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Baltusrol (Lower)



WHO REDOES WHOM?

Meet the
masters of
restoring
Golden Age
classics

by JOE PASSOV



A

s countless clubs across the globe approach their centenaries, it's clear that many Golden Age classic courses deserve

restorations. Fortunately, there's a supremely skilled assemblage of architects to help them find their way back. We asked five prominent restoration experts to share their experiences and insights into this ever-burgeoning aspect of design.

These days, the hottest go-to restoration artist is Gil Hanse. With his partner Jim Wagner and their talented field crew known as "the Cavemen," Hanse and his team have excelled at rehabilitating America's most revered Golden Age courses for 25 years. In the past 10 years alone, Hanse has seemingly snatched away Rees Jones's "Open Doctor" label with his turn-back-the-clock efforts at Winged Foot (East and West), Baltusrol (Lower completed; Upper to come), Merion (East), The Country Club in Brookline for the 2022 U.S. Open, Oakland Hills (South), and, most

recently, Southern Hills. Throw in his remarkable accomplishments at Los Angeles Country Club's North course, site of the 2023 U.S. Open, and it's clear that Hanse has planted the flag atop Restoration Mountain.

Hanse enjoyed a steady stream of restoration (and original design) successes from 1995–2010. But when LA North reopened in 2011, it catapulted him into rarefied air. With the help of historian Geoff Shackelford, Hanse restored George Thomas Jr.'s "course within a course" design philosophy that utilized alternate tees, fairway width, and a mix of hole locations to instill maximum day-to-day variety in a round. Bunkers were reshaped and relocated, fairways were widened and reshaped to provide alternate routes, and a natural barranca was brought back into play as a strategic hazard. After its successful staging of the 2017 Walker Cup, Hanse's phone hasn't stopped ringing.

Asked about his firm's recent efforts at two of America's toughest championship tracks, Southern Hills and Oakland Hills (South), Hanse remarked, "I'm not sure if either will play harder, but they will certainly play differently from the pre-restoration courses. Southern Hills was our first Perry Maxwell restoration



Merion (East)

and it is an amazing routing for that site. Aside from Merion (East), it's maybe the best routing for a particular course we have worked on. The major change is that we restored the edge conditions to the greens, where they now fall away as in the original designs. Golfers will need to be super respectful of the edges of the greens, and they will only reward truly precise shots into these small and sloping greens.

"At Oakland Hills, there were significantly more changes to the tee shots and the fairway bunkering, which we hope will make the game from the tee more interesting. We also restored the scale of the Donald Ross features to the site. It may be the best merger of scale, features, and topography that we have ever seen. Ross was a genius at that."

Tom Doak and his longtime collaborator Jim Urbina churned out dozens of superior restorations over the years, from Alister MacKenzie products such as Pasatiempo, Royal Melbourne, Crystal Downs, and the Valley Club of Montecito, to Top 100 treasures by Ross, Thomas, Maxwell, A.W. Tillinghast, William Flynn, Walter Travis, C.H. Alison, Charles Blair Macdonald, and Seth Raynor.

On his own since 2009, Urbina has elevated his craft even further, with his sensitive handling of such fabled century-old tracks as Chicago's Bob O'Link (Alison) and New York's Paramount (Tillinghast) and Blind Brook (Raynor). He is the Consulting Architect at Pasatiempo, Yeamans Hall (Raynor), White Bear Yacht Club (Ross), and Chicago's Glenview (Flynn).

Urbina's breakthrough arrived via his efforts at Pasatiempo in 1996 and Yeamans Hall in 1998. "They were my introduction to Golden Age, classic design strategies," says Urbina. "Those two courses started my process of learning, reading about, and studying MacKenzie and Raynor. I wasn't schooled in the Ivy League. I was from the college of dirt, working for Pete Dye. This was like a 500-level college education in a work-study program."

The height of anxiety for Urbina took place under Doak's Renaissance Golf banner at Tillinghast's San Francisco Golf Club in the 1990s, when he was charged with bringing back all 18 greens after a devastating nematode infestation. "I was praying that I wouldn't hear, 'You've ruined these greens.' When it was done, for approval, I went to the people I knew could tell me



Wannamoisett

the truth—the caddies. When the caddies said, ‘Jim, it all looks good,’ what a relief.”

Andrew Green tore into the design business like a quiet cyclone. One day he was an unknown. The next he was as in-demand as anyone in the industry. Or so it seemed.

Actually, he had paid his dues for 14 years doing design and build for elite golf course construction firm McDonald and Sons. Among the McDonald renovation projects that educated him further were Oakmont, Shinnecock Hills, and Pine Valley.

Since founding his own firm in 2014, he has prospered. His clients include Inverness Club (Ross), site of the 2021 Solheim Cup; Oak Hill East (Ross), 2023 PGA Championship venue; Congressional (Blue), (Devereux Emmet); Scioto and Wannamoisett (Ross); Whitemarsh Valley (Thomas); and Huntingdon Valley and Philmont North (Flynn).

Green has the utmost respect for tradition and the classics, yet has wholeheartedly embraced technology and other modern tools to hone his craft. He cites the use of the knuckle bucket on mini excavators as a game-changer. “The mini ex has made such an impact because it’s very similar in shape to the old horse and plow—the dimensions of the bucket, whether it’s two feet, 18 inches, or even 12 inches, versus an eight-foot dozer blade—that piece of equipment makes a huge difference in the presentation, with finer detail, and allows us to make things feel more ‘period.’

“Some guys think technology makes the profession colder or less artistic. My opinion is that it makes it better and gives me greater flexibility. I can verify more things and in a much cleaner, crisper way than

ever before. At Inverness, we moved the second green back 100 yards. LIDAR (light detection and ranging) technology allowed me to survey it and move it in CAD (computer-aided design) and reproduce it—while the existing green was still in play. We could simply walk over and compare the new version to the green we were trying to replicate. It would have been a very cumbersome process a few decades ago, using some sort of grid system and more antiquated tools.

“Being in the dirt, with your shovel, is still the most important thing. But the technology gives me a sense of confidence and a command of what I’m doing.”

Among the most proficient and certainly the most prolific practitioners of restorative design is Ron Forse.

With partner Jim Nagle, Forse’s company has taken on more than 120 restoration projects, from 27 different original architects, including 55 Ross designs alone.

The Forse restoration stable includes Ross gems The Broadmoor (East), Hyannisport, Salem, and Winchester in Massachusetts, plus Tillinghast’s Brooklawn and Newport Country Club, Flynn’s Philadelphia Country Club and Lancaster Country Club, and Alison’s Davenport Country Club in Iowa. Nagle handles many of the Flynn projects, but both are well versed in the classicists.

Forse scored his first restoration triumph in 1990 at the Ross-designed Hyannisport Club on Cape Cod. The club superintendent suggested that Forse share his knowledge through industry seminars, one of which was a half-day affair called “The Classic Courses of the Master Architects.” Teaching superintendents about the design characteristics, methodology, and influences of the masters attracted many business contacts. That and the intense study of hundreds of courses built the foundation for success in the restoration field, not just with Ross courses but with many Golden Age greats.

Rarely are there pure restorations, observes Forse. “Our goal is to restore design intent,” he says. “That doesn’t mean to put everything back in the same spot. At Brae Burn (Mass.), we kept two bunkers that Ross installed in 1912 on the left side of the short par-four 15th even though everybody was blowing past them. But we added two more bunkers further down and slightly more in toward the fairway. That replicated Ross’s design intent. Players can’t tell that they aren’t original.”

Forse is especially proud of their work at historic Newport Country Club; tying together Spencer Oldham, Tillinghast, and Ross at the Omni Bedford Springs Resort in western Pennsylvania; installing some Ross “All-Stars” into the Country Club of Orlando; and in raising the profile of Langford-Moreau’s Lawsonia Links in Wisconsin and Alison’s Davenport Country Club. Forse admits that their prowess at restoration got them typecast as specialists. “It was unfortunate in one way,” says Forse, “but in another way, it helped us. Studying all those old courses made us better.”

Canada’s premier restoration artist is Ian Andrew, but he’s quickly gaining traction in the U.S. He has reinvigorated 17 courses in his home country by native Golden Age great Stanley Thompson, including World Top 100 and 2022 RBC Canadian Open venue St. George’s in Toronto and Highlands Links in Nova Scotia.

In recent years, Andrew has branched out to include refurbishing efforts on seven Travis designs, five in the U.S. and two in Canada; five by Ross; and products by Raynor, Tillinghast, Alison, Flynn, Emmet, and Willie Park Jr.

“The vast majority of my early work was in Toronto and Stanley Thompson had built or renovated so many of the golf courses in that city,” says Andrew. “The bunker restoration at St. George’s was so well received in 2001 that it made me a ‘go-to’ guy.”

But Andrew had concerns about that project. “I was deathly afraid when given the mandate to restore the bunkers on St. George’s,” he says. “Many believe it’s Thompson’s best golf course. I did my research and then took a year to put back the bunkers note for note using over 100 historical images and a collection of aeri-als. It was the moment where I went from an aspiring architect to a level of confidence in what I could do. I felt exactly the same when I was given my first Donald Ross course, too.”

Of all the Golden Age giants, Ross’s work is most challenging for Andrew to restore. “It’s a combination of things,” explains Andrew. “I’m in awe of the more subtle nature of his architecture. Subtle is harder to recreate than audacious. The number of experts on Ross and his architecture is intimidating. There are a lot of strong opinions of how the work should be handled.”

Unquestionably, many more stars reside in the restoration constellation. Keith Foster has won



multiple awards for his work at Philadelphia Cricket Club, Moraine, Eastward Ho!, and Baltimore Country Club at Five Farms, as well as recent U.S. Senior Open site Omaha Country Club. Tripp Davis has displayed remarkable acumen and versatility in restoring courses by Tillinghast, Ross, MacKenzie, Maxwell, Emmet, and Herbert Strong, while Kyle Phillips’s 2007 part-restoration/part-renovation/part-brand-new-hybrid effort at the California Golf Club of San Francisco stands alone for excellence.

Out west, Todd Eckenrode and his Origins Golf Design team have done wonders bringing back 1920s layouts from William Watson, Billy Bell, and Max Behr; notably Behr’s Lakeside Golf Club in Hollywood. Across the pond, Tom MacKenzie and Martin Ebert have consulted on seven Open Championship courses and just finished a superb restoration at Alison’s Hirono in Japan, ranked as Asia’s best course. Kudos as well to the recently formed firm of Clayton, DeVries & Pont for the MacKenzie expertise of Mike Clayton and Mike DeVries and to Frank Pont, the world’s foremost H.S. Colt restorer.

Credit pioneers in this arena, too, from Ron Prichard for perhaps the earliest restoration, at Texarkana Country Club in the mid-’80s, to Rees Jones, who ignited the classic course restoration craze in 1985 with his retro-fitting at The Country Club in Brookline ahead of the 1988 U.S. Open, and to Brian Silva, who coined the term “sympathetic restoration.” Finally, a golf clap for Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, who smacked a home run in 2011 with one of the most lauded restorations ever at Pinehurst No. 2. As their other rejuvenations of Seminole, Maidstone, and the Old Town Club show, Coore & Crenshaw take a backseat to no one in the restoration department.

For any club apprehensive about messing with its Mona Lisa of a classic course, fear not. There’s a current architect that can surely restore the smile. ●