



## DONALD ROSS SOCIETY

### ***Shady Trees and Sticky Club Politics***

*By*

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Today, too many golf courses are stuffed with trees. Historically, these layouts did not appear so cluttered. Just look at photographs of Pinehurst in the 1920's. It's not a coincidence that numerous Donald Ross designs were once windswept and barren. Ross stated, "as beautiful as trees are, we must not lose sight of the fact that there is a limited place for them in golf."

Because classical architects were influenced by The Old Course and links golf in Scotland, they naturally embraced washed-out farmland and prairies as ideal sites in America. If wooded areas were selected, clearing plans were typically spacious and wide.

As courses have evolved, it's hard to determine which have been the more damaging: newly planted saplings or mature hardwoods that have not been kept at bay. Oddly enough, trees have a peculiar habit of growing taller and wider. It's difficult to notice during any one season, but over the course of 60 years, hole corridors have lost nearly half of their original playing areas. Countless golf holes today are simply too narrow as straight patterns of trees tend to strangle fairways from both sides.

Consequently, laser straight ball flights are required in today's game. Because good shots are restricted to the center of play, golf can no longer be approached like the game of billiards - where the lateral angle of the first shot can be chosen with the diagonal of the next shot in mind. Strategy is all but lost when alternative angles of approach have been straightjacketed by tree plantings and overgrown vegetation.

#### **Undercutting the Tree Planting Trend**

The installation of golf course irrigation triggered the tree-planting barrage. These irrigation systems were single-row down the middle axis of the fairway. The extent of the water's throw gradually became the demarcation lines for fairways, particularly since the turf was naturally greener in these locations. Thus, wide-open fairways became narrow, and their elaborate curvatures evolved into straight lines. In response, greens committees began planting sub-standard varieties of trees in the lateral areas that could not be irrigated.

The Dutch elm disease also served as a contributing factor. The American elm was a beautiful hardwood with deep, unobtrusive root zones and soaring, elegant canopies. As the American elm

perished, awareness of attrition escalated and the practice of planting "replacement" trees became the rage. A countless number of "back-up" trees were also planted in close proximity to healthy trees, just in case they too perished.

Worse yet, their substitutes were cheap golf course selections. Soft wooded trees, such as willows, birches, and maples, were planted much too often. Debris-ridden conifers and evergreens, such as white pines, hemlocks, cedars and spruces, were also poor choices. These varieties not only possess shallow root zones, a maintenance burden, but they also manifest low extending limbs which restrict the swing and obstruct recovery play.

Golf course rankings have also inspired tree plantings. The top ranked course in the country serves as an architectural model for all others. Naturally, the elite courses will be emulated. Such is the case with Pine Valley Golf Club in New Jersey, which most publications perennially anoint as the best. Because one hole cannot be seen from another at Pine Valley, numerous clubs have initiated tree-planting programs between holes in an attempt to create the Pine Valley framework. Interestingly, Pine Valley intersects 300 plus acres of land, while the average classical course contains less than 120 acres. Separating golf holes with tree plantings on much smaller parcels of land will immediately influence play.

All too often committee people plant trees to defend par. The typical locations are along the landing areas of tee shots or on the inside corners of doglegs. Beautification committees also plop trees in every available open space on the golfing grounds. Likewise, superintendents occasionally cram trees in the understory of wooded areas to attract beneficial wildlife habitats.

Other times the bone of contention is for safety between adjacent holes. Admittedly, trees shield golfers in certain situations, but not always. Does a row of midget evergreens really protect golfers? Doesn't the ricochet amplify the feeling of danger? The point being that there is a false sense of security associated with trees, which divide holes. Instead, open, unobstructed site-lines can create a visual awareness or consciousness between groups, where golfers can easily be spotted, judge when to hit and not to hit, and forewarn others of an errant shot. Golfers cannot always forewarn neighboring groups of an impending shot when they are obscured by trees and therefore cannot be seen.

It is also good advice to avoid planting memorial trees. Determining desired tree types and locations are always at issue. Their sense of permanence also becomes debilitating in an ever-changing environment. Allow one memorial tree, and soon your course will be inundated with remembrances. If families really want to show their affection to a loved one, trees can always be removed from your course in their memory.

Regardless of the motivation, too many trees encumber our golf courses today.

Trees located too close to bunkers should be re-evaluated. Their proximity to one another often forms a double hazard. In addition, trees that block full-scale visuals of golf course hazards should be logged. For instance, bunkers and creeks cannot demand the proper attention and awareness from golfers when they are partially camouflaged by foliage.

Instead, golf committees should utilize a tree's ability to screen on the perimeter of the premises. Trees can partition the golf course from unattractive structures and bustling noise, so long as they do not follow some formalized arrangement such as a single-file line. Rows of trees appear much too ornamental and contrived in a natural setting.

Selectively clearing trees from the interior of the golf course produces the added visual dimension of depth. Gorgeous vistas of rolling hills and terrain are available when your eyes are not isolated by a dense barrier of trees. Newly planted trees clutter open spaces, and their limbs and shadows tend to hide intricate ground game contours. Golf courses, instead, should embrace the visual depth and splendor of long, sweeping perspectives. Besides the beauty, golfers will experience a unified spirit and a sense of camaraderie with other golfers throughout the course, as their site-lines will periodically meet during the round.

Dense wooded areas with low reaching limbs restrict recovery play. All too often the golfer is forced to punch the ball laterally out of harm's way. Instead, clean out the brush, raise the canopy to a reasonable height, and remove undesirable evergreens within the hardwoods. Under these conditions, the golfer may at least assess the risks for their next angle of attack, and depending upon their skill, may shape the ball through alternative openings to safety.

Here, grand signature trees can be exposed. Bring to view prominent trees, which have always been hidden among impinging neighbors. Grand oaks and other specimens will become visually accentuated and highlighted upon the removal of unattractive evergreens and miniature saplings nearby.

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