Coore-Crenshaw team restores Winston-Salem classic

Perry Maxwell’s 1939 course at Old Town Club to reopen this summer

By BRAD KING

Bill Coore is standing on the first tee box at Winston-Salem’s Old Town Club pointing toward a trio of bunkers flanking the right side of the opening fairway. On an unseasonably cool, spring morning, the soft-spoken, 67-year-old golf course architect – who in 1982 joined forces with twintime Masters champion Ben Crenshaw to form what is now considered golf’s preeminent design team – is decked in his nondescript day-to-day workplace attire: baseball cap pulled low, sunglasses, faded red-tag Levis, rubber mud boots, golf shirt and V-neck sweater with the logo of Coore & Crenshaw’s most recent high-profile creation.

Two decades ago another renowned golf course architect, Tom Doak, stamped his name on the industry when he wrote the brutally candid “Confidential Guide to Golf Course Architecture.” In his now infamous book, Doak saved warm praise for Old Town Club’s Perry Maxwell design, including it on the short list of golf courses in the country he considered “worth golfing to play” – the other handful widely considered the finest layouts in the country, including Augusta National, Seminole, Pine Valley and Cypress Point.

Preparing for its 75th anniversary celebration in 2014, Old Town retained Coore & Crenshaw to restore its Maxwell masterpiece and complete the club’s decade-long project approximating the look, playing character and hand-hewn finish of its original 1939 identity.

Since starting the Old Town restoration project, Coore and his shaping team, often referred to as “his boys” – longtime right-hand man Dave “Ax” Axlund, an accomplished architect in his own right, as well as talented spadesmen Keith Rhebb and Quinn Thompson – have diligently tweaked the same first fairway bunker so many times it has become a popular subject of their unique vernacular.

What was once an artistic, inspiring fairway hazard on Old Town’s opening hole had mellowed through the years until becoming basically round. In Coore & Crenshaw jargon, “round” resembles a “blob” – and blobs are often “blah.” After the bunker was stretched out, it became dissected into two bunkers – described affectionately by Axlund – in his distinct, former college football player baritone – as: “A big guy and a little guy.” By itself, how-ever, according to Coore, “the little guy looked a little lonely.” So the two bunkers were ultimately joined back together and finally an island-of-turf was formed in the center, eventually turning it into a “big guy with a little do-dad in the middle.”

Using dozens of Old Town photographs including a vintage aerial image, Coore & Crenshaw have been able to boldly and beautifully “mimic” nature and their work at Old Town is now dramatically taking shape. Following a July turf grow-back period, the course is expected to reopen in late summer.

Coore & Crenshaw believe design plans or drawings – most anything thought out on paper, for that matter – handcuff an artisan’s creativity and feel in the field. Speaking their own “slanguage” and staying away from elaborate blueprints favored by many of their peers, the C&C boys are instead specialists at collaborative detail creativity using their tools of the trade: dozers, excavators, backhoes and skid steers.

Eventually, one single bunker on Old Town’s opening hole will require a trio of shapers working more than three months to complete its bold, eye-popping final configuration; and even so, the bunker will not be totally finished until 419 Bermuda sod is hand torn – not cut – from its edges and scoops of native bluestems are transplanted around its perimeters adding character-rich shadows and dimension, while native creek bed sand is transplanted into the bunkers from the nearest harvester, the Yadkin River.

Old Town superintendent O’Neil Crouch and golf chairman Dunlop White likely possess as much understanding of the team’s first-tee exchange as anyone. Explains White: “Coore and Crenshaw are restoring the approximate size, shape and dimensions of Maxwell’s original bunkers at Old Town and reviving the artistic look and feel of the course at it’s inception.

“Now the bunkers will look much more weathered, with jagged-laced edges, rumpled lips, and exposed dirt faces,” says White, “closer to what Mother Nature would have left behind.”

Later that afternoon, after walking much of Old Town’s front nine, Coore stands with the group on the eighth tee box discussing a distant fairway bunker’s horizon line. “It’s too clean and smooth,” Coore tells the team. “Let’s ding it up a little, give it some dents.”

Years ago, it was this same eighth – a 382-yard, par-4 with a blind tee shot to a crowned landing area before a steep slope that runs downhill to a devilish creek fronting Old Town’s famed double green – where Hall-of-Famer Lanny Wadkins, then starring for the Wake Forest golf team, said he used the steeple of the school’s Z. Smith Reynolds Library as an aiming point for the natural draw on his drive, later joking, “That was probably the most important way I used the library.”

Indeed, given its proximity directly next door to the university, Old Town has long provided an ideal proving ground and home course for the storied Demon Deacon golf program. Maxwell’s brilliant routing over tumbling topography forces golfers to use imagination and creativity, as each fairway contains varying degrees of slope that generate awkward lies on approach shots. But it is Old Town’s intricate green undulations, affectionately known as “Maxwell’s rolls” that make it such a shotmaker’s challenge.

Wake’s first standout, Arnold Palmer, won the very first Atlantic Coast Conference tournament at Old Town Club in 1954, two years before the college officially relocated to Winston-Salem. Thereafter, the ACC men’s golf championship returned to Old Town every year through 1958 and again in 1962. In the nearly half-century since the relationship began, Old Town has helped groom numerous Deacon standouts, including Wadkins, Curtis Strange, Scott Hoch, Jay Haas, Leonard Thompson, Gary Hallberg, Joe Inman, Jay Sigel, Billy Andrade, Len Mattiace, Laura Diaz, Darren Clarke, Bill Haas, Kyle Reifers, Webb Simpson and Cheyenne Woods.

“Old Town offers so many varied challenges,” says Wadkins. “It is the ideal course for training serious young golfers.”

The Old Town Club legacy dates back to the early 1900s on the grounds of Reynolda, the stunning, 1,000-acre estate belonging to tobacco magnate R.J. Reynolds, who was so fond of golf he had built a 9-hole links on his front lawn. Reynolda was eventually passed down to his daughter, Nancy Reynolds Babcock, and her husband, Charlie.

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In 1938 the Babcock’s donated 165 of Reynolda’s acres adjacent to what became “Reynolda House” – now an art museum listed on the National Register of Historic Places – to start a new club named Old Town.

Charlie Babcock had recently hired Clifford Roberts, co-founder of the Augusta National Golf Club, as an associate of his investment firm – Reynolds & Company (later Dean Witter Reynolds). Meanwhile, Roberts had retained Perry Maxwell at Augusta National to reconstruct numerous Alister Mackenzie bunkers and green sites for The Masters Tournament – a natural fit given that for many years Maxwell had served as Mackenzie’s design partner. Pleased with the results at Augusta National, Roberts recommended his employer hire Maxwell to design the new course in Winston-Salem.

For Maxwell’s design at Old Town, the Babcocks allowed the architect to essentially handpick his site from a sweeping expanse of fallow farmland. Construction commenced in December 1938, with Old Town’s holes modeled after many of the world’s best including those at St. Andrews and Augusta National. Roberts actually accompanied Maxwell, who harbored an undying affection for the Old Course at St. Andrews – birthplace of golf and home to seven double greens – in the latter stages of the Old Town construction process, encouraging Maxwell to merge Old Town’s adjacent green sites at Nos. 8 and 17 – if for no other reason, Roberts claimed, “a double green would make for interesting bar room discussions.”

In November 1939 the Maxwell design was complete and Old Town opened for play. Guy Paulsen was hired from Augusta National as the first head professional, receiving the highest recommendation from both Roberts and Bobby Jones. Charles Trueblood described Old Town in a July 1939 edition of the Winston...
It’s rare to play a course that’s hosted the most prestigious championships in the game. Pinehurst No. 2 has been the site of the PGA Championship, the Ryder Cup and two U.S. Open Championships. And, for the first time in history, it will host both the 2014 U.S. Open and U.S. Women’s Open Championships, back-to-back. You don’t have to be a champion to play a championship course.

Until then, the first tee is open.

In June 2014, the greatest men and women in golf will play Pinehurst No. 2.

With fewer than 345 members through the years, the club has for the most part avoided hosting non-member events, yet the Purvis Ferree Cup – an annual four-ball competition that boasts a national field – is one exception. In recent years Old Town has hosted several U.S. Open and USGA Senior Amateur qualifiers. But that’s about as high profile as it gets for an institution perfectly secure in its legacy as a citadel of tradition and subtlety.

For Coore, who grew up just 24 miles away in Denton, the Old Town restoration represents far more than just another reclamation project – it is a homecoming. Standing on Old Town’s new double green – which Coore says will more closely resemble its source of inspiration at the Old Course in both size and shape – the architect reflects back on his own days as a member of the Wake Forest golf team in the late 1960s when he would enter the club property through a back fence 30 yards behind where he now stands. “I keep pinching myself,” Coore said. “I keep asking myself, ‘Is this real?’”

Though he only remained a member of the Wake squad through his sophomore year, Coore said he developed a keen sense of knowledge and understanding of golf course architecture during his competitive days by studying both Old Town and Pinehurst No. 2, which Coore & Crenshaw recently retrofitted to its original grandeur in preparation for its historic 2014 hosting of both the men’s and women’s U.S. Opens. “Probably no two courses were more influential to me, particularly given my evolution and appreciation of golf course architecture, than Old Town and Pinehurst No. 2,” Coore said.

Crenshaw grew up on a Maxwell design in Texas at Austin Country Club and the tandem has previously restored other prominent Maxwell designs, including Midwest classics Prairie Dunes and Southern Hills. All of which have allowed Coore & Crenshaw unmatched familiarity and intimacy during the Old Town restoration process. “We like to think we’ve done some work (at Old Town) Mr. Maxwell would be proud of,” says Coore. “I don’t know if we’ve lived up to what he would expect, but we hope so.”