

The Quiet Gem of the Sandhills

Tucked away and largely unknown to outsiders,
Southern Pines Golf Club delights everyone who plays it



BY LEE PACE

Beyond the small greens and intricate chipping areas, past the features inviting the ground game and the limited use of water hazards and forced carries, the earmark of a Donald Ross golf course is a great routing. Ross arranged holes like Monet ordered brushstrokes and Chopin aligned notes. Poetry in golf, so to speak.

Exhibits A, B, and C in the Sandhills golf universe are, of course, Pinehurst No. 2, Pine Needles, and Mid Pines, each an early 1900s masterpiece and a venue over multiple decades of elite golf competitions.

Tucked away in the southeast corner of Southern Pines is yet another monument to Ross's old-world sensibilities and eye for turning hardscrabble ground into inviting golf – Southern Pines Golf Club.

This 1923 Ross relic has never hosted the U.S. Open or Ryder Cup ...

There is no opulent inn next door ...

It hasn't a deep reservoir of marketing dollars ...

And in truth the 1970s architecture of the clubhouse and the neighboring Elks Club are like most structures and garments of that era – just *what* were we thinking?

"People see the clubhouse and they see the ratty range and they say, 'What have you gotten me into?'" golfer Ran Morrissett says. "I say, 'Hang on, just give me a couple of holes, you'll soon understand.'"

Indeed, lace a nice little draw on the par-four first hole, pinch a nine-iron off the firm fairway and nestle your putt into the cup on a starkly canted green and you're off on a golf adventure that taxes your strength on some holes, your touch in every nook, your skills at curving shots, your ability to plan shots and to balance risks and rewards.

Morrissett, a devotee of the course since his move to Southern Pines in 2000, is walking and carrying his bag one bright December afternoon along the fourth fairway. He nods to a row of condominiums to the right.

"You see homes on four and five, but that's it," Morrissett says. "The rest of the time, you're literally immersed in nature. How fortunate are we to have a course like this? Personally, I think it's on the best property in Moore County. All of this is sand, and it's rolling, up and down, up and down. You walk off one green, and in a few steps you're teeing off. At some point, you'd think the architect is bound to get stuck with one bad hole. But here there is one appealing hole after another."

Golf has been played on this ground just south of Morganton Road and east of Broad Street for more than a century, as postcards collected by the Moore County Historical Association show holes in existence today being played in the 1910s. The final routing for Southern Pines Country Club was established in 1923, with Ross later adding nine holes and planning for nine more that were never built. By the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, Ross had designed four courses at Pinehurst and one each at Pine Needles and Mid Pines.

The Depression strained every golf operation in the nation, the ones in the Sandhills included. Mid Pines and Pine Needles went bankrupt at one point or another and the Tufts family of Pinehurst struggled in operating its resort and private club. The Southern Pines golf operation was a drain on the town's coffers, and after World War II the town sold the course to Mike Sherman, a Connecticut businessman who knew the area from his frequent visits to Pinehurst.

In Sherman's employ in Bridgeport in the late 1940s was a young accountant of Hungarian descent who complained that the cold Northern winters were bad for his golf game. So Sherman dispatched Julius Boros south to Southern Pines to keep the books and give golf lessons to Sherman's wife, who came south for the winter. It was on these holes at Southern Pines that Boros sharpened his skills to the degree he could tie Sam Snead for runnerup honors behind champion Toney Penna in the 1948 Men's North and South

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Open at Pinehurst No. 2. Two years later, Boros turned pro and launched a Hall of Fame career.

Sherman owned the course until 1951, when he sold it to the Benevolent & Protective Order of Elks, which remains the owner today. The course has been operated since 2007 by Avestra Golf Management, which leases it from the Elks. It is open to the public at all times, and memberships are available.

The greens were rebuilt by architect John LaFoy in 1998 to accommodate faster putting surfaces, and he added a tee on the 15th hole to lengthen it from a par-four to a par-five. The course plays 6,268 yards to a par of 71.

“What struck me most about Southern Pines was that you had a really fine layout,” LaFoy says. “It’s just a really, really good layout. It’s outstanding. That’s what Donald Ross did so well – his routings. He used the topography very well.”

Among Avestra’s initiatives in recent years has been to aggressively clear out decades of underbrush accumulation between holes, allowing for better vistas and air circulation.

“It’s the absolute best value on a Ross course for this type of condition in the area,” says director of golf Doug Thompson. “It’s a daily fee course and it’s affordable. What hurts is the physical perception as you drive in. Once you get out there, the golf course and the conditions are off the charts.”

Morrissett lives less than a mile from the course and often plays at twilight during the summer, taking three hours or thereabouts to walk the course. He remembers seeing it for the first time in the winter of 2000 and thinking it should be in *Golf Magazine’s* Top 100 Courses in the World, for which he serves as a course rater. About the same time, Morrissett and his brother created *GolfClubAtlas*, a website that has developed an international presence among golfers and architects interested in travel and classic design. Morrissett has been effusive in his praise of Southern Pines on the website and is eager to invite his golfing pals to town to experience the course.

“I know, a little irrational exuberance,” he says with a laugh of his first impressions. “I got carried away. But I just *loved* it. I felt like I’d stumbled on a gem the rest of the world didn’t know about. I thought, ‘How have I never heard about this place?’ There is so much good golf here.”

Early 20th century design customs didn’t require an architect to return the ninth hole to the clubhouse, so Ross had the freedom to route the course in best manner possible (e.g., No. 2, Forsyth and Linville, among other Ross gems of the era). Ross did so at Southern Pines by wrapping the eighth through 11th holes around a lake positioned half a mile south of the clubhouse and using the water feature as a visual backdrop on several other holes.

There are small nooks in the front of some greens that make hitting and holding perilous. The player who can hit a driver flush with a draw on the par-five fifth hole can gain a trampoline effect of 30 more yards off the sloping fairway. The player who can launch a high fade can drive the green on the left-to-right shaped 11th. Eight and 10 are par-fours that require precise short-iron approaches, then 12 comes along and demands a hefty long iron or fairway wood uphill into the green. Accuracy off the tee is necessary to negotiate the bounces off the sloping fairways.

You'll find no confetti or mascara at Southern Pines. No bright-eyed cart boy will descend upon your arrival. Grab your bag and go hit it. And hit it again, nothing more, nothing less.

"Without any doubt the thing I am sure of is, if more kids had exposure to this as their idea of golf, the sport would be thriving," Morrissett says as his walk in the park continues. "If this is not your cup of tea, then golf is not your cup of tea." PS

Lee Pace will write about hickory golf and other vintage topics in his forthcoming book, "The Golden Age of Pinehurst," due out in spring 2012.



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