restoration, Bill Coore & Ben Crenshaw, and our shaping staff's goal, was to restore Ross's late 30's to early 1940's style of Pinehurst work. That meant re-creating:

- The bunkers with a mix of slightly flashed faces and low profile/slightly rolled over faced bunkers.
- And, of course, restore the wiregrass/sandy-hardpan areas on each side of the fairways to compliment the overall hole strategies and challenging green complexes. The fairways were restored to an enjoyable width, which was a trademark of Ross's work in the Sandhills. With the USGA input for the 2014 U.S. Opens, it also tightened the fairway widths in places to make the course a more exacting driving test.

2. Mid Pines - Ross's original design style was very different at Mid Pines:

- The course was more heavily dependent on menacing/flash faced bunkers on each side of the greens. On Pinehurst No. 2, the first two greens have a relatively bunker free areas where the player can bail out into the famously challenging tight-mow areas and hollows. On most holes, there is at least one larger area around the greens to safely miss, leaving those iconic, touchy recovery shots. Ross's original design at Mid Pines had far less tight-mow and friendly space around the greens. While there were snippets of tight-mow buffers around areas of greens, and classic Pinehurst recovery shots, as a rule Ross generally had something more punitive lurking close by on most sides. Both courses were meant to be exacting approach shot tests -- but each in a slightly different way.
- We chose to restore those principles closely. The intimidating, high flash face bunkers Ross used during the early/mid 1930's were more aggressive than the bunkering we ultimately employed on Pinehurst No. 2. The 15 foot deep greenside bunker on #5 at Mid Pines is a prime example. It is easily the most severe bunker I've restored on the three courses. The bunkers fronting the 4th, 13th and 14th greens would probably be next in line.
- While Mid Pines fairways were originally as wide as Pinehurst No. 2, there was a relatively sharp difference in the areas beyond the fairways. No. 2 featured large sandy wiregrass areas on each side of the hole. These acted as buffers between the fairways and forest -- where golfers could find their wayward shots and safely play on. At Mid Pines the overall clearings were narrower,

resulting in dense thickets of pine, dogwood, wisteria, wiregrass, and broomsedge closely guarding the fairways and landing zones. In some areas, there was little to no buffer between the fairway edges and the woods. As a result, obtaining good approach shot angles past the intimidating greenside bunkers, required playing bold tee shots precariously close to these jungles.

Early players, such as Walter Hagen and Bobby Cruikshank, characterized Mid Pines as a “severe test”. In order to ‘score’ at this course, ace players were forced to play perilous shots, even by Ross standards. That is why the heavily treed character of Mid Pines was preserved during our restoration -- even though we did remove several hundred pines. The tight corridors still work very well today to achieve the menacingly claustrophobic affect Ross intended. We restored the overall fairway width Ross designed -- slightly wider than Pinehurst No. 2’s USGA championship specifications. While the width encourages choices off the tee for the ace, these expanses are eminently playable for the average player. Our work also returned the various bunkers, wiregrass, broomsedge, and sandy wiregrass hazards at the edges of holes where appropriate to Ross’s intentions. Lastly, we restored hole locations on all the greens that had been lost or abandoned over the decades.

The Pine Needles Restoration

Ross intentionally designed Pine Needles to be distinct from his work on Pinehurst No. 2 and Mid Pines.

The design relies heavily on large ridges in the fairway landing zones to create interest on tee shots. The player that hits solid drives is rewarded with robust speed-slot bounces forward. The 1st, 2nd, 6th, 7th, 11th, 12th, and 18th aptly illustrate the concept. The player that can hit draws and fades to the correct sides of the ridges has even more of an advantage. That style is, of course, reminiscent of many classic holes from the “Philadelphia School of Design”. This is not a surprising influence given that Ross was working at Aronimink, Saint Davids, and York -- all in the Philadelphia region -- while Needles was being constructed.

One of the sharper distinctions between the courses was playability around the green. Areas such as the 11th green of Pine Needles exclude uncomfortably close greenside bunkering entirely. In addition, the fairways were the widest of the three courses.



Width and the manicured look on early Pine Needles.

Some Ross enthusiasts prefer more maintained/manicured courses than his Sandhills style. Some like wall-to-wall velvet; while others think the courses should be even *more* sandy/rugged/natural. There is nothing wrong with either perspective.

That said, from the outset, our goal was to make Pine Needles slightly different by making it more manicured than Pinehurst No. 2 and Mid Pines. The resort was blessed with having two very distinct/different Ross courses. So I enthusiastically embraced and pursued the challenge of making Pine Needles slightly more appealing to those who prefer a more manicured style -- while still being authentic to Ross's original design.

To accomplish that, we chose to emulate the style of Ross's mid to later 1940's work in Pinehurst. By then the courses were:

- Slightly more manicured thanks to improvements in turf and irrigation technology.
- The bunkers had slowly been altered by Ross/Frank Maples crews to become more grass faced/rolled over. This editing was a significant contrast to the big sand faces of the 1930's. With this in mind, restoring the late 40's style gave us the opportunity to make the bunkers look different from Mid Pines and Pinehurst No. 2
- By the mid to late 40's a few small areas of maintained rough began to appear on holes where Bermuda grass crept into sandy wiregrass/native areas.

To achieve the late 40's style:

- We expanded the fairways out to their original margins to re-establish Ross's strategic options/playing angles with the friendly width Ross intended. Pinehurst No. 2's fairways average 24-40 yards in the landing areas. Mid Pines is very close to Ross's intended widths at 38-50 yards wide. Pine Needles fairways are now very similar to Ross's dimensions, averaging 38 to 60 yards wide. Some of the higher handicapper landing zones are nearly 70 yards wide -- the widest of the three courses -- just as Ross had intended. The analogy I made was to make Pine Needles feel as clean and manicured as Augusta prior to the 2000's; huge fairways and minimal rough, while complimented by authentic Ross's style bunkers and native areas. Given the course plays through forest and neighborhoods, I felt that the late 40's style very much fits the property.
- We restored and/or re-configured all 70 bunkers to Ross's rolled over late 40's style, including adding 8 additional new traps. This work brought Ross's strategic concepts back to life.

PINE NEEDLES

Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club / Mid Pines Inn & Golf Club



- We also removed and re-naturalized 11 acres of rough that had been added over the decades. Several acres of native areas were re-vamped, as well. While there are some sandy/wiregrass areas, the wide fairways are more often flanked by pine straw. That combination allows balls to run swiftly downhill toward trouble, with the sloping property. The side-hill tee shots on the 6th and 12th are prime illustrations of Ross's use of this tactic. Although he intended there to be less sandy wiregrass than No. 2/Mid Pines, there are still plenty of them -- such as the areas we restored guarding the speed-slot landing zones on the 2nd, 6th, 11th, and 18th.
- We re-grassed, expanded, and restored greens to re-establish Ross's lost hole locations. In the process, we restored "horse and blade" caliber micro-contours to add interest on the putting surfaces.
- We removed select trees throughout the property to improve turf and compliment the renewed strategies created by expanding the fairways and greens. Tees were added for shorter players, as well as three new tees for longer hitters -- hoping to get them hitting the clubs Ross intended into greens.

- The last area we focused on was improving playability for high handicappers. Some parts of the course had become overgrown with dense lovegrass and broomsedge, causing occasional lost balls -- especially in front of the tees. Both plants are difficult to eradicate to improve playability. So I decided to revamp those areas into Pine Valley style hazards that Ross used in the Sandhills region in the 1900's-1920's. He utilized these in front of tees, in lost ball prone areas. This also allowed us to highlight another distinctive era of Ross's most interesting work. Since we were going for a slightly more maintained style along the sides of holes, I thought the 1920's style in foreground native areas would spice things up visually.

Hole 11 at Pinehurst #3 Course – 1920's



Hole 9 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club



Hole 16 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club - Before



Hole 16 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club – After



It will be interesting to see how the USGA approaches the ultra-wide fairways for future events. We are hosting the 2019 U.S. Senior Women's Open. My hope is that the fairways remain wide for subsequent tournaments, and instead the holes play lengths where players will be hitting the same irons Ross intended into greens. The holes were almost always intended to play longer than one might suspect today. That setup style would provide for an interesting contrast to their excellent setup on No. 2 for the 2014 U.S. Women's Open.

The scope and scale of our Pine Needles restoration is as extensive as our work at Mid Pines. However, because the work has been ongoing for two years, instead of a few months like Mid Pines, it is not as noticeable. It is always nice to go back and see where we started! If you did not see the course before the project, this photo tour is a great resource: <http://sandhillsinsider.com/PineNeedles/pncoursetour.html>

Hopefully everyone will enjoy the stylistic approach we chose. Working in a different period of Ross's Sandhills-style has been an enjoyable challenge. I've been extremely fortunate to play a part in many exciting restorations. In addition to the courses here, I've been part of restorations at Pasatiempo and California Golf Club. Also, I am presently consulting on an exciting list of other courses including Country Club of Charleston, site of the 2019 U.S. Women's Open, and Minikahda Club, site of the 2017 U.S. Senior Amateur.

Pine Needles has made for a fascinating 2016-17. If anyone is in town and stops by, I would love to catch up for a game!

Kyle Franz - KMF Golf Course Design

Hole 4 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club - Before



Hole 4 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club – After



Hole 9 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club – After



Hole 3 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club – After



Hole 18 at Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club – After

