



# The Ross Brothers

*Donald and Aleck Ross left indelible marks on golf and Pinehurst*

BY BILL CASE

Even the closest of brothers look to pulverize one another in competition. This was undoubtedly the case at the North and South Open held at Pinehurst Country Club in April 1907. The tournament hinged on the battle between Scottish ex-pat siblings, both employed as professionals at Pinehurst CC — head man Donald Ross, 34, and his kid brother and assistant, Aleck (Alec or Alex) Ross, 27.

Outdistancing their fellow competitors, the Rosses stood deadlocked atop the leaderboard after Saturday's morning round with iden-

tical scores of 73. Donald took charge during the afternoon's closing 18, surging to a comfortable lead of four strokes over Aleck with six holes to play. But a couple of loose shots by Donald frittered away half of the cushion, and his regrettable 7 on the 16th dissipated it altogether. The Ross brothers finished the championship tied again, but Aleck capped his comeback by winning the playoff. His third North and South title equaled Donald's victory total in the event.

For Aleck, the triumph ignited his greatest year of golf, 1907, while it would also mark a critical milestone in Donald's life: His crowning architectural achievement, Pinehurst's No. 2 course, would debut later that year.

The Ross brothers' emergence as notable figures in American sport could not have been foreseen during their youth in Dornoch, Scotland, a remote northerly town in the Scottish Highlands. The eldest of four brothers (John was two years younger, Aleck seven and Aeneas nine), Donald was drawn to golf at an early age and frequented the local course at every opportunity. But, as the eldest, Donald was expected to support himself financially at an early age. It seemed a pipe dream to be able to make a living from golf in his home village — Dornoch Golf Club did not even employ a professional. The boys' father, Murdo Ross, a stonemason, steered his sons toward traditional trades like his own and, at age 14, Donald began an apprenticeship with local carpenter Peter Murray. While the woodworking skills he acquired would prove useful, Donald found shopwork overly confining.

The lad was much more interested in the comings and goings at the local club where Old Tom Morris of St. Andrews had just transformed Dornoch's seaside links into a magnificent test of golf. The lure of the redesigned links was irresistible to the oldest Ross boy. He spent every spare hour outside the carpentry shop there, caddieing and playing, and quickly developed into a stellar golfer.

Dornoch GC's secretary, John Sutherland, impressed with Donald's talents, thought he might be the right man to become the club's first golf professional, but he believed the young Ross, by then 19, needed further seasoning. Who better to provide it than Morris? Old Tom had mastered the varied skills required of professionals: green-keeping, clubmaking, instruction, competitive playing — he was four times the "Champion Golfer of the Year" — and managing the disparate needs and bruised egos of members. Disregarding his parents' wishes, Donald headed south to St. Andrews in 1892 to begin an apprenticeship with the legendary Morris. So miffed was the family that Donald's mother, Lillian, refused to speak to Sutherland for some time.

In *The Life and Times of Donald Ross*, Southern Pines author Chris Buie suggests that Ross' exposure to Old Tom's multi-layered role at St. Andrews would be the "template Ross used in his approach to Pinehurst and the development of American golf." Following his apprenticeship with Morris, Ross received additional training in Carnoustie at Simpson's Golf Shop, founded in 1883 by renowned clubmaker Robert Simpson.

In November 1893, Ross returned to Dornoch and became the golf club's professional, a job he enjoyed except for the tedium of greenkeeping. "What I really did was to go out in overalls on my hands and knees and care for the turf and the bunkers and the greens," Ross said. "And how I used to hate it. But, as it turned out, that was the best training I could have had for what turned out to be my future."

Aleck, 14, and a natural golfer, joined his brother in the Dornoch shop. "Being the older brother, it was left to me to order him about occasionally, and, as you would expect, he generally told me to mind my own business," Donald said. It made for a busy, though not particularly prosperous, life for the golfing brothers. In the 1890s, Dornoch Golf Club (now Royal Dornoch Golf Club) was far from the must-play golf destination it is today. Given its backwater inaccessibility — the closest railroad station was 7 miles distant — few outsiders visited Dornoch. If intrepid Harvard professor Robert Willson had not made his way to the town during his 1898 holiday abroad, the Ross brothers might never have left the Scottish Highlands.

Recently hooked on golf, the American arranged for a series of les-

sons from Donald that resulted in the educator's rapid improvement. The delighted prof was doubly pleased with Donald's recommendation of a local tailor who took care to measure both of Willson's sleeve lengths — an unusual nicety.

Impressed with Donald's acumen, Willson advised him to consider emigrating to America, indicating that golf was new in the country and there was money to be made. "He said I could make 50 cents an hour for lessons," recalled Ross in an interview. "You see that was three times what I was making in Dornoch." Willson also urged Donald to "call him up" should he ever find his way to Boston.

Ross wasted little time mulling over the pros and cons of leaving Scotland. By March of the following year he was bidding adieu to Aleck and the rest of his family and sailing off on the ship *Majestic* to New York. Once in America he boarded a train for Boston, arriving at that city's South Station with \$2 in his pocket. Ross sought to contact Willson in hopes the Harvard professor would assist him in getting settled. After a kindly operator showed the perplexed Scot the vagaries of using a telephone, Ross was able to reach his lone American friend. The professor told him to take the trolley to his home but, fearful of exhausting his limited resources, Ross hiked the 8-mile distance. Willson greeted his erstwhile swing instructor with a sandwich and a glass of milk.

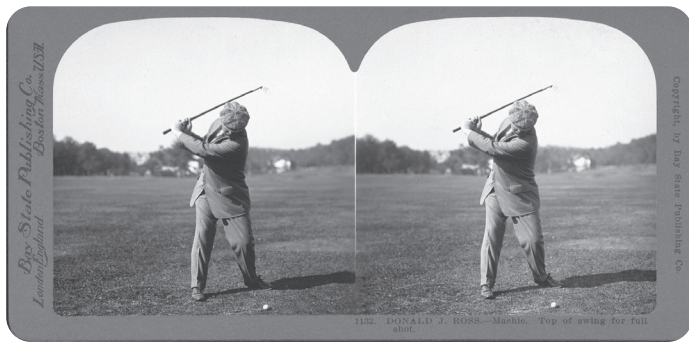
As luck would have it, the fledgling Oakley Golf Club, where Willson was a charter member, was looking to hire its first professional. With the professor vouching for Ross' credentials, he was quickly hired. While Ross was getting settled into his new post, there was an unforeseen development in the construction of the Oakley course. Several holes required re-routing after the club failed to renew a lease on the land where the holes were supposed to be built. Adding to this chaotic state of affairs was the unavailability of the course's architect due to illness.

The desperate Oakley board asked Ross if he would take charge of relocating the holes. Their new professional had hands-and-knees experience with turf maintenance and proper drainage. So, why not? He assured the board he was up to the task.

With the additional responsibilities thrust upon him, Ross persuaded the Oakley board to hire a second professional to give lessons and assist with clubmaking. The man he had in mind was an ocean away — his brother, Aleck. Soon, the younger Ross, now 21, made his own Atlantic crossing, joining Donald at Oakley.

By the fall of 1900, the new holes laid out by Ross were ready for play. His surehanded work received rave reviews, and the grateful Oakley board paid him \$2,000 for his efforts. The dutiful son promptly forwarded the windfall to his mother in Dornoch. It was Donald's first taste of the kind of money that could be earned by designing golf courses.

Ross' efforts drew the attention of wealthy New Englanders, including soda fountain magnate James Walker Tufts, who had founded Pinehurst and its resort five years before. Tufts had originally conceived Pinehurst as a restful haven that would furnish fellow Northeasterners a soothing place to restore their mental and physical health. In particular, he courted sufferers from tuberculosis. Once it was discovered that the disease was communicable, Tufts needed a new business plan. Ultimately, he redirected the resort's marketing campaign to emphasize golf and other outdoor activities. Sensing that Ross could enhance



Stereotype images of the brothers in action: Donald (left), and Aleck (right)



Pinehurst's golf profile, Tufts offered him the head professional position. Donald was amenable but with two caveats: It had to be a package deal that included Aleck, and the Ross brothers would be permitted to retain their summer positions at Oakley. A deal was struck and on December 5, 1900, the Rosses arrived in Pinehurst and established quarters in the Casino Building.

Tufts did not hire Donald for the purpose of designing new courses. The resort already featured a challenging 18-hole course. A second pitch-and-putt layout, played mostly by ladies, was opened during the brothers' first season in Pinehurst. Donald did, however, initiate course improvements, lowering tees and acquiring a steam-powered machine to roll the resort's sand greens.

The brothers were often called upon to compete in exhibition matches for the benefit of the resort's guests. Many were new to golf and keen to observe how experts played the strange game. Well-heeled patrons passed the hat, building a purse to add some buzz to the matches. Sometimes the siblings teamed together in four-ball matches, but more often wound up on opposing sides. While the Rosses rarely faced each other in one-on-one exhibitions, they played numerous individual matches against visiting professionals. One such opponent was English pro Bernard Nicholls, who had the temerity to defeat the host pro, Donald, in a singles match in the spring of 1901.

A revenge match was scheduled days later between Aleck and Nicholls. It would be the kid brother's first big test in an individual exhibition and came, no less, against a player who was known to have defeated the great Harry Vardon the previous summer. Aleck routed Nicholls, posting a medal score of 152. The *Pinehurst Outlook* reported that his performance "was one of the best exhibitions of golf ever seen here" and that older brother Donald was "highly elated."

As the Ross brothers' first Pinehurst season wound down, the *Outlook* praised their teaching skills. "Pinehurst has been very fortunate in having two such instructors as Donald and Aleck Ross . . . They have the faculty of imparting to others the science of the proper stroke to make a successful drive."

A formidable team, the Ross brothers integrated themselves into Pinehurst society. Both men were elected honorary members of The Tin Whistles, the club's male golfing society. As professionals, they rarely participated in the Whistles' weekly competitions, but they could be counted on to attend dinners and other social events.

The Rosses commuted between their jobs in Massachusetts and North Carolina depending on the season. While Donald summered at Oakley, Aleck moved on. In 1905, after a brief stint at Woodland Golf Club, he was hired as the pro at prestigious Brae Burn Country Club in West Newton, Massachusetts. As influential as the Ross brothers

were in Pinehurst, they also became a force in Bay State events. Donald won the first Massachusetts Open in 1905, and Aleck was the victor in the '06 championship. Together they would eventually win eight Massachusetts Opens.

Both Donald and Aleck entered the 1907 U.S. Open, scheduled for the St. Martin's course of the Philadelphia Cricket Club. Donald had finished in the championship's top 10 several times, but his chances at St. Martin's seemed modest, at best—he had spent the bulk of his time the previous year designing courses for Leonard Tufts. A second nine had just been seeded for course No. 2 and its existing nine was being substantially toughened. The new improved No. 2 was scheduled to open for play in the fall, but there remained a plethora of final details to resolve. He had also designed a third Pinehurst course of nine holes that had posed a significant challenge due to the hilliness of its terrain. Keeping his golf game in top shape had taken a backseat.

By contrast, Aleck was in good form. His successes in '06, including a sixth-place finish in the U.S. Open, filled him with confidence. After Thursday's opening two rounds in Philadelphia, steady cards of 76 and 74 staked Aleck to a one-stroke lead over Scot Jack Hobens. Three other contenders lurked two back. One of them was Bernard Nicholls.

Despite a decent third round of 76 in the morning, Aleck fell two strokes behind the surging Hobens and one in back of Nicholl's younger brother, Gilbert. Another 76 in Friday afternoon's final round proved good enough to vault him past his rivals to the title. Ross' finishing score of 302 bested Gilbert Nicholls' by two strokes. He collected the munificent sum of \$300 for winning America's national championship. Donald finished 10 strokes behind his champion brother.

While Aleck's playing ability had always been respected, his victory in the U.S. Open, along with a repeat victory in the Massachusetts Open later in the summer, catapulted him into the front ranks of America's golfers. Aleck's presence in exhibitions was suddenly in high demand. For the first, and perhaps only, time in the brothers' careers, Donald played second fiddle to his younger brother as the two played matches throughout New England in 1907. The barnstorming afforded Donald an opportune time to do what he called his "missionary" work, touting the wonderful new courses he was building at Pinehurst.

When Pinehurst's course No. 2 opened for play in the fall of 1907, initial reaction in some quarters was that the layout was too difficult—a "freak" course. But public opinion rapidly turned around and soon the course, and Ross' architectural talents, were being applauded. Course No. 3's nine holes (later expanded to 18 holes in 1910) would also receive high praise. In *The Legendary Evolution of Pinehurst*, author and course architect Richard Mandell wrote that No. 3's popularity, "quickly trumped its older siblings," and that many deemed it Ross' "best

yet.” The acclaim for his new courses caused design work to flow Donald’s way. In 1908 the commissions included a redesign of Essex County Club in Manchester, Massachusetts. Ross would become the professional there from 1909-13 until his design work became so popular he needed the time more than he needed the job.

In ’08 Aleck would achieve a threepeat in the Massachusetts Open with a then historically low 72-hole score of 290. He also won the North and South for the fourth consecutive time. As the sun was setting on the first decade of the 20th century, the Ross brothers continued to play excellent golf. Aleck would eventually win a total of six North and South Opens and six Massachusetts Opens. In 1910, Donald made a spirited run at winning the Open Championship contested at his old stomping grounds, St. Andrews. He finished tied for eighth, 10 strokes behind winner James Braid. It was Donald’s last hurrah in championship golf as the volume of his course design business exploded, leaving little time for anything but casual rounds. Soon, Donald Ross-designed courses could be found in nearly every state east of the Mississippi. A lot of that business transpired when resort guests, wowed by the Pinehurst courses, would ask Donald to build them a course back home.

Detroit attorney Horace Rackham was a prime example. Having made a \$5,000 investment to help his client, Henry Ford, get his new automobile business off the ground, Rackham became a millionaire many times over. He retired early and relished his frequent golfing visits to Pinehurst with a group that called themselves the “Snowbirds,” fellow members at Detroit Golf Club. Dissatisfied with the existing Detroit course, Rackham retained Ross to design not one, but two new 18-hole layouts. Donald completed the North and South courses for the Detroit GC in 1914. Today, the club hosts the PGA Tour’s Rocket Mortgage Classic.

Rackham liked Donald’s brother, too. At Horace’s urging, Detroit GC tapped Aleck to be its club professional in 1916. One newspaper hailed his hiring this way: “The advent of Aleck Ross, former national open champion, at the DGC has caused a boom in golf interest in the motor city. The members of the new club in which he is attached are expecting that his instruction will put the club on the golf map with a vengeance.”

With his competitive skills waning, Aleck segued into administrative roles. He served as the Michigan PGA’s first president in 1922 and did much to promote junior golf in the state. He continued wintering in Pinehurst, but also found time to travel. A favorite destination was Switzerland. The veteran had enough game left to win the Swiss Open championships of 1923, ’25 and ’26.

While Aleck was not especially outgoing, once they got to know the man, the Detroit GC members found him endearing. Donald described his brother as having “a heart of gold and is full of kindly sentiment, but he has a hard time showing it, which is a characteristic



Early members of “The Tin Whistles” including Donald Ross (second from top in cap) and Aleck Ross (immediately below and to the right of his brother)

of the Scots.”

Aleck did possess a bitingly dry wit. A friend once criticized his dog as being too fat.

“Too fat!” responded the pro. “What do you know about dogs?”

The man replied, “I ought to know something. I have six of them.”

To which Aleck rejoined, “That doesn’t prove anything; you have eight golf clubs and you don’t know a blessed thing about any of them.”

Aleck Ross served as Detroit GC’s head professional for 30 years, retiring in 1945. The banquet the club threw in his honor produced an outpouring of affection. Donald could not attend but forwarded a warm message extolling Aleck as his “loyal friend and beloved brother.” He also summed up Aleck’s estimable accomplish-

ments, writing that he, “had a full part in the early development of golf in America. He was a great player, a lover of golf, and he believed in its finest traditions. He was a good loser as well as a modest winner.”

When Horace Rackham died, he honored the Scottish immigrant he had brought to Detroit by establishing a \$30,000 fund for Aleck’s benefit, payable in monthly increments upon the pro’s retirement. Horton Smith, winner of the Masters in 1934 and again in 1936, succeeded Aleck as Detroit GC’s pro. Smith was later followed in the post by 1953 PGA champion Walter Burkemo, giving Detroit GC three head pros who had won major championships.

In his penultimate book, *Unplayable Lies*, the brilliant, albeit curmudgeonly, golf writer Dan Jenkins makes the point that the early pros have never been given proper credit for their important tournament triumphs. Prior to the advent of the Masters in 1934 and the PGA Championship in 1916, the North and South Open, the Metropolitan Open, and the Western Open were considered the important titles of their day. Aleck’s six North and South victories coupled with his U.S. Open triumph would give him a whopping seven titles of major import. While it is true that his first three North and South wins were against lesser fields, the last several were not. Donald Ross was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 1977. Aleck has never been nominated.

Donald, the oldest of the Ross boys and the architect of over 400 courses, died in Pinehurst in 1948. Aleck passed away in Florida in 1952. His ashes were spread over the grounds of Detroit GC. While Donald’s passing received high profile coverage in all of golf’s publications, Aleck’s death was generally noted on the back pages, the obits invariably mentioning that he was “the brother of Donald Ross.”

If Aleck Ross didn’t mind being in Donald’s shadow, it may have been because he managed to shine quite brightly himself. **PS**

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*His favorite book is King of Lies by John Hart*