

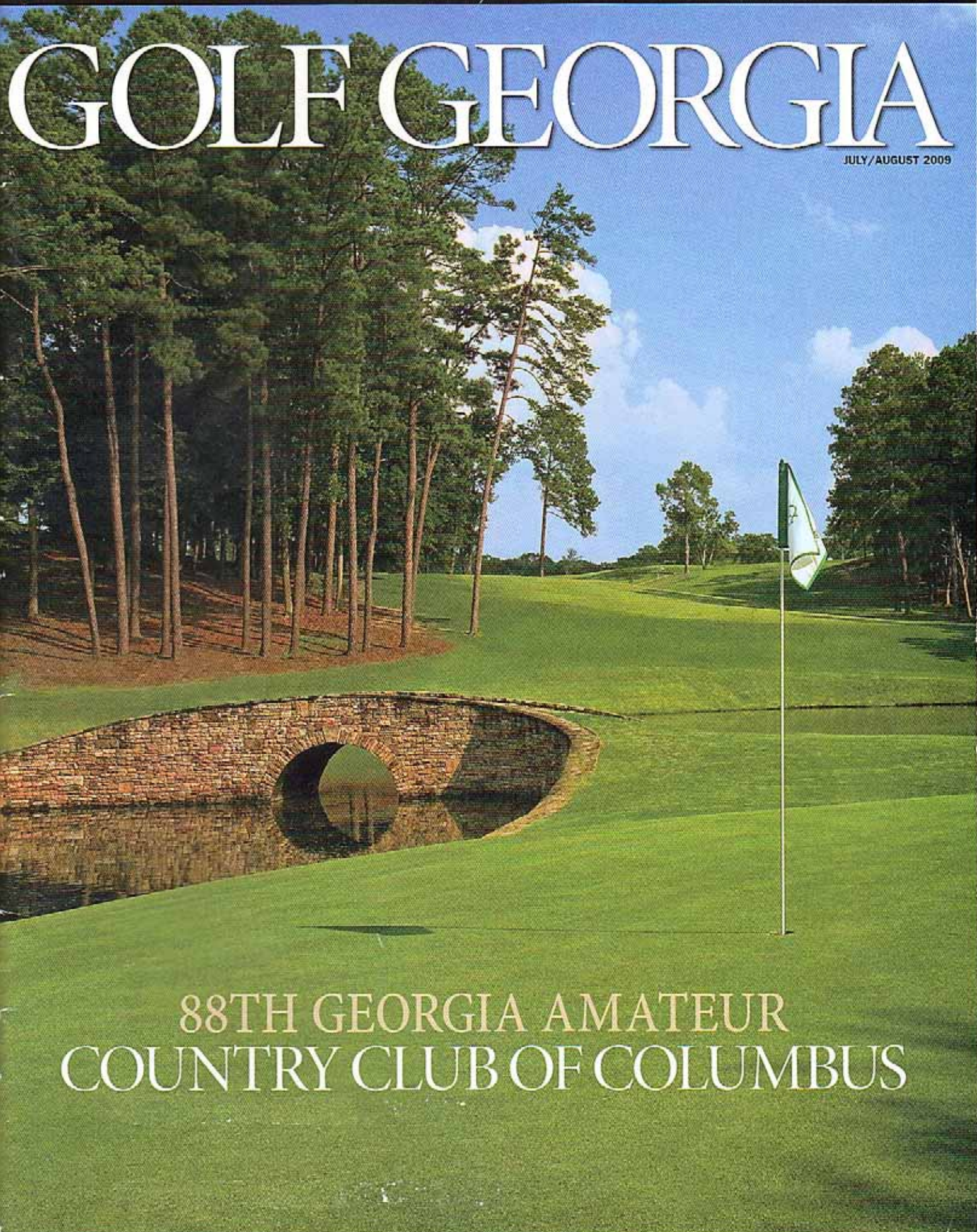


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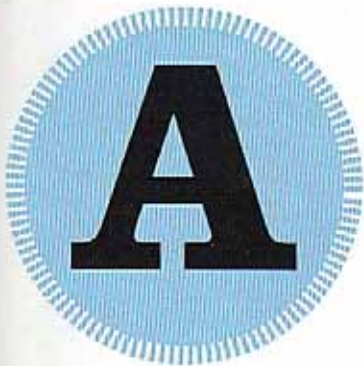


88TH GEORGIA AMATEUR
COUNTRY CLUB OF COLUMBUS

Amateur Championship Track Familiar to Many

BY MIKE BLUM
COURSE PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL KIRK

“PLAY IT AGAIN SAM”



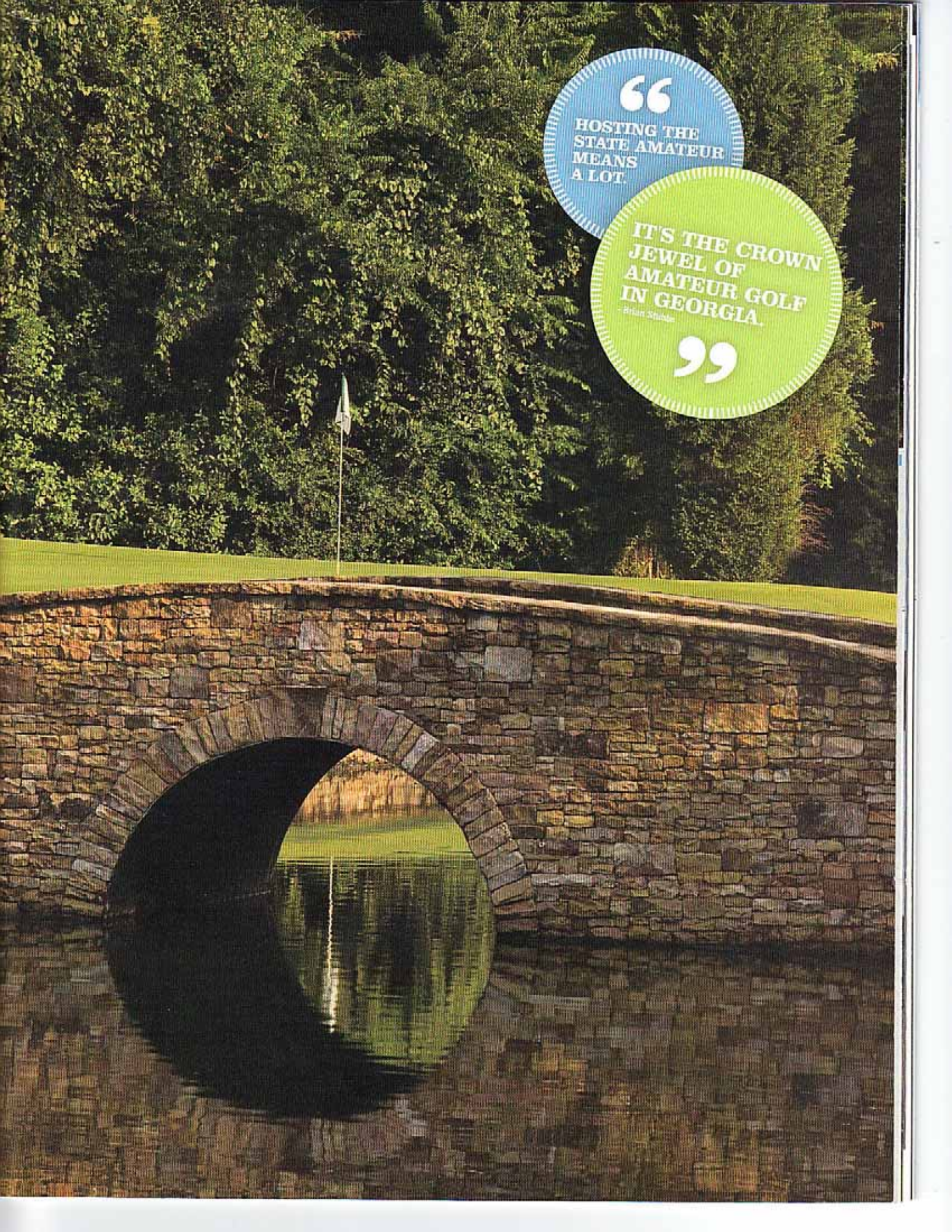
Although it's been nearly 50 years since the Georgia Amateur was last played at the Country Club of Columbus, the **Donald Ross**-designed layout is a familiar one to most of the state's top amateur players.

Georgia's best players have competed in the annual Southeastern Amateur, which is played here the same week as the U.S. Open and annually attracts a strong field of primarily college golfers from around the Southeast. The Country Club of Columbus also hosted the Georgia Mid-Amateur Championship two years ago, with some frequent contenders for the Georgia Amateur among the top finishers in that event.

The annual **Fred Haskins** Four-Ball event also played here features the top mid-amateurs from around the state, with that group needing all the

experience they have gathered over the years to hold off the challenge of the state's top collegians, who have won the tournament four of the last five years.

This year's Georgia Amateur championship is scheduled for July 9-12, just three weeks after the Southeastern Amateur. Those who compete in both events will not be facing a much different course, although the rough will have a few more weeks to mature, which will make the problem of solving Ross's subtly challenging layout a little more demanding.



“
HOSTING THE
STATE AMATEUR
MEANS
A LOT.

IT'S THE CROWN
JEWEL OF
AMATEUR GOLF
IN GEORGIA.
Brian Stubb
”



Hole No. 12, Par 4, 316 Yards

At just over 6,500 yards from the back tees, Country Club of Columbus is on the short side by modern standards, but is in line with some of the recent courses to host the Georgia Amateur, including Macon's Idle Hour and The Savannah Golf Club. Country Club of Columbus plays to a par of 71, with just three par 5s, two of which are among the first four holes.

There was some consideration given to making the course play to a par of 70, but the short par-5 17th will be played as is, providing an excellent scoring opportunity for someone to pick up a shot or two on par at the end of the round.

Layne Williams, the GSGA's senior director of Rules and Competitions, says he will use the full length of the course, including all three holes that are distinct from the rest of the course from a yardage standpoint.

Holes 6 and 15 are a pair of four-length par 4s, listed at 449 and 468 yards on the CCC scorecard, with the fifth a very healthy par 3 at 243 yards from the back tee.

Other than those three, however, length is not a concern on the Ross-designed layout, which first hosted the Georgia Amateur in 1925, just the eighth time the event was held. There is only one other par 4 of over 400 yards, and it barely exceeds that total, with the next longest par 3 just 182. The two early par 5s will be within reach for the longer hitters, but both are tough greens to hold, with the lack of size to the putting surfaces among the hallmarks of the Country Club of Columbus. The course was renovated in 2003 with the intent to return the design as close

as possible to the one envisioned by Ross when he reworked and expanded what had been a 12-hole course into a full 18-hole layout.

Among the more prominent changes to the course was the addition of collection areas bordering several of the greens. Although

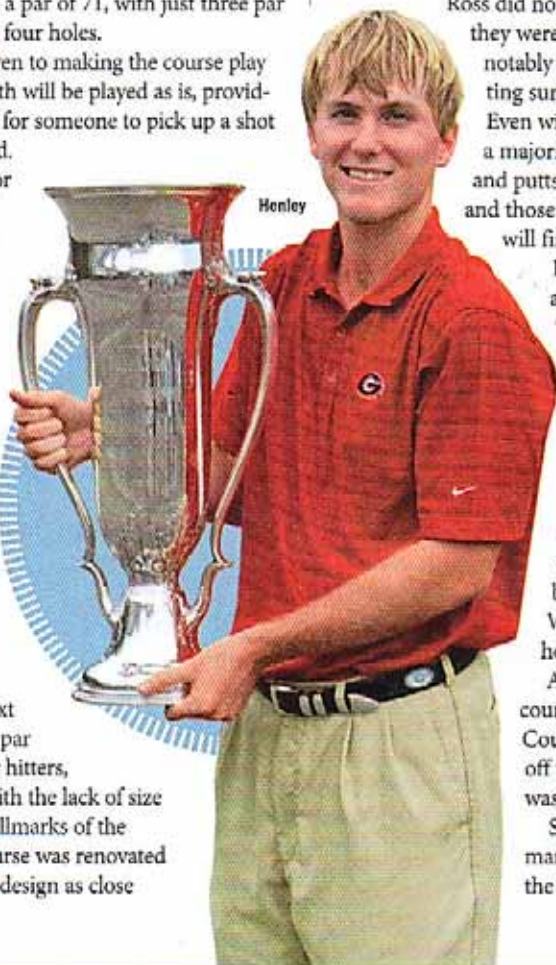
Ross did not include them with his original designs, they were a staple of many of his creations, most notably Pinehurst. Because of the undersized putting surfaces, a quality short game is a necessity. Even with a wedge or short iron approach shot into a majority of the holes, a variety of chips, pitches and putts from the collection areas will be required, and those who limit the number of inevitable bogeys will find themselves among the leaders.

Brian Stubbs, the head golf professional at Country Club of Columbus, believes the familiarity most of the state's top players have with the course will result in some relatively low scores, but maybe not as low as some might think.

"When you look at the card, you think you should shoot a 65," Stubbs says. "You can shoot a 65 out here. There are a lot of opportunities because of the number of short irons. You can make a lot of birdies, but you're also going to make some bogeys. We don't have many Faldo-like rounds out here."

As you would expect from a traditional-style course that measures only around 6,500 yards, Country Club of Columbus is reasonably tight off the tee, but is a little more forgiving than it was prior to the renovation of 2003.

Stubbs says about 350 trees were removed, many of which had encroached too closely on the lines of play. They also caused turf prob-



Henley

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lems, and Stubbs said the removal has been roundly praised by the members as "the best thing we ever did."

There are still plenty of trees remaining that will impact play, beginning with the first hole, where the option exists of taking it over the trees on the dogleg left in hopes of reaching the par 5 in two. The unexpected loss of a tree on the par-4 13th has altered the hole somewhat, with a new tree planted to replace it near the corner of the dogleg right, along with the addition of some hummocks (small mounds) to create slightly uneven lies.

Many of the fairways at CCC have a decent amount of slope, with longer hitters able to utilize some for added distance, along with the possibility of facing a downhill lie. Only a handful of holes, most notably the downhill, par-3 eighth and short, uphill par-4 12th, offer much in the way of elevation changes, but a number of others have enough movement to make club selection an occasional concern.

With a pair of par 5s and a short par 4 among the four opening holes, Country Club of Columbus presents an opportunity to get off to a fast start, at least until you reach 5 and 6, the toughest back-to-back duo on the course. The main concern early in the round is not going left, as the early holes after the first are bordered by thick tree lines and OB stakes tight to that side.

The mostly benign nature of the opening holes changes markedly once you reach the tee on the long, par-3 fifth, with an imposing bunker just off the right edge of the green, which is perched above it.

The other par 3 on the front nine, the downhill eighth, is considerably shorter and friendlier, but one of the testier putting surfaces on the course will keep the number of birdies to a modest level.

Both the eighth and ninth holes have been turned

around since the course was originally constructed. Instead of finishing with a slightly downhill par 4 and uphill par 3, the front nine now concludes with a downhill par 3 and a narrow, slightly uphill par 4, with the greens and tees on both holes reversed. The ninth is now one of a handful of holes where the primary trouble off the tee is along the right side.

The back nine begins with what the members refer to as "Oh Man Corner," a play on Augusta National's "Amen Corner." The three holes form a triangle that comes back to the clubhouse and all are short but tricky par 4s offering extremely different sets of challenges.

Like the first hole, the back tees on the 10th occupy a corner of the club's practice putting green, which makes for an interesting start no matter which nine you begin from in the opening two rounds. Players can choose to lay up to the crest of a hill or bomb it to the lower level of the fairway, which leaves a short, uphill second to an elevated green with little depth and four surrounding bunkers.

The 11th is the most photogenic hole on the course, with a rock wall pond extending all the way across the front of the green and a thicket of trees and boundary fence just behind one of the tiniest putting surfaces you'll encounter. The green slopes back to front, and any shot that comes up short with spin will likely wind up in the pond.

The downhill, 315-yard hole will yield plenty of birdies, but will also produce more double bogeys and the dreaded "others" than any hole on the course.

The 12th is the same yardage as 11, but plays uphill with a fairway that has a considerable amount of slope. The green site has been moved more than once, with its current location on a hill that makes for a very demanding putting surface with a sizeable ridge through its middle and a tiny back shelf above it.



English



Hole No. 1, Par 5, 548 Yards

The long (468 yards) 15th provides the only serious concern coming in, with the 17th just eight yards longer but playing as a par 5. A narrow tee shot constitutes the main problem on the hole, which should yield plenty of birdies and a few eagles.

With its overall absence of length, Country Club of Columbus should offer a chance for the state's top mid-amateur players to make a run at the college standouts who have held the upper hand in the Georgia Amateur in recent years.

Leading the way among the mid-ams is Dalton's **David Noll Jr.**, who won the GSGA's championship event in 2003 at Pinetree Country Club in Kennesaw and has finished no lower than sixth the last four years, including a runner-up finish in 2005 and a close third last year at Idle Hour. Noll won the Georgia Mid-Amateur at CCC in 2007 with a 4-under total for 54 holes, but since his win at Pinetree, only one other mid-amateur player has been able to take home the state's top title.

Augusta's **Jeff Knox** has made a number of serious challenges for a Georgia Amateur victory, finishing second in both 2006 and '07 and placing fourth last year. Knox, who lost in a playoff in 1998, had come close in other GSGA events before winning the Mid-Amateur last year and has been a fixture on the leader board in the Georgia Amateur since 2003 with five finishes of sixth or better. He comes into the tournament off an impressive repeat win in the recent Georgia Mid-Am.

Mark Strickland of Woodstock tied for second at Ansley Golf Club-Settindown Creek in Roswell in 2007, and tied for 11th in the Georgia Amateur in both 2006 and '08. In recent years, Strickland has won both the Mid-Amateur and Atlanta Amateur Match Play Championship, as well as teaming for a win in the Four-Ball Championship.

Dave Womack of McDonough, the 2006 U.S. Mid-Amateur champion, has four top 10s in the Georgia Amateur since 2000, but has never been in real position to win the tournament since West Lake Country Club in Augusta almost a decade ago.

Jeff Belk of Marietta and **Robert Sheats** of Atlanta both came close at Settindown Creek two years ago, and followed with solid showings last year at Idle Hour.

Bill Brown of Dublin is the last mid-amateur to win the championship, playing an outstanding final round at Coosa Country Club in 2006, but after four top-10s in a six-year span from 2002-07, he struggled at Idle Hour last year.

Brown played on the golf team at Georgia, and his victory three years ago in Rome kept alive a streak of victories in the Georgia Amateur by current or former Bulldogs.

That number has reached five in a row, with current tour player **David Denham** of Tifton getting things started with a win at Athens Country Club in 2004. **Brian Harman**, who recently completed his college career in Athens, won in his hometown at The Savannah Golf Club in 2005, with teammates **Harris English** and **Russell Henley** winning the Georgia Amateur back-to-back the last two years.

English, a Thomasville resident and a rising junior at Georgia, held off a large group of mid-amateur challengers to win at Settindown Creek in 2007, with Henley becoming the first player to win on his home course in several decades last year, edging out English and Noll in a tense duel at Macon's Idle Hour Club.

Henley, English and Noll finished 1-2-3 last year, and enter this year's Georgia Amateur as the most likely players to emerge with a victory. However, 15 different players have won the last 15 Georgia Amateurs, with Knox the leading contender to make it 16 of 16.

Carter Mize, a member at the Country Club of Columbus, is the last player to win back-to-back titles, following his 1993 victory at The Golf Club of Georgia in Alpharetta with another the next year at The Savannah Golf Club.

Mize will not be able to play in this year's championship because of complications from shoulder surgery, but two standout Columbus golfers are exempt into the field – **Cason Hammock** and **Tra Dykes**. Hammock advanced to the semifinals of the 2008 U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship and finished fourth in last year's Georgia Public Links. Dykes won the 1998 Georgia Mid-Amateur at the Country Club of Columbus and is the current club champion.

One likely tournament challenger falls in between the college players and the mid-am contingent. **Jay Moseley** of Bainbridge, who completed his college career at Auburn last year, has been a

presence among the Georgia Amateur leaders, notching top-10 finishes three of the last four years, including a tie for sixth last year.

Mize says his home course does not favor a particular style of player, but is vulnerable "to any type player who hits the ball straight." Length off the tee is always an asset, Mize points out, but even those who don't bomb it off the tee will have a number of short iron approaches.

"The greens are small in comparison to most and there are certain holes where you have to be cautious of where you hit your approach. There are some false fronts and the greens still have character and are pretty subtle."

Mize believes the Country Club of Columbus "lends itself to the more seasoned players," but because of the amount of competition the top college players get, it will be tough for the mid-amateurs to prevail against them.

This will be the fourth time the Country Club of Columbus has hosted the Georgia Amateur, the first since 1960. That year's tournament was the first held in a stroke play format, with future Masters champion **Tommy Aaron** winning the championship. **Billy Key**, a Columbus resident and CCC member, was the runner-up.

Aaron's winning total was 271, with that score holding up as the lowest 72-hole mark in tournament history until Henley shot 270 on the par-70 Idle Hour layout last year.

Country Club of Columbus celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. The club's golf course originally consisted of nine holes and was soon increased to 12. In the early 1920s, Ross was hired to renovate and expand the layout to a full 18 holes, and the work was completed in time for the club to host the 1925 Georgia Amateur.

The course, which has undergone several other alterations over the years, received severe damage during a 1953 tornado. Almost a half century later, club officials decided to use the original architectural drawings of Ross to restore as much of his imprint on the course as possible.

The (11th) green slopes back to front, and any shot that comes up short with spin will likely wind up in the pond.

Drew Rogers, an associate of famed golf course architect **Arthur Hills**, handled the renovation, with **TiffEagle** replacing the greens surfaces, which **Stubbs** described as "a little bit of everything" before the renovation.

A few back tees were installed, adding about 100 yards to the scorecard, with the ninth tee moved back and the green shifted toward the tee, keeping the yardage for the hole about the same.

"The course was out of the rotation for a while, and we're excited to be back on the state golf scene," **Stubbs** said.

"Hosting the state Amateur means a lot. It's the crown jewel of amateur golf in Georgia." **GG**

Mike Blum is a freelance writer/editor and frequent contributor to Golf Georgia. Player photography by Rob Matre.

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