

## **Updating Fort Myers Country Club: *Investing in the future of a Donald Ross classic***

FORT MYERS, Fla. – After nearly 100 years, “The Fort” is getting a facelift.

Fort Myers Country Club, a Donald Ross design that opened in 1917, with Bahia grass fairways and common Bermuda greens, is being brought in step with the modern game. Noted designer Steve Smyers, whose Lakeland, Florida-based firm has given the game such renowned layouts as Olde Memorial in Tampa, Isleworth near Orlando and Olympia Fields South Course in suburban Chicago, site of the 2015 U.S. Amateur, is the architect charged with updating the classic Ross course for the City of Fort Myers, which operates the club as a municipal, daily-fee facility.

But don’t look to Smyers to put a “label” on the work he and design associate Patrick Andrews are doing at The Fort, once the winter home course to some of the most important business leaders of the early American “Industrial Revolution,” including Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone. Smyers is reluctant to call what his firm is doing at Fort Myers Country Club by any of the terms most often associated with the re-working of an existing course, including “restoration” or “renovation.”

“We are approaching this project as if Ross were coming back and designing a course on the same site,” says Smyers. “If Ross were alive today – given the modern playing equipment, turf grasses, maintenance practices and all the other changes that have evolved in golf over the last hundred years – I am confident he would not design a golf course on this property exactly as he designed in the early 1900s.”

Ross would, however, create a layout that presents the modern golfer with the same challenges – both mental and physical – that he designed into the original Fort Myers layout, Smyers firmly believes. That is what he and Andrews pointed to as their No. 1 goal as they approached a project that has and will continue to have the eyes of many of golf’s foremost critics, historians and enthusiasts, in general, focused on it until the course reopens in early November.

But before critiquing any work being done to update Fort Myers Country Club, one must understand the context in which the course was created nearly 100 years ago, the environs in which it exists today and the sweeping differences between the two.

When built and opened, the golf course enjoyed a remote, pristine setting 2.5 miles south of what was then the town of Fort Myers. The site was, as it is today, bordered on its east and west boundaries by Tamiami Trail and McGregor Boulevard, respectively, but with the automobile still in its relative infancy, neither was the busy thoroughfare it is today. Now, residential and commercial development crowds all four sides of what is basically a rectangular site encompassing some 133 acres, including clubhouse, maintenance facilities and parking, 122 of those devoted to golf.

Ross designed the course to accommodate roughly 3,000 rounds a year, most of which were played in the winter months. That’s because maintenance practices of the day could hardly keep up with the

prolific growth of Bahia grass fairways and common Bermuda grass greens in warmer weather, rendering the course virtually unplayable for much of the year.

Further, the course was built without any drainage to efficiently manage storm water runoff other than a straight, narrow “drainage ditch,” as labeled on Ross’ original drawing, running the length of the property, east to west, and a smaller ditch draining into the larger one from the north side of the property. There was, and still is today, no surface drainage. Given the frequent, and often heavy, rainstorms that hit the area, the course is often closed to play because of wet conditions or even standing water.

The work being undertaken at Fort Myers Country Club addresses these and other issues associated with a course less than three years shy its own centennial. Smyers and Andrews both understand that everything they do over the next six months will be put under a microscope by many throughout the golf world, including the game’s self-labeled purists, who liken any re-working of a classic course from the “Golden Age of Architecture” to tampering with a canvas signed by one of art’s grand masters. But before critics take poison pen in hand, Smyers points out that throughout his life, even Ross, himself, made alterations to his own creations to keep them relevant to an evolving game.

For evidence of that, one has to look no farther than Pinehurst No. 2, Ross’ acknowledged masterpiece that, still today, remains a fixture in the rankings of the very best courses in the game. Ross designed the original nine holes in 1901, added a second nine five years later and, because he lived right on the course, continued to tweak the course throughout his life. Before his death in 1948, he completed at least six significant renovations or alterations to his now-hallowed layout, according to *The Architects of Golf*, an authoritative reference volume first published in 1981. Three of those renovations involved at least nine holes, including two comprehensive projects in the 1930s, in which the entire course was lengthened and rerouted in preparation for the 1936 PGA Championship.

“When he prepared Pinehurst No. 2 for the 1936 PGA Championship, Ross wrote that he believed a great golf course should be designed in direct relationship to the ability of the golfer,” said Smyers, who has traveled to Pinehurst numerous times to play the course and study at the Ross Library since first competing in the North South Amateur in 1973. “An elite player should have a stern challenge through the way the golf course could be set up, whereas an older player and a higher handicap player could have a golf course they could easily move around. For the less skilled players, it should still provide a stimulating challenge, but it wouldn’t be an excruciating test.

“He also believed a great golf course should produce solid shot-making. It would require the player to hit a long and accurate tee shot and require them to hit a long and accurate long iron to several holes. There should be a blend of long and short holes so that a single round of golf should provide a total examination of one’s golfing abilities and require the player to hit every club in their bag. “

Bringing back the original challenge Ross intended at Fort Myers is a major goal of the current project. But it is one of several important objectives, as Smyers and the City of Fort Myers work to bring an early 1900s golf course into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To help golf enthusiasts understand the scope of the work now

under way at Fort Myers, the project is being presented here in relation to the goals established for the overall project. In no particular order or priority, those include:

- Restoring the character and challenge of a Donald Ross course designed in 1916 and opened for play in 1917 as the Fort Myers Golf & Yacht Club.
- Installation of modern turf grasses to a course that was built with Bahia grass tees, fairways and rough and Common Bermuda grass putting surfaces.
- Improving sightlines and aesthetics, especially around the periphery of the property where development has encircled what was a remote site at the time the golf course was built.
- Improving safety, based on the distance demands of the modern game versus a routing designed for the equipment of the early 1900s.
- Improving water quality through the creation of a network of water retention ponds and connecting waterways that will provide a way to manage storm water runoff within an area extending well beyond the boundaries of the golf course.
- Improving drainage.

But before addressing the specific goals of the Fort Myers project, it is worth taking a minute to explore Smyers own thoughts regarding any efforts to alter older golf courses, whether the project is labeled a renovation, restoration or redesign.

Smyers philosophy of course restoration may be different from some, in that he doesn't think it practical to restore a course, feature for feature. His firm believes in restoring or maintaining the overall philosophy of the original architect within the modern-day standards of materials, maintenance and play, itself. He explains:

"We use the original underlying design principles as our guide. We don't go feature by feature. Our reasoning for our belief is, we think that, as designers, how we use those features should be modified based on the game at the present time. This isn't an argument as to whether the game is better or worse today or yesterday. But it is different.

"We can trace how the game has been altered, simply by the introduction of different turf grasses and how those grasses are maintained, not to mention the evolution of the playing equipment. We, as designers, need to adapt the features of our design to the playing standards of the day.

"Sometimes, we have to redesign, based on the modern-day game. Here at Fort Myers, for example, we no longer have Bahia grass fairways. We do have drainage issues and we also have safety issues. If Donald Ross came back today, he would agree that we have to make alterations to address these issues.

“Plus, over the years, the course has changed through hap-hazard planting of trees and other plant material. We want to correct that and create a stronger landscape setting.

“But we still want to and should adhere to the underlying principles of how architects of the past went about the design process. Restoration, to us, is restoring those underlying principles of the original layout.”

## **Restoring the Donald Ross character and challenge**

Whenever anyone broaches the subject of altering a significant course from golf's storied past, purists make an argument for “restoring” the course to its original design. But Smyers asked, “Why would you go back to a property and restore a golf course that was designed for the game of 80 to 100 years ago, as opposed to today's game and today's player?”

Taken in its most literal meaning, restoring the Fort Myers course to original specifications would mean bringing back a course that included 11 forced carries off the tee and 13 cross hazards that demanded forced carries on approach shots. In today's golf environment, this would be unacceptable, Smyers noted.

Further, the original course measured 6,388 yards and played to a par of 74. No par-4 measured more than 416 yards and three of the five par-5s were less than 440 – numbers that hardly translate to today's game.

“But at the time it was opened, this course was considered to have long holes for that era,” Smyers explains. “Back when they designed this course, golf was played with hickory shafts and a long tee shot was 200 yards. When he redid Pinehurst No. 2 for the PGA Championship in 1936, he took that course back to close to 7,000 yards because of the introduction of steel shafts. A long tee shot then was 250 yards.

“Since then, we have evolved through modern equipment, athleticism and training, and a long drive today is 300 yards or more. Also thanks to modern grasses and mowers, not to mention regulated irrigation, the ball rolls out more.”

Smyers noted that when Ross first built Fort Myers, he had par-4s of 407, 410, 416 yards and a par-5 that stretched 537 yards “which was unbelievably long for that era.

“We are responding to that. We are going to have some strong par-4s out here, but instead of being 410 yards, we're going to make them 510 yards – the long ones. So we are keeping true to his philosophy of shot-making. There is a wonderful blend of long and short holes on this golf course. For example, we have four par-4s of more than 500 yards and we have several great drive-and-pitch holes,” Smyers adds.

“We're also going to hold true to the Ross philosophy in and around the putting surfaces so that when you miss a green, it's going to call for creative chipping. And we're going to do it in such a way that it's going to be visually stimulating.”

It is the blending of long, medium and short holes that architects refer to as the rhythm of a golf course.

“We’re going to have the same rhythm and flow to the course. We’re doing it in the same respect Ross did because of the shape and configuration of the property. He took you on a very nice journey around the property through his routing of the golf course,” Smyers explains. “And a major part of the appeal of any great course is created by that journey and how it makes someone feel about the course.

“So we’re keeping the same rhythm and flow of golf holes, because the spaces he took you to, we’re taking you to. And those spaces are what dictate where you have longer or shorter holes. If you look at his plan, on holes 12-15, those are small spaces. So we’re keeping you in the same rhythm of those holes by developing shorter par-4s and par-3s in those areas. “

Andrews relates Ross’ original routing to a journey, as well, calling the clubhouse “home” and correlating a round of golf to a quest to return to the safety of that home.

“I think we have to start the story of what we are doing with this project with what is behind the original Donald Ross course,” he offers. “With any really good architect, you start with a journey around the site. You start from the clubhouse, you experience the site and all that it offers and then you come home.

“So the whole idea, using golf shots as a metaphor, is to build as epic a story as you can. ‘Boy, this stretch of holes was tough, then I had a bit of a respite here and then the middle part of the round, I was just hanging on. And then I saw a home in the distance. Within that finishing stretch, wow, was I challenged, but I arrived home.’ It’s like a voyage, but at the end, instead of being shipwrecked or saving yourself, you add up your score.”

Like any noteworthy quest, a round of golf on a great course must evoke “the same sort of human emotion,” Andrews believes.

“For anybody who plays the game on a high level, the more emotion that is felt – the more risk, the more reward, the more variety of spaces and the more interesting the journey – the better the course,” Andrews concludes.

What Ross did at Fort Myers was create an overall routing that blended a series of physical challenges of varying degree – from difficult stretches to brief respites – into a “journey” designed to draw the player into unavoidable head-on confrontation with their own emotion. Andrews believes that we measure the greatness of a course, as well as the memorability of a round, by the ethereal force of this collision of physical effort and emotional struggle.

As the legendary Bobby Jones once wrote, “On the golf course, a man may be the dogged victim of inexorable fate, be struck down by an appalling stroke of tragedy, become the hero of unbelievable melodrama, or the clown in a side-splitting comedy – any of these within a few hours, and all without having to bury a corpse or repair a tangled personality.”

Referring to the specific “journey” Ross created with his original routing at Fort Myers, Andrews said, “We’re not going to copy his pattern exactly, but his pattern is going to serve as the guide for what we

are doing. In other words, we're not trying to tell another story here; we're going to tell Ross' story, but in modern-day vernacular."

One of the challenges of any architect is to create a course that can accommodate players of vastly different skill levels, from beginners to accomplished professionals. That is especially true at Fort Myers, which has hosted an annual professional event since 1963. Past winners include major champions – Tommy Bolt, Bobby Nichols, Lee Janzen among them and many other former or current Tour players, including area products Nolan Henke and George McNeil.

"There is a great desire by the client for this to be a learning ground for young golfers wanting to become accomplished golfers. So we want to design the course to appeal to that type of player, as well as the club level player who comes out on a regular basis for the fun and recreation the game provides," Smyers says.

More than just the course, the current project also addresses major improvements to the practice facilities, including construction of a new putting green as well as improvements to the existing range.

"The course has to accommodate every level of player, from juniors and beginners to college players, to professionals like Nolan Henke and George McNeil, to seniors who are playing into their 90s," Smyers adds. "That's another thing Ross didn't have to think much about when he was designing this course. Back then, the life expectancy in this country was 67. Now we have players playing golf well into their 70s and beyond."

## **Improving playing conditions**

Let's face it; no golfer of today, not even the staunchest restoration purist, wants to play a golf course maintained to early 20-century standards. Even at its best, the Fort Myers Country Club course of the early 1900s played much like the outer rough of the same course today.

"Keep in mind that when this course was built, it had Bahia grass fairways, which is a very thick-bladed grass that grows so fast in summertime that they couldn't keep up with the mowing. So they basically didn't play golf in the summer. And in the winter, because it's not a dense grass, the ball sits down within the runners," Smyers says.

When they were mowed, Andrews points out, "the fairways were mowed at a couple of inches, which is about like the outer rough now. And they were probably mowed only once a week, and that was with a gang mower."

Given the equipment of the day – small-headed blades with sharp leading edges and balls that were aerodynamically inferior to those of today – players played basically what amounted to a punch-and-run game. Players didn't generate enough clubhead speed to get balls with small, shallow dimples in the air, much less keep them there. But because the fairways were the coarse Bahia, there wasn't much roll or run, either.

When reopened, Fort Myers Country Club will have fairways and tees carpeted in Celebration, one of the latest hybrid Bermuda grasses. Already in use at a number of high-end facilities throughout the Southeast, Celebration is capable of sustaining healthy turf at mowing heights measured to the tenths of an inch.

“The Celebration Bermuda we will be installing in the fairways is a very dense Bermuda that allows the ball to sit up,” Smyers adds. “With today’s clubs, with their low center of gravity, and the modern golf ball, which is very stable, everything is designed to get the ball up in the air. And with the modern grasses, like Celebration, the ball sits up with a near-perfect lie almost every shot.”

The original putting surfaces at Fort Myers were grassed with common Bermuda, another grass that is exponentially coarser than today’s ultra-dwarf Bermuda hybrids capable of producing green speeds approaching or even equaling those of bentgrass greens. What’s more, the putting surfaces of the early 1900s were mowed, on average, twice a week at three-quarters of an inch (0.75”), so putters had 11 or so degrees of loft, just to get the ball “up” on top of the grass.

By comparison, the Champion hybrid Bermuda grass that will be installed at Fort Myers is a fine-bladed, dense-growing ultra-dwarf that can be sustained at a mowing height of .10 inches, according to the producer of the cultivar, Champion Turf Farms. Consequently, today’s putters have, on average, approximately two degrees loft.

“What we are doing is adapting the course to the technological advances of today, both in turf and how we maintain it,” Andrews says.

## **Improving sightlines and aesthetics**

As the once small town of Fort Myers grew into the City of Fort Myers, the once pristine surroundings of Fort Myers Country Club gave way to housing, strip centers and the occasional high-rise. The challenge of today’s modern design team is to restore the serenity of the golf experience without razing a single structure.

To do that, Smyers and Andrews have subtly massaged the original routing, where possible, to focus the golfer’s eye inward, toward the golf property, rather than outward, toward the peripheral development. In other areas, natural screening, including trees and other plantings, are being used to stop the golfer’s eye before it strays beyond the property line. And in still other places, like at the par-3 fourth hole, the angle of play has been shifted slightly to create more scenic backdrops for holes that abut the property line at acute angles.

“So, we’re keeping Ross’ same journey in place. But we are orienting the player’s body so that their focus doesn’t leak outside the property, something Ross didn’t have to be concerned with because there was no development around the course when it was first built,” Smyers says.

Andrews adds, “Anytime you get a lot of urbanity build-up along the side of an older golf course, especially with a highway like Tamiami Trail, there is a conflict between all that noise and movement and buildings and the golf.

“So what we are trying to do is, not shut down the edge, but create an edge that makes the player feel completely differently than the way they would feel in an urban environment. This is a respite; this is your metaphorical Central Park. Take away the golf, and you would still have a large piece of land cut out in the middle of a city. So we’re going to try to fortify those edges so that when you are in the middle of this respite, of this park, you feel like you are in a completely different environment, removed from the hustle-bustle of urbanity.”

Smyers is quick to point out that, as with any facet of the Fort Myers project, improved aesthetics is an objective that cannot be sought at the expense of the overall goal – that being the creation of the best overall golf product possible on the site.

“Design is a multi-layer process and every aspect of the design is inseparably tied to one another. So we want to get the context of the golf course right to begin with and the way we do that is through the routing,” Smyers begins.

“In this case, we are using the routing to provide buffer from the surrounding development, but more importantly to focus your attention on the more palatable areas of the property. By doing that, we establish a framework that helps define the strategy of the golf course, as well.

“Here at Ft. Myers, the outside of the property is the weakest part of the property. Yet internally, from a landscape perspective, it’s very strong; it’s pleasant to look at. So we want to create a journey around and through this property where everything focuses your attention inward, toward the interior of the property. We’re doing that through the routing, where holes will generally turn toward the interior, and through the landscaping along the outer boundaries, so that everything will turn your attention toward the middle of the property.

“It’s more than simply screening the exterior. We are making the center of the property more visually dynamic through the creation of water courses and the installation of native upland grasses, aquatic plants and trees. We want the golfer’s attention to be literally drawn into the property, not away from it.”

## **Improving safety**

As anyone old enough to remember woods that were actually made out of wood and golf balls made from natural rubber, rather than thermoplastics, will tell you, modern golf has different safety requirements than it did a century ago. Today, a five-iron shot can cover more ground than a good drive of the early 1900s. So it is obvious how the yardage demands of the modern game can impact the safety of golfers playing on a course designed 100 years ago.

“When this course opened in 1917,” Smyers begins, “people were playing with hickory shafted clubs and very unstable golf balls. People, themselves, weren’t as big and athletic and players of that era didn’t know as much as we do now about the biomechanics of the body or about the golf swing. So, bottom line, people didn’t hit the ball as far, not nearly as far.

“Through equipment, strength training, better understanding of the swing and people, in general, getting bigger and more athletic, we are hitting the ball farther. So within the old design, there are several places where we have safety issues and we need to alleviate those.”

Because classic courses were built as stand-alone facilities and not in support of real estate development, as has become common over recent decades, courses were built on smaller sites, necessitating tightly wrapped routings that made maximum use of the land. Doglegs were often wrapped around tee or green settings of adjacent holes and, because there were no golf carts, tees were commonly placed within a few steps of the previous green.

Such was the case with the original Fort Myers routing. A good example can be found at the dogleg right 12<sup>th</sup> hole, a 349-yard, par-4 that was likely a drive and a mid- to long-iron in 1917. Back then, the line off the tee was directly over a pair of bunkers that gave the 12<sup>th</sup> its “cape hole” characteristic. But today’s players, armed with modern equipment and playing a hole that still measures its original length, take a line well right of those same bunkers, biting off much more of the dogleg and putting players on the 16<sup>th</sup> tee and possibly even the 15<sup>th</sup> green, both of which are set close along the right side of the 12<sup>th</sup> hole, in danger of being struck. Similar situations exist in several other places on a course that features eight holes that bend one way or the other.

“Another thing is, when the course was developed it was well outside the city,” Smyers continues. “Now, the city has grown up around it and we have areas that are too tight to the property lines and areas that we feel we need to buffer to not only create a stronger edge, aesthetically, but also to address these safety issues. Of course, the most pressing situation is along the eastern edge of the property, along U.S. 41, or Tamiami Trail. The fifth hole currently plays right along the property line, dangerously close to the roadway. They have had an issue for years with people hitting balls into the road. So we are going to alter that.”

By shifting the hole a bit to the left, Smyers’ design team will do more than simply alleviate a major safety concern that has existed for decades. The area between the new fifth fairway and the highway – basically the area where the original fairway was – will give contractors room to create an aesthetic, but from a water management standpoint, functional water feature. While the hole will play much the same as it always has – a slight dogleg right par-4 that will require only a short-iron approach – the small lake will serve as the first of several water retention ponds being created to address the drainage and water management issue that is an underlying reason the Fort Myers project is being undertaken in the first place.

## **Improving water quality**

“The reason this project is taking place is the community needs water retention in this area and this is the only place we can introduce sufficient storm water retention capabilities to meet that need,” Smyers states flatly. “So we are going to make the necessary storm water retention work in harmony with the golf course.”

There you have the answer to a question many have asked since the project at Fort Myers was first announced. Why, after so many decades, did the city decide to update a golf course that had remained basically the same for nearly 100 years? The answer, in a word, is water. More specifically, it's improved water quality through storm water management.

Since the golf course was built, the narrow canal, or drainage ditch, as Ross called it, bisecting the property has ducted storm water runoff directly into the Caloosahatchee River, a major south Florida waterway that stretches 70 miles, east to west, from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico and drains a basin area that measures 1,408 square miles. The flow has not been interrupted or slowed by baffles, filtration ponds or any other detention areas, allowing any and all silt, debris or other contaminants to reach the river and the Gulf of Mexico, just a few miles away.

“Right now, we've got a huge amount of water coming through this canal. And what we are attempting to do through a series of ponds, as well as dry detention areas, that we are adding is clean the water,” Andrews explains. “Instead of dumping all of that run-off directly into the river via a straight canal, we are trying to add to a component of water quality to the golf course function. So that ties back into the story of the fifth hole.

“In order to do that, we have to find room to dig those ponds so that we have areas where the water is retained or at least slowed, in order for the sediment to settle out as it makes its way through the canal system.”

To address safety issues the fifth hole needed to be shifted to the left, away from the busy Tamiami Trail. That left room for the first of a series of detention ponds to which Andrews referred.

“There was already a big, open space with a grove of pine trees that we want to preserve just to the west of the original fifth hole,” Andrews continues. “There was already a slot through those pines where we can fit the golf hole and that leaves us a big, open space adjacent to Tamiami Trail where we can put a pond. That will be the first place where water will be diverted from the canal and into that pond, which will allow the sediment to settle out there, rather than being carried on to the river.”

“What it also does is gives us a place from which to excavate material, because for better or worse, Donald Ross, in 1916, didn't have either the budget or the construction scope or whatever to try to drain the entire site.”

Other small lakes or ponds are being incorporated into the overall project, not only to manage the flow of storm runoff by detaining water and allowing suspended particles to settle out before reaching the river but to provide retention ponds to help meet the golf course's need for water, as well.

“The trick is how to incorporate the ponds and not interrupt the character of the site or the flow of the Ross routing. A good example of how we are attempting to do this is evident at No. 5,” Andrews points out. “By shifting No. 5 just slightly to the left, into the slot within those pines, we are able to keep the character of the hole very similar – a shorter par-4, just as it was in Ross’s day.”

Smyers points out that, were Ross designing Fort Myers today, he would address the same water management and quality issues he and Andrews are solving today through their updating of the course.

“Because one of the stipulations of our project today is to provide storm water treatment for an area that extends well beyond the golf course, Ross would have made that an integral part of the design.”

## **Improved drainage**

The water management system being engineered into the revamped Fort Myers course plays directly into significant improvements to the overall drainage of the property. As both Smyers and Andrews point out, when the course was built, drainage wasn’t a priority because, during the hotter months of the year, when Florida gets the majority of its rain and thunderstorms, the course saw little if any play, because of Bahia grass fairways couldn’t be maintained to playable standards.

“Now that the course is a year-round recreational amenity, we have to drain it because if you don’t drain it, the quality of the turf is very poor. Weeds come in; the trees suffer; everything suffers,” Andrews continues. “The maintenance and the upkeep of this recreational gem, this park-like corridor within the city, is important. And you can’t maintain the course well unless you have proper drainage.

“So it’s not only a water quality value that we are overlaying upon the course, but now we are trying to make the course drain through building up certain areas of the fairways and allowing the course to shed water so people can play more during the summer. That is an economic benefit to the city and an obvious benefit to the players because, going forward, the course won’t be closed as much. It will be able to sustain play throughout the year.”

Smyers quickly adds, “Keep in mind that when the course was built, they probably only played about 3,000 rounds a year. We’re going to build a course that can handle 75,000 rounds a year or more.”

And because it will now drain efficiently, the course will be easier and much more cost-effective to maintain.

As it was built, the original Fort Myers Country Club course was without any topographical relief of consequence. The entire site had only three feet of elevation change, the amount of slope needed for every 100 feet if a given surface is to effectively sheet drain water off of Bermuda grass turf.

“Excluding the slopes right around the greens, there probably wasn’t anywhere on the entire golf course that had a three percent grade,” Andrews notes. “So what we are going to do is use the materials (from the creation of detention ponds) to lift the holes on one side to get the water to shed off the fairways.

“At the same time, where we are lifting these areas and creating some movement within the fairways, we want to move the golfer’s eye and visually lead the golfer into the green. This will allow the golfer to read the shot, just like Ross did at Pinehurst and other places in his later courses.”

Improving the overall drainage of the course will be accomplished largely through sheet drainage over long, subtle slopes, not through a series of abrupt moguls drained to catch basins. The latter would be out of character with the Ross style of the early 1900s, and as Smyers noted, it would not fit with his design style of today.

At the same time Smyers’ team is raising one side of the fairway to improve drainage and thus enhance playing conditions, the architects will create a complementary landscape through their selection of plant materials.

“The plant material and movement of the golf holes will combine to define the strategy of the holes themselves” says Smyers. “We’re using the grading of the holes to not only better drain the golf course, but to move your eye down the fairway in such a way that your body will respond to how the hole moves and how the strategy of the hole unfolds. Upland vegetation along the higher side of holes and lowland vegetation along the lower side will automatically allow the player to read the movement of the hole and they can select their strategy of attack based on slope, movement, wind – all the elements that come into play on any golf shot.”

## **In Summary**

As with any golf course project, there are ancillary benefits of the Fort Myers project to the overall community, its residents, players and non-players alike, and its visitors. Among these are increased property values, elevated community pride, preservation of wildlife habitat and birding areas – all of the natural advantages that come with the creation of “green space” and add to what Chamber of Commerce types refer to as “quality of life.”

These immeasurable abstracts are products of the golf course design and construction process but are not quantities any architect can plan or design for. What the architect must address is a litany of tangible artistic and technical issues, many of which are discussed here. How much is art – reshaping and accessorizing the earth to create landscapes that are both functional to the game and pleasing and informing to the brain? And how much of it is technical – engineering that same earth-moving while incorporating drainage, maintenance and sustainability?

“There is a seamless transition between the two because we have to answer technical issues within the artistic design. That is exactly what we are doing here,” says Smyers.

“This project is full of technical issues, but we have to make the technical issues and the art and the shot-making blend together. If you blend all of these layers together in proper fashion, it becomes very rhythmical.

“One layer can’t override any other because you destroy the flow and rhythm of the overall course. The intangible is getting all the layers to fit together and make the whole thing, in the simplest terms, feel right. And that’s what the great architects of the past had an innate ability to do.”

Retaining the flow, the rhythm, the challenge of the original design is the sum total of the many technical and artistic tasks confronting Smyers and Andrews as they go about updating a Ross classic at Fort Myers.

“For most people, when you talk about Ross and what makes a Ross course, especially when you talk about Pinehurst, it’s the greens. But what really defines Ross is not the greens but leading up to the greens. That is where he creates a rhythm, a rhythm in the grading, a rhythm in the ground, so that when you get to the putting surfaces, a pattern has already been established. You are responding to pattern he creates all the way through the journey. Once you get to the actual putting surface, which is the stage, the platform has already been set for the crescendo,” Smyers says.

Listening to him describe the legendary architect born in Dornoch, Scotland in 1872 and credited with designing more than 400 courses, all after emigrating to the United States in 1899, one might think Smyers half golf architect and half psychologist. But considering he has spent his entire career designing courses for a game that is as much mental as it is physical, many might argue that such a hybrid blend is perfectly suited to his vocation.

“The main thing is, design is a multi-layer process and every aspect of the design is inseparably tied to one another,” he avows. “So, in every design assignment we take on, we want to get the context of the golf course right to begin with and the way we do that is through the routing.”

At Fort Myers, the route the holes follow was inherited from Ross’ original design. But to Symers, “routing” connotes more than simply how and where holes are placed on the land. It is how they relate to one another to create the entire golf experience. It’s the “journey” to which he and Andrews so often refer. Like chapters in a great novel, each hole must relate to the all those that combine with it to tell an overall story that is more compelling when experienced not only in total, but in a carefully rationalized order.

“I have a firm belief that you can have 18 good golf holes and still not have a good golf course,” Smyers states firmly.

“By that, I mean that everything has to evolve from a greater context. The first thing you have to do is establish solid landscape ‘rooms’ so that as you traverse around the property, you go from one area to another that basically looks and feels differently because variety comes from different landscape settings more than variety of shot values.

“Understand, we need variety of shot values and a variety of shots to test players throughout a round of golf. But for players to respond well to the golf course, to the property itself and to the overall experience, we need to take players through different landscape settings.”

He continues, saying, “A designer can either utilize existing landscape settings or create new ones. On this site, we are having to create. But we are doing so in such a way that, once the landscape patterns and the drainage patterns make sense, the shot-making will emanate out of that. If you have a very strong landscape setting, and if you use it properly, the shot values will emanate out of that.”

As Smyers puts it, the eyes see, the brain interprets and the body reacts. Great golf architecture, like great art, great music and great literature, has the ability to shape human emotion, giving rise to feelings of satisfaction, anxiety and even fear, among others, depending on the challenge faced and how we choose to deal with it.

Those challenges are defined by spatial relationships. Grand, open spaces provide a feeling of safety, while more confined spaces, often abutted by perilous hazard, spawn fear and angst. These are the human emotions golf architects play upon when they design a course, “the basic primal human emotion of risk versus reward,” as Andrews terms it. “And Ross did that in spades in his original design of this course.”

“That’s the basis of architecture – whether you are talking about golf course architecture, building architecture, landscape architecture or simply creating a backyard garden. It’s all about how everything around you relates to shapes and movement,” Andrews goes on. “And how do you make an underlying pattern out of all of that?”

“That’s the underlying abstract that very few golf writers – very few people, in general – even try to describe. That’s what makes a Ross course a Ross course. That’s what makes a Mackenzie course a Mackenzie course and so on. It’s not just ‘Oh, I’m going to copy these bunkers’ or ‘I’m going to copy these greens’ or ‘I’m going to copy this tee’ because a lot of the placement of specific features isn’t even relevant today.

“But what is relevant is where classic architecture reveals a certain angle or reveals a certain movement. It’s where a view allows your body to read a certain shot. And that’s what has to be maintained, those abstract principles.”

As we referenced in the opening section above, Steve Smyers believes, “Restoration ... is restoring those underlying principles of the original layout.”

To Smyers, updating a classic course is more than simply adapting a layout to the length demands of the modern golf game. It is translating a message from one of the past’s noted philosophers into a language today’s history student can read and understand.