



## Tracing the Evolution from Maniac Hill to the Pinehurst Academy By Art Stricklin

**I**n 21st century golf, you can't open any self-respecting golf course without first building a place for players to practice, work on their games, get better at their craft and practice shots or warm-up for the coming round.

But more than a 100 years ago, when golf was first brought to these shores, that was far from the case.

Golfers, professional and amateur, were more than likely to stumble out of a bar or hotel to the first tee, than to spent an hour at the practice range before they played.

But like many great inventions in American golf, the first recognized practice range in the U.S. was built here by architect Donald Ross and the Richard Turfs family.

It became known as Maniac Hill, towering high above the Pinehurst landscape on land abandoned with the moving of different holes from the original course layout.

The range received its unique nickname because of the fervor of its many golfers, thrilled with the chance to work on their game, either before they played or before the next future golfing challenge.

"Maniac Hill is to golf what Kitty Hawk is to flying," famed golfer Tommy Armour once said before the prestigious North and South Tournament at Pinehurst, rightly known then and now as the Capital of American Golf.

Today, a high-tech Padgett Learning Center sits on the huge range at Pinehurst, with longtime Director of Instruction Eric Alpenfels overseeing the teaching and research facility with a roster of talented instructors for Pinehurst Resort guests, members and locals.

"Every time I walk down the back steps to the range, I realize all the great golfers who have walked down here before me," Alpenfels said.

It's a far cry from what Ross found when he immigrated from Scotland in the early 1900s and settled at Pinehurst where he served as the head pro, director of golf, greenskeeper and any other duties he could find.

He was employed by the Tufts family to build a series of golf courses

on the North Carolina sandhills, incidentally only a few hours from Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and a few years removed from when the Wright Brothers made their first flight.

The original No. 1 course at Pinehurst was opened in 1899 and the championship No. 2 course, built by Ross was opened in 1907, first only nine holes and 5,400 yards.

Very few golfers practiced back then with the exception of early American pros Walter Travis, Freddie McLeod and Jock Hutchinson who would use an empty fairway.

That begin to change until some of the holes of the original course were moved in 1910 to accommodate the changing golf landscape at Pinehurst. Ross began to design the first dedicated range, Maniac Hill.

He built the range high above the ground so golfers could see the surroundings, others could see them and could avoid being hit by stray practice shots.

With the North and the South the premier amateur tournament of its time, attracting all the top players, America's best golfers came to Pinehurst to see the new practice facilities for themselves,

This was also where the American school of golf teaching began to take place along with the traditional English method of teaching.

The best teachers in the U.S., and those who had come over from Europe, came together at Maniac Hill for endless sessions with well-heeled Pinehurst guests and members.



Maniac Hill (above) Pinehurst Academy (below)

Ross even arranged for a large practice shed, a common occurrence these days, but radical for his time, to be erected at the range for protection from the elements. It stood guard over generations of golfers until it was finally taken down in the late 1960s.

Alpenfels arrived at Pinehurst as a course intern in 1984, as part of a new generation of golf teaching and technology, but still determined to preserve the Pinehurst past.

“We are not band-aid teachers, but that’s the nice thing about having 3-4 day schools,” he said. “We can just stay out there and work on the fundamentals until we get it right.”

He is now located at the plush Padgett Learning Center, named for longtime Director of Golf Don Padgett, located on the opposite end of the practice range from where most of the players warm-up before their round of golf begins.

Alpenfels said Pinehurst probably operates on a 60-40 principle with 60 percent of the lessons coming to Pinehurst members and the rest to hotel guests.

The wide range of technology available at the range allows for players to get as

technical as they want with video, launch monitors and motion vest available, to hands on lessons from Alpenfels and his four full-time teachers.

“All the pros teach here,” he said. “We have a research facility along with an extensive teaching area plus hitting bays for all kinds of players and conditions.”

Alpenfels has been at Pinehurst long enough to see several renovations of the teaching and practice facilities.

The first came in the early 1990s with the building of the separate Padgett learning center. The original building was located 350 yards from the main hitting area which could only be hit by a young Davis Love, who grew up in the Pinehurst area.

As technology grew and better players began to get better, the learning center became a target from many at the range including professionals like Love to a 22-handcapper using good equipment on a windy day.

Another renovation occurred before the second U.S. Open staged at Pinehurst in 2005. It moved the learning center back out of the range of fire of all golfers, equipped it with the most modern and

technical teaching equipment and also finished leveling the original Maniac Hill to fit into the overall resort and practice area.

But over the last nearly 100 years, America’s original range and teaching area has evolved from an oddity for players who would actually want to work on their game before and after they play, to the finest and most modern practice and teaching range anywhere.

Alpenfels admits that Ross and Turfs might be shaking their head over what their original practice facility has become, but it fits into the Pinehurst theme of respecting the past while preparing for the future.

“Our goal is always to create an environment where you have what you need to get better in as many high tech or low tech ways as possible.”

Something Pinehurst practice range founders would have understood very well.

**Note:** Special thanks to the Tufts archives (tuftsarchives.org) and history center for their research help. ●

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