

ARCHITECT BRIAN SILVA DIRECTS RESTORATION OF ROSS COURSE AT MOUNT WASHINGTON RESORT

By Lee Pace



BRETTON WOODS, N.H. (August 2007) – To his right looms the Presidential Range of the White Mountains, its peak kissing the blue sky at 6,288 feet.

To his left stands the majestic Mount Washington Hotel, its white siding and bright red roof beckoning visitors just as it has for more than a century.

And in the valley between this striking eye candy are the bones to an 82-year-old golf course designed by the renowned architect Donald Ross. Green sites on this July morning in 2007 are shaped with sand and greens mix, fairways are dirt and the men on the bulldozers are nipping the ground here, tucking it there under the watchful eye of golf architect Brian Silva.

“Is this awesome or what?” Silva exudes. “Finally, we are going to have a golf course here that does justice to these surroundings. It doesn’t get any better than this.”

Silva was three months into a redesign and construction project that will culminate in the fall of 2008 with a refurbished 18-hole golf course opening to guests at the Mount Washington Resort. The hotel opened in 1902, the Ross course followed in 1915 and for nearly a century provided a pleasant amenity to resort guests without ever reaching its potential in terms of conditioning and playability.

“People in New England ask what projects I’m working on, and I’ll tell them about this Mount Washington restoration,” says Silva, a native of Boston who now lives and works in Dover, N.H. “Invariably, they’ll say, ‘Beautiful site, okay golf course.’ For whatever reason, the golf course was never all it could have been.”

The Mount Washington Resort was acquired in June 2006 by

Celebration Associates and CNL Income Properties and came under the management of National Resort Management Group. As Mount Washington Resort's new president, Patrick A. Corso is bringing the same perspective and skills he used from 1987–2004 as president and CEO of Pinehurst Resort & Country Club in shepherding a resort and golf course from a period of financial uncertainty into a stable and revitalized future. Under Corso's leadership at Pinehurst, the famous No. 2 course designed by Ross was restored to its earlier grandeur and reclaimed its place among the nation's top-ranked golf courses. The PGA Tour came to No. 2 in 1991 and '92, and the course hosted the 1999 and 2005 U.S. Opens and 2004 U.S Senior Open.

Mount Washington has 27 holes of golf, including the Ross course and the nine-hole Mount Pleasant Course, designed in 1989 coincidentally by Silva's former architecture firm, Cornish, Silva and Mungeam. The first thought from the new owners as they made plans for a new spa and meeting facility and numerous improvements to the 200-room hotel was to expand the nine-hole course into a full 18 holes.

But after touring both golf courses, Silva suggested bringing the Ross course up to potential before embarking on the Mount Pleasant course expansion.

"He was so passionate about the opportunity," Corso said. "Brian's excitement is infectious. We couldn't get him to be quiet about what that course could become. It didn't take much convincing to show us the merit of restoring the Ross course first."

The owners had a set of original plans drawn by Ross, the Scotsman who emigrated from his home of Dornoch to Boston in 1899 and eventually set up his golf design business in New England in the summers and in Pinehurst during the winter months.

Silva found few of the original features still in the ground at Mount Washington. Greens had become essentially flat and round after decades of cost-saving triplex mowing procedures. Bunkers were shallow, benign in shape and littered with rocks. Substructures to assist with drainage on the greens, tees and bunkers were non-existent.

The positives were that the land, centuries ago a river bed, drained exceptionally well because of its gravel and sand underpinnings, and it had numerous topographical features and natural bulges and rolls that can make for interesting holes.

“I would consider this a mountain course, but it’s a mountain course in the best sense of the word,” Silva says. “It’s not on the side of a mountain. Some mountain sites just were not meant to have golf holes on them. But this is the best of both worlds.” He gazes toward the mountains, then toward the hotel.

“That’s a one-in-a-million building,” he says. “The goal is to bring the golf course more on par with its setting. It’s not gotten the greatest care over the years. ‘Frumpy’ is a word that describes what was here. The golf course was a little bit frumpy.”

The new course will stretch to approximately 7,100 yards, about 500 more than the original course. The greens and tees will be planted with bent grass, and the fairways will be mostly native fescue with some bent mixed in. The roughs will be fescue, and Silva and course superintendent Kim Dietel plan to let the fescue roughs grow wild away from the proximity of the playing corridors. “A typical day for us is a nice breeze rolling through the valley, the grass flowing with the wind,” says Dietel, the superintendent since October 2001. “The fescue will add a nice contrast to the green of the golf course. Perfectly manicured golf courses have their place. But to me, a little brown here or there is a part of it. It’s the skill of the game. Golf is not a game of perfect.”

Silva nods in agreement and references seaside courses like Shinnecock Hills and National Golf Links, each located on the far eastern extreme of Long Island and laced with contrasts with rich emerald fairways and gold and brown perimeters.

“The margins of holes will be wispy and hay-like,” Silva says. “The back sides of bunkers will have the fescue look, and they’ll look great if we don’t seed them too heavily. You want them to come in a little sparse and still be playable.”

Silva took the Ross plans and his own notes from walking the course to his office in Dover and got to work at his drafting table.

He compared drawings of the new holes and the old holes, choosing to import a majority of the features and green shapes from the original design to the modern version. Extensive alterations have been made to the first five holes as the original first hole had to be abandoned to accommodate the new spa and meeting facility. From holes six through 18, the hole numbers and locations remain consistent from the original Ross plan.

“When you review these old plans, you are reminded how incredibly bright these guys were in their designs 70 and 80 years ago,” Silva says. “They had it going on pretty good. Why should you try to do something better? When you scaled off these bunkers, they fell into these upslopes, in natural places to put bunkers. The classic architects just used the land. It’s awesome stuff.

“The land has nice rolls and folds, and then you highlight it with some of the original bunkering that was either not put in or was taken out. It makes it look like a cool golf course, rather than just a field. It had a little bit of a ‘fieldy’ look to it.”

One of the more interesting original features that never endured to the present is a three-bunker configuration on the fourth hole that resembles the “Principal’s Nose” structure from the shared fairway of the third and 16th holes of the Old Course at St. Andrews, Scotland. The three bunkers are situated in right-center of the fairway, about 50 yards from the green on the par-four hole. “I can’t wait for the first person to say, ‘Ross would never do anything like that,’” Silva says. “I am going to carry this plan in my pocket. In fact, a lot of the bunkers would fool people. Donald Ross was known as the master of subtlety. But if you look at his notes on his bunker drawings, they average four to five feet deep. That’s pretty severe.”

Seeding on some of the greens and fairways was to begin in early August. Silva hoped the first nine could open by early summer of 2008, with the back nine following in late summer or early fall. The next phase of the master plan to upgrade the golf facility will be to add nine holes to the Mount Pleasant course and have two 18-hole courses.

“The opportunity here is incredible,” says Mount Washington General Manager Matt Massei, who moved to New Hampshire from

the position of director of golf at Pinehurst. “The hotel, the setting and location are terrific. There’s some allure here, some history here. Now when we build two really good tests of golf, we’ll have something pretty special.”