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Course architect Spence has a feel for Donald Ross designs

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Kris Spence recently redesigned the Donald Ross course at Sedgefield Country Club.

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John Dell/Winston-Salem Journal

GREENSBORO — Kris Spence, an award-winning golf-course architect, remembers the first time he was smitten by a Donald Ross design.

He was a scratch golfer and greens superintendent when he first played Pinehurst No. 2.

“I hit an approach that I thought was good on the first hole, and it rolled off the back,” said Spence, remembering that round in the fall of 1985. “Then I did the same thing on the second hole. I became intrigued right there because it was like

playing in Scotland.”

Spence said he loved the fact that he had to think his way around the course because of its turtle-back greens, and he decided then to start looking into what Ross was about. That research continues today.

By the time Spence became the greens superintendent at Greensboro Country Club’s Irving Park, he decided to put his knowledge of Ross to good use. He helped

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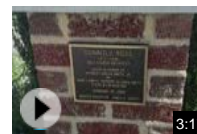
An interview with a local business owner in Pinehurst

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An interview with No. 2 Henrik Stenson at Pinehurst

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U.S. Open - designer Kris Spence

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renovate that design in the mid-1990s, taking it closer to the course Ross wanted it to be.

“And here I am some 15 courses later,” Spence, 51, said of his specialty — restoring Ross designs.

Among the courses he has redesigned are: Sedgefield Country Club, the home of the PGA Tour’s Wyndham Championship; Forsyth Country Club; the Grove Park Inn in Asheville; Cape Fear Country Club in Wilmington; and Carolina Golf Club in Charlotte.

Spence has a keen knowledge of Ross, who is credited with designing 399 courses, and has been able to transform it so that his redesigns keep up with today’s equipment. Not long ago, naysayers were predicting that continued advances in the technology of golf balls and equipment would make Ross courses obsolete.

“There was nothing that caught my attention the first time I went to No. 2 until I started playing, and that’s when it catches your attention,” Spence said. “It forces you to figure out the shape of your shot and what needs to be done.”

Spence recently stood behind the No. 18 green at Sedgefield and tried to compare it with Pinehurst No. 2.

“That’s an original Donald Ross green,” he said of Sedgefield’s No. 18. “While it doesn’t look exactly like Pinehurst No. 2 greens, the design elements are all there that you see at No. 2 with the little spines and the subtle edges.”

One of the challenges that Keith Wood, the superintendent at Sedgefield, has for the Wyndham Championship each August is to make the greens fast and firm. That’s the same challenge facing the USGA this week and next for the men’s and women’s U.S. Opens at Pinehurst.

Greens speeds will be severe and most likely will give golfers fits.

“Without question, all the greens out here have the same characteristics as No. 2, but depending on hole location and things like that, it demands that you play to certain places on the green,” Spence said. “And that’s how it is at No. 2.”

Spence and many others are looking forward to how the renovation at No. 2 — done by the team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw — will hold up against the best golfers in the world. Spence says he’ll be at the course each day and will buy tickets and walk around to see how it holds up.

“I don’t believe it will be easier,” he said of the lack of rough and the widening of many of the fairways. “What you are going to see more in this Open is players will be on the short grass more because of the widened fairways and no rough, but they will have harder shots from different angles.

“The design is going to entice the players to be more aggressive to the greens that are going to be fast and firm, and if you are approaching those greens from the wrong angle, it’s going to be tough.”



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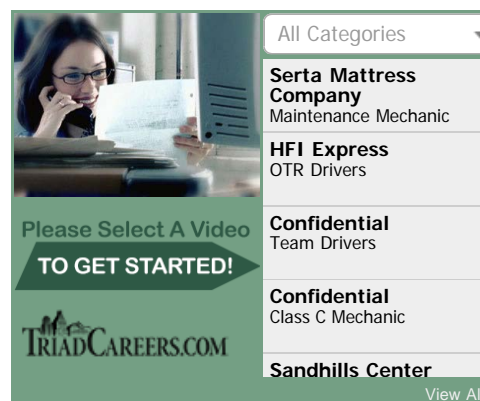
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Spence says that much like Sedgefield, golfers will have to be in the right position off the tee to attack any of the holes.

“I think as we get through the practice rounds and into the tournaments, the players that are succeeding are playing the ball to the correct side on the fairways,” Spence said.

Spence loves to talk about Ross, who lived just off No. 2 until his death in 1948, and his principles of strategy.

“It’s all those little equations that are there in Ross golf courses,” Spence said.

“Positioning the ball to be able to putt to certain areas on the green is a big thing. There are swales and knobs that can turn a ball off the green, and those are things that are so different compared to modern designs.”

Spence has researched how Pinehurst No. 2 looked in 2005, when the U.S. Open was last played there, and how it looks today with Google Earth photos. He said that golfers and caddies would be wise to study those aerial shots to gain perspective.

“You can measure out and find the distances to the areas off the tees,” he said. “You can find out what it was like for the previous Open in 2005, and you can compare those aerial shots.”

Spence has a modest office on Friendly Avenue in Greensboro but spends much of his time on the road, meeting with clients. He has won awards and has been praised in many quarters for his restorations at Ross courses, and he recently has been fielding more phone calls from golf writers and historians.

“I have been getting more and more calls because I’m a restorationist of Ross courses, even though I didn’t work on the project of No. 2, more people have called to talk about what the players will be facing,” he said. “No. 2 has played a part of the story in my life since Day 1, and it planted the seed and piqued my attention.”


Spence praised the work done by Coore, a Wake Forest alumnus, and Crenshaw at a course many call the Mona Lisa of golf.


“They brought that back to life with what they did a couple of years ago,” Spence said. “I can’t wait to see how it all plays out over the next couple of weeks.”

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