CORAL GABLES | Not long after Bob Coman started his job as director of golf at the Biltmore Hotel, he decided to take a road trip.

Coman was on his way to visit his son at the University of Virginia when he stopped into a library known for historic golf memorabilia in Pinehurst, N.C. For $180 a woman made him a copy of the original blueprints Donald Ross used in 1925 to design the Biltmore Golf Course, an incredible look at one of the first courses to be constructed in South Florida.

But Coman received something even better, something akin to hopping in a time machine and walking alongside the legendary architect himself.

"I was about to leave and the lady behind the counter said, ‘You've been so nice to me, so I have something else for you,’ ” Coman recalls. “And she handed me Ross’ original handwritten notes from the design.”

What those blueprints and notes have led to is a $2.5 million restoration currently taking place at the Biltmore course. It coincides with a $25 million renovation of the hotel and its amenities, an act of preservation and enhancement to ensure this national historic landmark stays true to its past while being relevant and attractive in modern times.

To do so on the golf side, Coman and designer Brian Silva are attempting to transform Biltmore into what Ross intended nearly a century ago. The bunkering plans provide more movement to the fairways with angles intended to challenge better players while making the course manageable for the recreational player. The TifEagle greens will have the Ross trademark of gentle turtlebacks, and walks to the next tee box will be shortened in many cases.

While it's a major project that will fundamentally change the character of the course, only 52 of the layout's 140 acres are being altered — a lot of the tee boxes, bunkers and greens are being shifted to bring Ross's original details back to life while simultaneously keeping the modern game in mind, but it's not so drastic that locals won't be able to recognize the course come December when it reopens.

After taking a tour of all 18 holes, my main takeaway is that this course will be more difficult for the better player, easier for the average golfer and more intriguing for both. That may sound counterintuitive, but it's the beauty of great design to achieve exactly that.

For better players, the yardage has been lengthened to about 7/100 — designers went so far as to take out a fountain near the hotel so the 10th tee could be pushed back a good 60 yards — and the fairway bunkering is more relevant for today's powerful players. However, the trickiest aspect for elite players will be the need to hit the proper sections of fairways to allow the best angles of attack and the delicate shots they will face after missing greens.
At the same time, the average player receives some help. Trees have been removed to open up the look of holes, and there are several instances of bunkers being added behind greens where previously the ball would have rolled another 20 yards into a poor lie. There are playable bailout areas where using your putter or a hybrid from off the green will be recommended. Situations where players are in a greenside bunker and have to carry another bunker to reach the green will be eliminated.

Certain holes will be really fun when all is said and done. The back nine is special, including a revamped par-5 15th hole that has a shallow green reminiscent of No. 15 at Augusta National. The par-4 17th features a shifted fairway that goes up against a canal, making for a nervous tee ball and an even more difficult second shot when you have to carry that canal. The par-3s are a wonderful mix – you will find a monstrous one that can stretch out longer than 240 yards and a much shorter “thumbprint” par-3 that requires a short iron to a fascinating putting surface. The final hole will face right at the beautiful hotel tower and features another green with several sections.

The front nine is perhaps not as dramatic but does include interesting challenges. Both par 3s – No. 2 and No. 8 – have been lengthened and have added wraparound bunkers that were in the original design. The par-4 fifth hole is a real treat, where you can miss left off the tee but are given a much better angle to the green if you challenge the bunkers on the right. Ross’ original documents were particularly critical in the decisions to add or remove bunkers in strategic areas, the defining characteristic of the layout.

In addition to the course restoration, the range and a short game area are being expanded and refurbished. The facility is now home to Jim McLean’s golf school and continues to serve the University of Miami’s women’s team.

What’s coming to life is a championship-worthy facility that already boasts a ton of history. The PGA Tour played at the Biltmore from 1931 to 1937, and again from 1959 to 1962. At the annual Junior Orange Bowl, an event that has been moved to the first week of January to avoid the recently announced “dead period” of college recruiting, nearly every professional star you can name has competed here. Add the restored Donald Ross design into the mix, and the Biltmore potentially becomes a compelling destination for the PGA Tour to return to Miami, something it has expressed interest in since the event at Doral lost its sponsor two years ago.

There are promising signs that this could become a reality. Coman says the PGA Tour Champions is interested in playing an event at the Biltmore as soon as next year. And it is common for facilities to host smaller events before the main Tour invests in a location. For instance, the 3M Championship at TPC Twin Cities was a successful senior tour stop and now Minnesota will host a PGA Tour event in 2019.

It’s also worth noting that Coman has experience in this regard. He once worked at PGA National and was instrumental in getting the Honda Classic to move there.

“I would put our odds at 80/20 to get a Champions tour event,” Coman said. “When you look at other Miami courses, we’re one of the only ones with the infrastructure and the golf course to host. We’ve really missed having an event in Miami the past two years. It’s
not just the golf tournament because the party doesn't end when the last putt is holed. It's a community event for us."

No facility is better representative of Miami than the Biltmore. Although this is the place where Dwight Eisenhower, Babe Ruth and Al Capone have stayed and played, 70 percent of the golfers are local residents with a passion for Coral Gables and the surrounding area. And there's something about the thick St. Augustine grass, natural canals and neon green iguanas that captures the heart of the location unlike anything else.

It would only be right if this is where professional golf came back to Miami. Regardless, the facility will soon be entering into a new echelon once the restoration is final.

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