spirit
SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

A Shot at Redemption

Life, like golf, is all about how you play out of the rough.

Taking the scenic route on hole 17 at Pinehurst's celebrated No. 2 course.

Triumph, struggle, and spectacular rebirth. Golf architect Donald Ross saw the game as a metaphor for life, and what happened to his masterpiece—the legendary No. 2 course at Pinehurst—is a story to live by.

Not to Be Forgotten

BY JOHN McALLEY / PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES HARRIS

IT'S MORNING in the Village of Pinehurst. The sun isn't quite up yet, but somehow the streets are already bathed in natural light. Two fit joggers, the only people in sight, sprint by. Birds are getting their chirp on. The air is redolent of pine and renewal. It's almost enough to make you think it's a good idea, this business of getting up at 5 a.m.

I'm standing outside the Holly Inn, the oldest of the two principal hotels at North Carolina's historic Pinehurst Resort, waiting to be picked up by Bob Farren, the golf mecca's longtime director of grounds and course management. Farren and the good people of Pinehurst are humoring me, having agreed to let me, for a couple of steamy days in mid-summer, be a guest groundskeeper on the resort's legendary No. 2 course, which has recently undergone a radical and pricey ($2.8 million) restoration. Over dinner just a short night's sleep ago, Farren passed me a tentative itinerary outlining my chores: placing tee markers, setting flagsticks, raking bunkers, pulling weeds. My immediate reaction was to gleefully recreate for him the scene from *Mad Men* in which a secretary driving a run-amok lawn mower shreds the toes of a British ad executive and then crashes through the wall of an office.

Farren laughed last night, but this morning, within an hour of sliding into his SUV to embark on our daybreak workload, it becomes obvious that I'll barely be lifting a finger on No. 2. And who can blame him? It would be like handing a can of paint thinner to a journalist with an interest in art restoration and setting him loose in the Sistine Chapel.

"WHEN WE'RE trainin' a *gahh* to set *ploogs*, there's no gray area. There's no 'Well, if you leave it a little bit *hahh* it's okay, or if you leave it a little low it's okay.' No, it's gotta be *floosh*, it's gotta be level." If anatomy is destiny, Alan Owen was born to be a golf-course groundskeeper. The doe-eyed, 36-year-old Brit has irises the size of nickels, and, to the chagrin of many of his co-workers, whose most expletive-free nickname for him is "the bunker Nazi," he can spot a misaligned blade of grass or errant speck of sand from a mile away. Bob Farren has left me in the care of fastidious Owen—the first of several grounds-crew aces assigned to chaperone me for two days—and as the sun crawls over the horizon I get schooled in the art of setting flagsticks on Pinehurst's spectacular greens. In Owenspeak—a hilarious blend of Liverpudlian slur and Southern drawl—plugs are *ploogs*, bunkers are *boonkers*, and guys are *gahhs*. And if you're going to be the *gahh* filling the *ploogs* on these immaculate putting surfaces, they darn well better be *floosh*.

It's not just the occasionally less-than-perfect attention to detail that makes Owen twitchy. On average, it takes him two and a half hours each morning to lovingly cut and tend to the cups on just nine of the No. 2 course's 18 holes. In the hands of someone like Owen, it's sculptural work and, sometimes, the source of psychic pain. "The worst," he says, adjusting the flagstick on the first green so it is absolutely perpendicular to the ground, "is when you see a *gahh* reaching into the *coop* with his *pooter*, trying to hoist out his ball. You're drivin' by and goin', 'Ow!'

"It was like walking into an attic and finding a blanket lying over a painting," one groundskeeper remembers about the renovation. "We took it off, and a masterpiece was sitting there."

But what are you goin' to tell a *gahh* who just paid $400 to play the course? He can get the ball outta the *coop* anyway he wants! But it's terrible. I *hate* seein' that."

More than 100 years earlier, the exacting vision of another Brit first shaped the beauty of the No. 2 course. When the 2,000-acre Pinehurst Resort opened in 1895, it was conceived not as a golf haven but as a health retreat. But the healing power of North Carolina's dreamy pine trees and sandy hills found its fullest expression in the golf courses that began dotting the landscape at the turn of the century, and in 1907 a Scotsman named Donald Ross created Pinehurst's masterpiece.

Regarded as, perhaps, the greatest of all golf-course architects, Ross has hundreds of famous tracks to his credit, but he doted on and coaxed the brilliance out of No. 2 for decades. By today's ultra-lush standards, No. 2 was rough-hewn, a ribbon of green fairways laid down amid dense, rugged expanses of sand, pine needles, hardpan, and bunkers that looked as if they'd been shaped by hand grenade. Thick masses of indigenous wiregrass multiplied like gremlins in these native areas, making any shot that didn't land in the safety of the fairway a perplexity of playing angles to Ross' famously elevated and wickedly rolling greens. "Ross' life work was here on No. 2," says Don Padgett Jr., a former pro golfer and Pinehurst's current president. "He lived here, he continued to refine it, and he watched the greatest players in the world play on it."

Still, the course, once considered one of the greatest ever built on U.S. soil, had in recent decades "become irrelevant," Padgett says—a victim of seismic shifts in the game and American life.

Golf is, at its core, an amateur sport. Pro golfers represent less than 1 percent of the people who play the game. The Tufts family, who founded and owned Pinehurst for 75 years, understood this and made it their ethos. In fact, their amateur creed was so fierce that, in 1951, when touring pros moaned about the modest prize money at an event played on No. 2, the Tufts "pretty much threw professional golf out of Pinehurst," Padgett says. At the time, it wasn't a gamble—the revolution in professional golf brought on by blanket television coverage and the rise of ready-for–prime time players like Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus was still a decade away. But without the visibility of PGA events, Pinehurst eventually faded from the collective imagination of the golf world.

Jungleland On the No. 2 course, the real adventure begins when your tee shot misses the fairway.

"THIS IS WHERE we keep all of the poisons," Tommy Lineberger says jokingly—I think. Swinging open the door to a storage shed stacked with dozens of gallons of pesticides and herbicides, the 24-year-old "spray tech" is in search of Roundup. "It just kills everything," he says. "Any plant, any weed, grass. I mean, it won't kill *trees*, but..."

Lineberger, known to his grounds-crew compadres as "the wiregrass whisperer," is a tobacco-dipping Pinehurst native whose job is to walk the No. 2 course inch by inch, for hours and hours each day, nuking the undesirable weeds that sprout up around the carefully protected wiregrass. It's a precision task particularly notable for the fact that Lineberger is, by his own admission, "blind in one eye, so I can't see s--- anyway."

On the No. 2 course, there is a hierarchy of hate when it comes to weeds. The evilest? "It's a tie between horseweed and crabgrass, because it gets so tall and *looks* so crappy," Lineberger says, Roundup-replenished and easing up to a

stop sign as we whipsaw around the fairway-side pathways in his maintenance vehicle.

"Exactly how blind *are* you?" I ask, clinging to the cart.

"Well," he tells me, "I can see the shape of that sign, but I can't read the word *stop*."

By the '70s and '80s, hideous growth had, in a certain way, overtaken Pinehurst. Reluctant to invest the millions of dollars necessary to make the resort competitive with the sparkling new golf destinations proliferating in coastal Florida and California, the Tufts family took an out available to many private businesses in America's economic boom years: They sold the property to a corporate entity, whose idea for reviving Pinehurst's fortunes was to give it a cheesy makeover, replacing its old-world charms with kitsch modernity and, worse, burying the brilliant, gnarly character of No. 2 under a wall-to-wall carpet of Bermuda grass. In effect, they made it look like every other golf course in the country, the kind of verdant dreamscape resort golfers began to demand in what Farren calls "the age of excess."

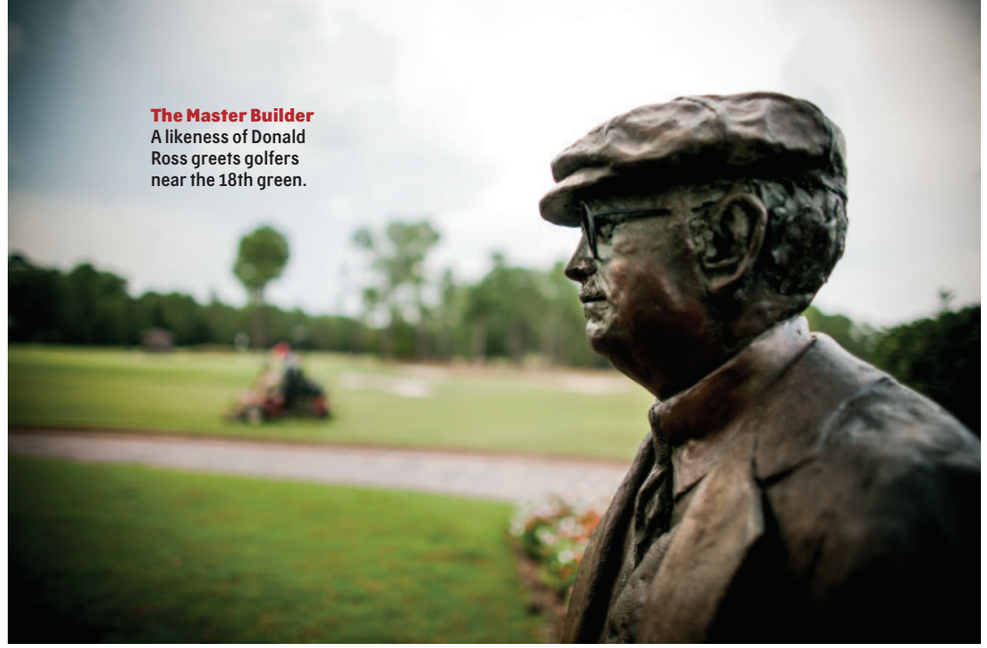
Who's Your Caddy? "They call me E.Mac," says Eddie MacKenzie, whose wisdom is found in his golf pointers and jewelry.

In those go-go decades, it wasn't strictly greed that was good. American golf and, for that matter, the entire grass-seed industry had become infatuated with *green,* a lust driven to extremes by something called "The Augusta Syndrome." Each year, the esteemed Masters tournament is hosted at Augusta National Golf Club, and images of that impossibly lush paradise were so transfixing to TV audiences that the course became the standard for not only the nation's golf resorts but every yard in suburbia. It triggered a grass-seed boom and, with the attendant proliferation of pesticide use and gross water consumption, an environmental bust.

A greening of a happier sort was taking place at Pinehurst, however. Under the sage stewardship of Don Padgett's well-connected father, Don Sr.—a former PGA president who expertly helmed the resort from 1986 to 2003—professional golf made a prominent return to No. 2, helping to restore much of its lost luster and stature. Two hugely successful United States Opens were hosted here, one in 1999 and another in 2005. But something was haunting the place—whispers, perhaps, from Donald Ross' house, which still stands on the property and can be seen from the green on the third hole.

"On Father's Day in 2009, I was playing golf with Lanny Wadkins and his boys," Padgett Jr. recalls. Wadkins, a retired veteran of the pro tour, is one of many golfers whose memory of the Ross-era No. 2 is profound. "'Padge,' he said to me, 'how'd you let this golf course go? The grass doesn't look the same. The course doesn't *feel* the same. If I didn't know where I was, I'd think I was at any country club in the South.' And he was right."

The United States Golf Association had already committed to playing the 2014 United States Open at Pinehurst. In fact, it had, for the first time in history, made the astounding decision to play the men's *and* the women's U.S. Open on the same course and on back-to-back weeks, an occasion that will turn the quaint little Village of Pinehurst on its head and make the resort an extraordinarily exciting place to be in June of that year. But Padgett and Robert Dedman Jr.—whose family had been the corporate owner of the resort since 1984 but had, in 2006, divested itself of all its properties except the Pinehurst gem—had a growing sense that a return to Ross' original vision for the No. 2 course was something that had to be done. Dedman's father had once called it golf's "fallen angel," and after lengthy debate and much uncertainty his son committed the funds for a full restoration. "This will be either the best decision ever made," Farren remembers the younger Dedman saying, "or the worst decision ever made."



The Master Builder A likeness of Donald Ross greets golfers near the 18th green.

"Brown is the new green" is the catchphrase of the USGA, and its current best eco-friendly example is century-old Pinehurst No. 2.

Bill Coore is a robust Southerner, the kind of guy who regularly uses your name when he talks to you. "Well, I'll tell ya, John, we were in a very, very stressful position," he says by phone from his home a few weeks after my Pinehurst stay. The 66-year-old North Carolinian caddied on No. 2 as a boy, and his overwhelming devotion to the course made him and his business partner in golf-course architecture, tour legend Ben Crenshaw, naturals to oversee its elaborate overhaul. They were honored to be chosen, but, in golf parlance, they had the yips, too. "We were being entrusted to restore one of the greatest golf courses in the world," Coore says, "but to what?!"

Ross was a mad tinkerer, and a decision had to be made about which iteration of No. 2 to use as a guide. Coore and Crenshaw felt the course had reached peak form in the years between its hosting the 1936 PGA Championship and Ross' death in 1948. But how much of a guessing game would it be to restore the exceedingly irregular features of each hole based solely on the ground-level photographs from 80 years ago housed in the Village of Pinehurst's Tuft Archives?

A number of breaks came Coore and Crenshaw's way, most dramatically one that wouldn't be out of place in a Tom Clancy thriller. Padgett Jr. tells the story: "We had a member here named Craig Disher, who worked for the government, somewhere in intelligence—I don't know where, and I didn't ask him to say. But he called Bill Coore and said, 'What do you have to work with?' And Bill told him, 'Not very much.'"

Fort Bragg, the United States military installation, is 40 miles east of Pinehurst, and Disher had a hunch that surveillance photographs of the base from the mid-20th century might be filed away somewhere. Within two weeks of his call to Coore, Disher called again. "I've located something that you might find interesting," he said.

Coore picks up the story, flecking it with laughter of disbelief: "Ben Crenshaw and I—and Toby Cobb, who was running the job for us—went over to Mr. Disher's home, and he laid out these aerial photographs from Christmas Day 1943. They had been taken inadvertently while the government was doing aerial mapping of Fort Bragg. The camera never stopped shooting, and every time the plane pulled a wide U-turn, well … . How this Mr. Disher got the files, I don't know, but he came up with an aerial picture of *every hole* on the No. 2 course."

Emboldened by impeccably detailed images of No. 2's hundreds of unique contours and quirks, Crenshaw and Coore and their team broke ground on March 1, 2010. Within three months, massive sod harvesters had pulled up 40 acres of grass, exposing Ross' beloved sandy roughs and rustic hardpan. "It was," one groundskeeper remembers, "like walking into an attic and finding a blanket lying over an old painting. We took it off, and a masterpiece was sitting there."

Once the native areas had been laid bare, many more months of effort went into eradicating the Bermuda grass that kept fighting to rise out of the sand. Next, the exhaustive process of landscaping began. Over 100,000 wiregrass plants were strategically embedded in the native areas. "It's *hard* to recreate nature," Coore says. "You've got 40 acres of exposed ground. What are you going to do with it? How do you get the stuff to where it looks natural and random and different?"

The Michelangos of golf-course maintenance were brought in for a labor of love: to hand-carve the aggres-

sively raw edges of Ross' bunkers and fairways.

The result—several years and millions of dollars in the making—is a wonder, a breathtaking panorama of green framed by bursts of untamed beauty. More than half of the course's 1,100 sprinkler heads were removed in the makeover, and a thrilling side benefit of the renovation is that water consumption on the course has been reduced by virtually half. Forty fewer acres of sod means the use of fewer pesticides and herbicides; forty fewer acres to mow means the use of less fuel. The sustainability of the game hangs on the golf industry's ability to lower the crippling cost of exhaustive course maintenance. Indeed, "Brown is the new green" is a new favorite catchphrase of the USGA, whose best example of that eco-friendly aspiration and fiscal prudence is now the hallowed ground of century-old No. 2.

Golf was popularized on the firm and fast, rough-around-the-edges, and unapologetically brown courses of 19th century Scotland, and in that regard, the renovation of No. 2 represents a return to form for the game. Setting the front-nine pins on my first morning at Pinehurst, quick-witted Brit Alan Owen looks around at the ragged moonscapes and is awed. "There are some people who will appreciate it for what it is," he says. "But there are some who will go, 'Who the hell is takin' care of this place?'"

John Jeffreys, a 34-year-old assistant superintendent, is, like Owen, reverent about No. 2 and flows into it everything he knows about agronomy. At one point during my hours-long tagalong with him, he walks me to the 10th green and, with his pocket knife, carves out for inspection a hunk of sod the size and shape of a slice of key lime pie. In the loamy strata of that sliver of earth—in its seedlings and silt and multitudes of tiny root hairs—he sees the circle of life. And through his generosity, so do I.

Jeffreys' profound appreciation for the delicacy of the turf makes his next gesture unfathomable. On the halfway-house practice green between the 9th and 10th holes, he stands me behind the roaring engine of a power mower and throws it into gear. As two floppy-haired, teenage course interns look on, that beastly machine pulls me in figure eights as I rip unsightly lines into the pristine putting surface. It's strenuous and humbling work that I happily hand back to the Biebers.

After two days of shadowing the grounds crew, I am, without having really earned it, gifted the pleasure of playing course No. 2. Deepening the privilege, I'm given my own caddy, a first in the history of my fairway hackery. Eddie MacKenzie is his name, and he treats me as if I were one of the greats of the game, advising me on yardage, wiping down my club after each shot, and providing a steady supply of water, tactful pointers, and gentle encouragement. When a mosquito lands on my ball, causing me to badly mishit a putt, he consoles me. "Ah," he says, "insectus interruptus."

The experience of walking No. 2 is such a throwback that I can picture the ghosts of Bobby Jones and Ben Hogan drifting out of the pines—or at least I might have had Eddie, a ferocious movie buff, not been inclined to inopportunely whisper in my ear, "Hey, that scene in *Eastern Promises* where Viggo Mortensen wrestles naked in the sauna, did you *see* it?!"

But even Eddie's deranged asides can't break the spell—Pinehurst No. 2 is that transcendent. Back at the clubhouse, he and I say our goodbyes, but not before sharing the titles of our favorite books.

"How old are you?" I ask.

"Spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, or chronologically?" he replies, before settling on something in the neighborhood of 68.

On the course, I'd noticed that Eddie is wearing a bracelet, and I ask about it. Extending and rotating his wrist, he shows me a silver band etched with icons. "This is Hopi. It's the story of life. All these symbols represent living, and this opening here," he says, pointing to the gap in the bangle, "is a chasm that means life is interrupted. And then life begins again. And again."

John McAlley is the executive editor of Spirit. *Shoot him an email at john.mcalley@paceco.com for a look at Eddie's awesome reading list.*