

VENERABLE RIVERTON

A DONALD-ROSS DESIGNED CLUB WITH RICH HISTORY

By Mike Moretti



In October 4, venerable Riverton Country Club in Cinnaminson hosted a Member Golf Day for the New Jersey State Golf Association.

It was a significant day, for Riverton was once again a proud member of the NJSGA after a considerable absence.

Riverton is a premier Donald Ross-designed facility in South Jersey with a rich history dating back to 1900. It is the only New Jersey course to twice host the Philadelphia Amateur.

Riverton has hosted the qualifying for the U.S. Open, U.S. Senior Open, U.S. Mid-Amateur, and a variety of GAP (Golf Association of Philadelphia) events.

“The club has benefitted greatly from having a Donald Ross golf course. When it was founded in 1900, it was a nine-hole golf course. In 1916, they bought most of the land they now have. They hired Ross to come in and give them an 18-hole course,” said former Riverton president Craig Ammerman.

“Ross came to America in 1898 and for a long period worked on Pinehurst. In 1916, Ross was in his first year as full-time

architect when he came to Riverton. He got most of the work done in 1916, and the course opened around July 4, 1917,” Ammerman said.

Ross is considered a genius when it comes to selecting sites for a course’s putting greens. The greens are his defense against those who might otherwise produce record low scores. Today’s 18 greens are where Ross put them 100 years ago. Nearly 70 years after his death, Ross still has more courses on Golf Digest’s Top 100 courses’ list than any other architect, and his courses still host the most national championships.

“It’s a darn fine golf course. It plays longer than it appears to be. Ross was a genius in many ways. He would spend weeks walking along the property looking for the best green sights. He’d find 20 to 25 of them and then figure the best 18 he could fit in there and then build the golf course. It would be hard to walk around Riverton today and say this green doesn’t belong there where Ross put it,” said Ammerman, who was greens chairman for a decade at the club.

Ammerman thinks head professional

Kevin Duffy, hired five years ago, and superintendent Doug Davis, hired in 2000, have been wonderful for Riverton.

“The golf pro, Kevin Duffy, is great. I’ve never seen anybody that good that young. He knows what to do as a professional. He gets people involved. Thanks to him, we have a lot more women playing golf, and a lot more kids playing golf,” he said.

“When I stepped in, Riverton had a small junior program and some ladies programs. We massively expanded the junior program by creating tons of different programs,” Duffy said.

“The course today is as good as it’s ever been. There’s a terrific superintendent, Doug Davis, who is really good at what he does. He’s been around. He was an assistant superintendent to Bernie Stuck in 1989-90. He then worked five years apiece at Pocono Farms C.C. and nearby Little Mill C.C.

“Among all of his skills, the most important one is that he can spot trouble before anyone else can see it, primarily with grass on the greens, which is what you are most concerned with. “He spots diseases before they happen,” added Ammerman,

who stated the club has removed around 3,500 trees to open up the course vistas over the past two decades.

In the early 1990s, the club engaged Ron Prichard, considered to be the golf architect who knows the most about Donald Ross courses, to help it preserve its Ross course.

A master plan was implemented, and Prichard got to work with a lengthy list of improvements needed after consultation from USGA agronomists and horticulturists.

Items on the master plan included leveling tees, dredging lakes, insufficient drainage, rebuilding bunkers, removing trees, healthier turf, improved watering system, reducing water and pesticides, enlarging practice areas, adding hazards throughout the course and providing lightning shelters.

“People come there a lot of reasons, but would not be there if not for the wonderful golf course. Obviously, since they hired Ron Prichard, a lot of things are improving,” Ammerman said.

In 1915, the club made what is likely the most important decision in its 116-year history to expand from nine to 18 holes and hire Donald Ross, who designed upwards of 400 courses and went on to become the best architect in the game’s history. Adjacent land was purchased and the 18-hole course opened in late summer of 1916. Ross retained one original hole, today’s 14th.

Like most clubs, Riverton had tough times from 1930 until about 1950, a result of the Depression and World War II. It was doing much better by the 1950s. For the next three decades, the club was guided to a considerable degree by two brothers, Ernie and Percy Ransome, whose parents and grandparents played key roles in the club’s early years.

“Riverton was very fortunate to have the Ransome family around. Ernie Ransome was president of Pine Valley for 30 years,” Ammerman said. “He and his brother were very successful in business and loved golf. They kept the club on a good course. As time went along, other people also kept it going on a good course.”

In the latter half of the 20th Century, Riverton had some of the best female golfers in this area, and for a few years one of the five best in the world.

Dorothy Porter, whose five USGA national championships rank seventh all time, also won eight Philadelphia Women’s



Above, Riverton clubhouse and putting green. Below, Riverton’s 14th hole, a Donald Ross original.



Amateurs and three Women’s Western Amateurs.

In 1949 she won the U.S. Women’s Amateur. Porter was a member of the U.S. team that won the 1950 Curtis Cup and captained the 1966 team to victory. In 1977, she became the first Women’s Amateur Champion to win the U.S. Senior Women’s Amateur. She went on to win the Senior title again in 1980, 1981, and 1983. Her home was adjacent to the golf course.

One year in the Western Amateur, Porter defeated Mickey Wright, who Golf Digest in 2009 named the best female golfer of all time, 5 and 4.

Ann Laughlin, who grew up on the

Riverton course, played collegiately at the University of Miami. She won an NCAA Championship once and finished in the top three two other times; she is in the university’s Athletics Hall of Fame. Ann also has won 11 Philadelphia Women’s Amateurs, the second-most all time, and remains active in serious amateur golf.

Riverton is unique in its tie to the sport of bowling. The four-lane bowling alley was built in 1905 and is listed in the National and State Register of Historic Places. The Riverton men’s team competes in the Philadelphia Inter-Club Bowling League which originated in 1902, and is considered the oldest club league in the country. 🏏