

PLUS: Farm LIV-ing | Navigating the Future | Radical Instruction

# CHICAGO DISTRICT GOLFER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE CHICAGO DISTRICT GOLF ASSOCIATION

CDGA.ORG  
NOVEMBER 2022

# DONALD ROSS AT

# 150

A look at his  
Chicago creations

NOVEMBER 2022

WWW.CDGA.ORG

Compliments of the  
Chicago District Golf Association

*For everyone who plays the game*

[www.CDGA.org](http://www.CDGA.org)



FOR EVERYONE WHO  
PIKYS THE GAME

# The Enduring Genius of Donald

*On the 150th anniversary of his birth this month, a look at his Chicago creations*

BY TIM CRONIN

Photograph courtesy of USGA Archives

**D**onald Ross knew a great golf hole when he saw one. And a poor one as well. “Why did they go out of their way to select the worst possible spot and then construct a green which sloped away from the play?” Ross asked a companion one day in 1918 while surveying the original 18 holes at Beverly Country Club for possible changes.

With that, his follower knew the original green for the 11th hole was doomed. The one that replaced it on the still-testing par 5 is a thriller, perched on the edge of a bluff and just enough off the otherwise straight line of the fairway to give those daring to reach it in two a second thought.

Beverly, located at 87th Street and Western Avenue in Chicago, is one of 13 Chicago-area courses that benefited from the master’s handiwork, either completely from scratch, from a redesign, or as a collaboration, which is how his Chicago history commenced.

One hundred and fifty years after his birth – he was welcomed into the world in Dornoch, Scotland on Nov. 23, 1872 – the genius of the man endures. It is shown by the quality of his courses. Working in the pre-bulldozer era of the early 20th century, he used the land to his advantage on hole after hole, layout after layout.

“I visit the land and walk over it until I have a complete grasp of the conditions and possibilities of the tract,” Ross wrote in “Golf Has Never Failed Me,” a memoir unpublished until 1996. “After going over it in this fashion, I then select all the good holes possible, irrespective of whether or not they shall be in the final layout.”

Harry Colt, himself a course architect of the first order, brought Ross to Chicago in 1913 to supervise the construction of Old Elm Club in Highland Park. Colt and Ross spent a week together on the grounds and Colt devised a precise plan, which Ross implemented. (A century later, Old Elm brought in Drew Rogers to give those plans a second look, and after clearing hundreds of trees and rebuilding bunkers in the torn-edge style Colt favored at the time, the course is close to the original.)

Ross built Old Elm as all courses were built in that era, using teams of horses and mules to move dirt, workers following the diagrams. The steam shovel was as yet unseen in course con-

struction, and the Bobcat was a pipe dream. The most modern tool was dynamite, perfect for blasting apart stumps after a tree had been downed.

Ross would soon develop his own creative process. He would walk a course with a topographic map in hand, jotting down ideas on paper and forming the image of a hole in his mind. His diagrams were on blueprint paper, as Ross designed courses like other architects would design a building. He concerned himself with the mundane – drainage and watering systems – and the dramatic, such as placing a bunker just so to complement the natural terrain and reinforce the challenge of a hole.

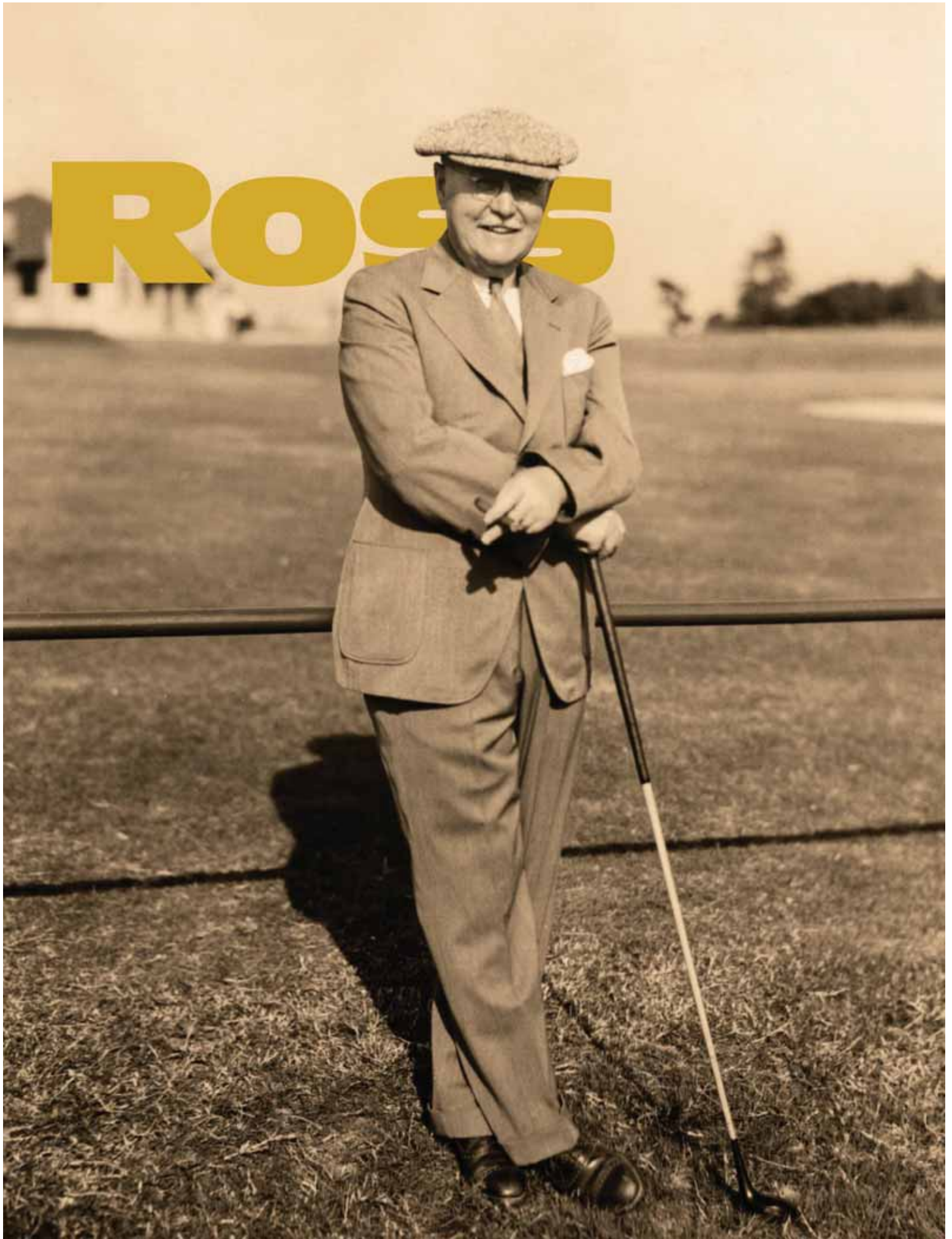
What Ross and Colt created at Old Elm was well-received, and immediately the founders of Indian Hill Club in Winnetka hired them to co-design their new course. But even as Old Elm was being brought to life, Ross and Colt were coaxed a few miles away to Glen View Club in Golf, where club president Lewis Ferguson was tasked with modernizing the layout originally crafted by H.J. Tweedie and revamped only three years earlier by Tom Bendelow. The result at Glen View was 40 new bunkers, and Ross, rather than Colt, was given the credit for the finishing touches.

Indian Hill took more than a year to design and build. Colt and Ross took the rudimentary design of Herbert H. Barker and created a course that, between 1914 and 1916, went from a bunkerless prairie to a layout with 100 bunkers, according to Chick Evans.

Colt never saw Old Elm or Indian Hill again. As was his custom, he went home to England. But Ross, having emigrated in 1899, would make a habit of returning to his courses to improve them. And he would return to Chicago often in the next decade.

Each time the train dropped him off in downtown Chicago, Ross would visit a handful of clubs. His 1914 journey included Midlothian Country Club in Midlothian, where he took a day to

**ROSS**





Donald Ross' work at Glen View Club (above) was one of his first projects in the Chicago District. He modernized the original H.J. Tweedie layout alongside Harry Colt and club president Lewis Ferguson in 1913.

walk the course and suggest minor changes to USGA officials in advance of the U.S. Open – perhaps making him the first Open Doctor – and a thorough examination of Skokie Country Club in Glencoe in May.

At Skokie, he took what Tom Bendelow created and thoroughly reworked it, creating a 6,548-yard par 70 course capable of hosting a U.S. Open – which it did in 1922, when 20-year-old Gene Sarazen captured the title in dramatic fashion, with a birdie on

the par-5 18th. That hole and seven others Ross created still exist, but the rest of the course was changed thanks to a land swap in 1938. William Langford and Theodore Moreau were called in to create new holes on a parcel of land to the south, but needed to build several other new holes to do so, thus losing much of Ross' design.

Ross' other major stop in 1914 was Oak Park Country Club, his first original design in the area. What he designed was built – with the exception of the 14th hole, where his planned straightaway par 4 extended into a heavily wooded area. To save money, the club built a dogleg left. Ross, upon his return in 1921, told the members they would get a proper green to go with the dogleg. So it was done.

Over the years, A.W. Tillinghast remodeled two greens and Bill Diddel tweaked the course as well, but a 2006 restoration by Rick Jacobson of Libertyville and subsequent tree removal has brought original Ross features back into play.

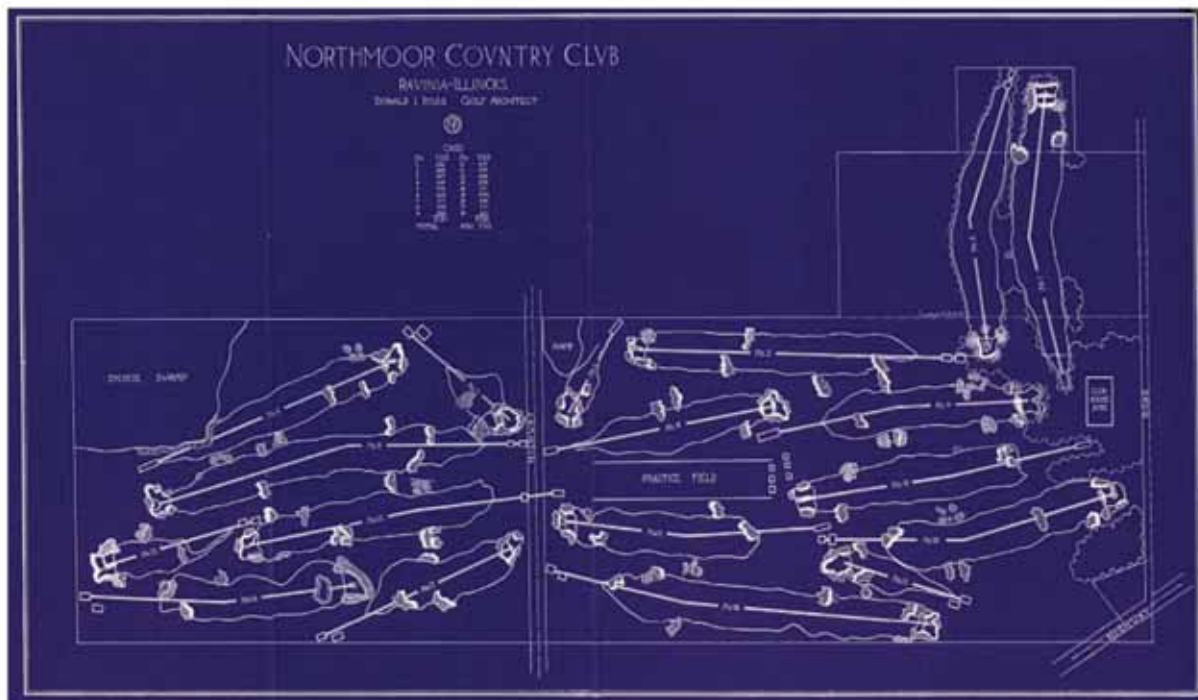
Ross was back in Highland Park in 1915, with a major revision of Exmoor Country Club. There, he took the original 18-hole design of W.A. Alexander and other members – which was first reworked by golf professional Stewart Gardner – and turned it into a first-class layout. Almost immediately, the 17th was acclaimed in the *Chicago Evening Post* as the best hole in the land. It took five years and \$40,000 to bring Ross' vision to fruition.

In 1916, still in Highland Park, he began to create Bob O' Link Golf Club. It opened the following year, but Ross came back two years later to improve it. In a reversal from Old Elm, Colt and Charles Alison

## Donald Ross Courses in the Chicago District

Year	Course	Scope of work
<b>Originals</b>		
1914	Indian Hill Club	Co-designer with Harry Colt, Herbert Barker
1915	Oak Park CC	Designer, visited 1914, returned 1918 for revisions, especially to 14th
1917	Bob O' Link GC	Designer, visited 1916, returned 1919 for revisions
1919	Evanston GC	Designer, visited 1917, 1918, on hand for 5/24 opening
1920	Calumet CC	Designer
1921	Northmoor CC	Designer of original 18, visited 1919
<b>Renovations</b>		
1913	Old Elm Club	Construction supervisor of Harry Colt design, with Ross making final tweaks
1913	Glen View Club	Renovation of H.J. Tweedie course in association with Harry Colt, club pres. Lewis Ferguson
1914	Midlothian CC	Consulting with USGA prior to U.S. Open (5/1); extent of changes to H.J. Tweedie course unknown
1914	Skokie CC	"Extensive improvements" suggested to Tom Bendelow course (5/10)
1915	Exmoor CC	Renovation of original 18
1915	Ravisloe CC	Revisions, followed by annual visits and revisions 1917 through 1919
1918	Beverly CC	Renovation covering seven holes of original George O'Neil-George Janes-John Middleton course

Ross' original layout for Northmoor Country Club (right) was his final major work in the Chicago area.



TUTS ARCHIVES

came through in 1924 and created four new holes.

The following year, Ross was brought in by the soon-to-move Evanston Golf Club to design their new course on property in Skokie. He designed a 6,468-yard layout that took two years to build. Ross was on hand for the grand opening on May 24, 1919.

Meanwhile, Ross had started and completed a multi-year improvement project at Ravisloe Country Club in south suburban Homewood, with the biggest impact on the club's back nine, and with Ross on hand in 1918 to supervise. Jack Nicklaus renovated it late in the last century, but the club has since gone back to many of Ross' original features thanks to work by local architect David Esler.

It was in 1918 when Ross rolled up Western Avenue to Beverly, where his biggest changes to the original George O'Neil layout were on the back nine, including the final four holes. Today as then, it's one of the best collections of finishing holes anywhere, with the par-3 17th a dearly-bought par and the par-5 dogleg 18th with its severely sloping green a classic conclusion.

He also made improvements to the front nine, including the creation of the dramatic risk-reward par-5 second by discarding a punch bowl par 3 and moving the tee for what had been the third hole atop the bluff. Wrote Jack Hoag of the tee shot in the *Evening Post*, "You can be as selfish as you like, but don't bite off too much, for unless you make the carry the whole left edge of the fairway will bristle with hazards and you will probably take a 6 in trying for a 4."

Ross remained on Western Avenue, designing the new course of Calumet Country Club in Homewood, which like Evanston, was moving from a previous location. It was another multi-year construction project that opened to rave reviews in 1920. In 1945, Byron Nelson won the eighth of his

11-straight tour titles in the Chicago Victory Open at Calumet. In 2001, Nelson returned for the club's centennial gala.

"I remember the 14th hole, a par 3, because of the difficulty, the slope of the green," Nelson said at the time. "When I played the hole, I didn't have any problem. I was hitting my irons well. And I remember the first hole. There was a modest clubhouse and a screened-in porch. We ate our lunch there. But look at it now. The way they've done it, it's absolutely excellent. I'm very proud of it."

Calumet changed dramatically in 1956, when the Illinois Toll Highway Authority played through, slicing off the north side of the course. Only creative work by Larry Packard and Brent Wadsworth was able to keep six original Ross holes near the clubhouse and build 12 replacements in Ross' style, and to keep the club in its Homewood location.

Next for Ross was one more trip to Highland Park to create the original 18 at Northmoor Country Club, seven of which are on the south side of Clavey Road, though today they are part of a separate third nine.

"What his 1919 design plan shows as bunkers are now easily seen in the land as dramatic hollows and scooped-out areas," Bradley Klein wrote in "Discovering Donald Ross," his authoritative 2001 examination of the man and his work. "Despite its heavy clay soil base and its lack of much elevation change - only 10 feet in all - Northmoor provides compelling evidence of fascinating ground game features."

That was Ross' last major work in the area. For all his renown, Ross apparently returned to Chicago only once after his 1921 revision of Oak Park, with a final visit to Ravisloe in 1924. Nearly a century later, his vision-turned-reality remains and, for the fortunate ones, can be experienced again and again. ●

Tim Cronin is the author of 10 books on golf.