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Pinehurst No. 2: Pure Pinehurst

The home of American golf, Pinehurst No. 2 nearly lost itself trying to be great. But after a yearlong restoration, it looks just like it always should have, right at home in the North Carolina Sandhills. Written by MICHAEL GRAFF

On a new day at Pinehurst No. 2, the flagsticks are the last things set into place.

A golf course isn't a golf course during the night. It's just a cut of land treated more carefully than the other cuts of land around it. If you walk Pinehurst No. 2 at night, you won't see a single ghost of golfers past, despite the legends; you'll just stumble upon short grass and shorter grass, and lots of sand, all strangely placed in the middle of 18 odd tunnels of longleaf pines. It's an unnatural setting with all-natural pieces.

Morning activates it. Nearly 20 men scatter throughout the land. They yank the mower cords, breaking the

silence. They mow one way, then the other way. They rake sand traps and pick up pinecones and fix ball marks. They don't talk much. The air is wet, and the ground is wet, too, glazed by dew that slept here with No. 2.

The fourth hole is the farthest east of all the holes on No. 2, one of the East Coast's most revered golf courses. Sunrise hits here first. The fourth is a gorgeous hole even to the eyes of a nongolfer. From the tee, you can see clear to the green, 520 yards away. In between, a valley bends down from the tee then up to the green, an empty belly in the

middle of the hole as if pressed down by God.

In this open land, when the sun rises on the fourth hole, its energy is tangible. The first rays are so bright and strong and straight as they shoot through the trees, it seems like you could hang clothes on them. The dew fades away instantly. The mowers stop. And finally, the flagsticks go in.

There are 18 of those flagsticks, and they are now the only things that don't grow naturally on Pinehurst No. 2.

I've walked Pinehurst No. 2, or parts

of No. 2, at least a hundred times. A former sportswriter, I stood in the clubhouse and watched a big-screen television as Michael Campbell accepted the 2005 U.S. Open Championship trophy just outside the door. Tiger Woods stood beside me. He growled. I watched the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill basketball coach Roy Williams tee off. He hits it straight. And I played it once. No. 2 was better than me.

But when I think of No. 2, the first thing I think of is cigar smoke. A cigar is a sophisticated collection of tobacco, smoked by men with money. I remember one North & South Amateur tournament. A young man named Phillip Mollica from Clemson University won, and his name was inscribed in a plaque in the locker room next to names like Jack Nicklaus. Mollica's grandfather taught him to golf, and the grandfather walked the course during the tournament smoking a cigar.

Otherwise, No. 2 smells like the Sandhills, piney and refreshing. Pinehurst, as a village, was founded because people believed those longleaf pines healed.

A church sits near the first hole. Its bell tolls at noon, loud enough that many golfers won't swing while it carries on. And there's always some quiet chatter from the back deck of the clubhouse as people watch golfers come in. And a few cameras click at the statue of Payne Stewart, who won the 1999 U.S. Open.

Otherwise, No. 2 sounds like a golf course, quiet and reflective. No. 2, as a course, was built as the "fairest test in championship golf," by designer Donald Ross.

Ross is a man who died 63 years ago but lives on as a verb. Anybody who's played one of the 400 courses he

designed knows the term, "You've been 'Rossed.'" Ross built most of his greens on top of mounds, with severe slopes off all sides. Being "Rossed" means you hit one too close to the edge, and you watched your ball teeter on the side, slowly rolling the wrong way, one revolution after another, faster and faster, toward trouble. Often, the flagstick is placed close to those edges, so aiming at the target becomes the wrong choice. Ross takes the narrow-minded and makes fools of them; he rewards people who take life in steps.

But the beauty of Ross's signature course, No. 2, and the beauty of golf in general, is that even if you are "Rossed," there's always another shot to be had. It's called a recovery shot.

Ross built the course out of the earth.

And in Moore County, a midsize county in the heart of North Carolina where peach trees and pine trees grow, that meant building a course out of sand. This is the Sandhills region, where everything grows atop ancient sand dunes that existed when the ocean level was much higher 20 million years ago.

The land is arid, prone to forest fires after lightning strikes. The forest floor is clear of vegetation; nearby Fort Bragg conducts controlled burns routinely. The local fox squirrels even evolved to have a char-colored coat.

Ross's original design for No. 2, completed in 1907, took into account the natural scenery, barely intruding on the sand, leaving light brown shoulders everywhere. In order to grow anything green here, you need water. And throughout most of No. 2's early existence, the course had only one irrigation line, down the middle of the fairways.

That one line worked for years. In the early 1900s, Pinehurst started sponsoring the North & South tournament, an amateur event created to do two things: promote the new resort and bridge relationships between all golfers following the Civil War. It became one of the top golf tournaments in the United States, and it still stands as the longest-running amateur golf tournament in the country.

Then television came along, and audiences wanted green golf courses. So the Pinehurst staff ran water lines all over the turf, and suddenly No. 2 had grass growing everywhere. Then, as golfers improved their game, the course toughened

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Pinecones that would have been removed in the past add to the challenge of hitting outside the fairway.





Sandy roads, like the ones that surround the 15th fairway, add to the rustic feel of No. 2. Rather than maintaining a dense rough, the groundskeepers have exposed the sand and wire grass that grow naturally here, giving the course a distinctly Sandhills feel.



Pinehurst's greens are notoriously difficult, and the best weapon for playing them is a good caddie.

itself by growing more green. The staff narrowed the fairways and grew taller rough. In 2005 at the U.S. Open, No. 2 had four-inch-tall rough squeezing in on pencil-thin fairways. And the whole place was green, rich green. All here in the Sandhills, where brown is natural.

Bob Farren started working at No. 2 in the early 1980s. He's now the director of greens and grounds for the resort, which involves eight golf courses, including No. 2. He watched No. 2 become greener and greener. But in 2008, the U.S. Amateur Championship took place here.

The kids — amateurs are mostly college students — weren't afraid of the course. They bombed drives over the pine trees on the seventh hole recklessly and successfully, trying to hit the green in one shot. That style of play wasn't as Ross planned it, back before science and engineering created golf clubs that could hit the ball much farther. Ross wanted his course played in steps, one shot at a time.

Ross's courses are tougher, even today, when they are as they should be. After years of trying to make No. 2 more difficult by just growing tall grass and shrinking the fairways, Farren and the Pinehurst board of directors decided to peel the layers back on this great course.

"It had gotten too formal," Farren says. "Too much

turf. Too manicured."

In 2010, Pinehurst hired Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw to strip Pinehurst No. 2 down to its sandy roots for the future. With the 2014 U.S. Men's and Women's Opens approaching, it was a risky move. But the staff believed purity would be appealing to everyone.

Today, national audiences want to understand the differences in region and culture. National audiences want to see Pinehurst No. 2's natural character. National audiences want to know No. 2 as it was supposed to be, a course in the Sandhills. Coore and Crenshaw and staff eliminated 40 acres of turf, ripped out the green grass, and let the sand shine through. They minimized the irrigation system to one line, straight down the middle of the course. If it doesn't rain for weeks, the outskirts of the fairways dry out and turn brown. Farren loves it when that happens because balls roll farther in those brown areas, and they funnel into the sand, making holes deceptively difficult for golfers.

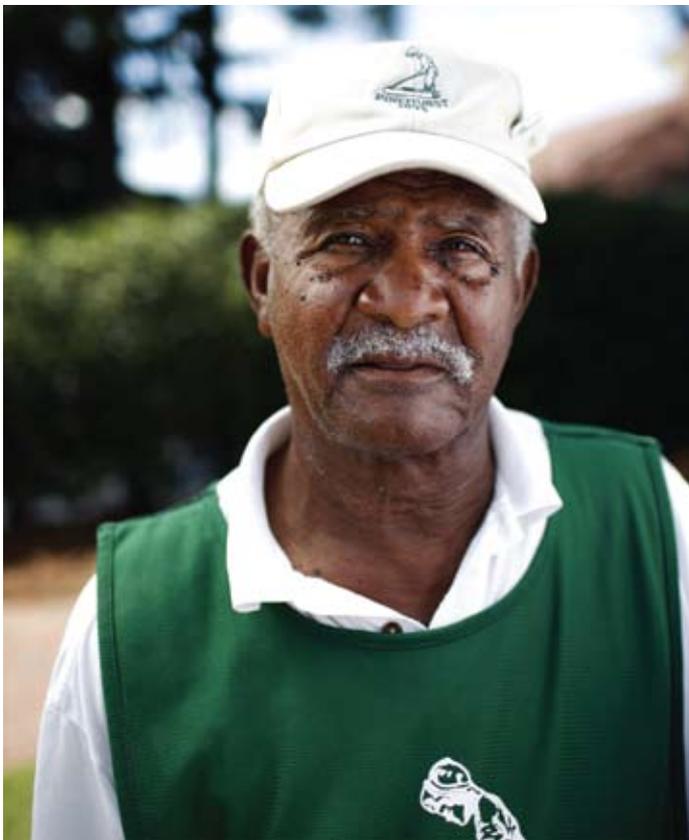
The rest of the reconstruction was a Sandhills gardening project — they added dozens of other native plants that bloom at different times of the year so that something always shines at No. 2. The portulaca plants on the 13th hole bloom for three or four hours a day, then hide away.

"If you play it all year, each of those times you play,



you'll find a different plant growing in some areas," Farren says. "No. 2 had just become a big expanse of turf. It was beautifully manicured, but it was turf. It just didn't have the diversity people want."

One of the plants that doesn't bloom color is wire grass. The staff planted 80,000 of those plants during reconstruction. The wire grass is native to the Sandhills, growing from a bulb, its stringy leaves fanning out. Most of the wire grass at No. 2 grows in clumps in the sand that surrounds the course, where that overgrown green rough used to be. When the wind blows, wire grass tickles the sand around it like a friendly claw. Now, anybody who tries to drive the ball over the trees on the seventh hole and misses might find himself in a clump of grass, or he might not — it's his risk.



"Aim left," caddie Willie McRae

says to the player he guides around No. 2. "More left. Keep going. There you go. Now."

The player swings and hits a ball that slices perfectly down the fairway.

"See?" McRae says.

McRae is 78 years old, and he's caddied at No. 2 since he was 10. He knows every roll of this land. He's carried bags for everybody from Ben Hogan to Arnold Palmer to Sam Snead. He remembers some big story about every hole, and he passes those tales down as legends. He tallied all of the times he's walked the course, and at almost 7,000 yards on each trip, he figures he's been to California and back eight times.

"Ask him about the time he caddied for Moses," a friend of McRae's says.

McRae doesn't walk the course anymore. He's the only person allowed to drive a cart over the precious grass. He knew Donald Ross. "Nice guy. Pro. He could play good golf," the soft-spoken McRae says underneath a flapping, gray mustache.

McRae served in the United States Army and then worked in an iron factory in Moore County from 1970 to 1995. He worked the night shift at the factory, so he could wake up and caddie during the days.

"Every time you walk Pinehurst, it's a new story," McRae says.



Top: The Padgett Learning Center stands near the clubhouse and overlooks the driving range and putting greens. **Middle:** Sixty-eight years after his first round as a caddie at Pinehurst, Willie McRae still makes it around the course, telling stories and giving advice. **Bottom:** The Putterboy logo is the symbol of No. 2, and it is drawn everywhere around the course, even on the tee markers.

He steps out of the cart and walks up the hills to Ross's greens and helps his players putt. He knows everything about every green. He knows that the grain of the grass grows from east to west and a putt moves slower going against the grain. He knows a putt rolls faster from north to south.

And he also knows the most important rule of playing Pinehurst No. 2: It's all about vision and taking it in steps.

"If you see it," McRae says to the player lining up a putt, "you can make it."

Imagine being dressed for prom every day of your life. Pinehurst No. 2 cannot have a bad morning. For 104 years, it's been formal every day.

It started as Ross's vision. It then became colored green. It played host to two U.S. Open championships. It became something it wasn't meant to be, too green and too lush. The charcoal-colored fox squirrels, here in their homeland, the land they evolved into, looked odd on the course.

But now, they are home at Pinehurst No. 2, and Pinehurst No. 2 is itself.

The great course has brown spots again, and it will have brown spots when those cameras shine down in 2014, and that will be fine.

And each morning, before the cigar smoke carries through the air, just as the sun shines through the pines and No. 2 awakes for the new day, those 20 workers cut the engines to the mowers and put the 18 flagsticks in 18 holes carved out of the native, sandy soil that's been here for millennia. And in those precious, early moments, as the sun awakens this golf course of legends, Pinehurst No. 2 simply smells like fresh-cut grass. 🏌️

Michael Graff is the senior editor of Our State magazine. His most recent story for Our State was "Edenton" (December 2011).



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