Americanization of Asian course design continues

YAMANASHI PREFECTURE, Japan — Despite the golf course development lull in Japan, von Hagge Design Associates are moving forward on two projects.

Von Hagge's Mike Smelek reports that, after three years of "political gymnastics," his firm has received approval to begin work on Minobu Golf Club here, in the shadow of Mt. Fuji. Local and national authorities requested a slew of modified routing plans before approving the project. However, Minobu GC will be worth the wait, says Smelcuk. The rugged piece of property lies in the foothills last south of the Fuji River valley. To help negotiate the severe topography, von Hagge will employ an extensive network of retaining walls between two and 15 meters in height. Smelcuk estimates that two million cubic meters of earth will be moved during construction.

Two more von Hagge Japanese projects are scheduled for completion this year: Mazi Resort in Hokkaido and Arima Royal near Kobe. Meanwhile, the von Hagge Design team expects to break ground on Ajoos Country Club in early 1994. This 18-hole complex is owned by Ube Industries.

Golf Course News: Are you personally building more regulation- or Cayman-length courses?
Bill Amick: Far more full-length courses.

Golf Course News: How has the Cayman idea been received?
Bill Amick: In general, it's positive. But it needs something that will promote it in the United States -- like they have in Japan, where they've built several courses exclusively for the Cayman ball.

Golf Course News: Why do you so strongly support this idea?
Bill Amick: There is a market for it, for a place for people learning the game at much less cost, quicker and easier because the Cayman ball is easier to get airborne and easier to learn with. Since it gets airborne easier, you don't have to hit it as hard to get satisfactory results. Then golfers can move on to heavier, harder golf ball.
Q&A: Amick

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rights to the Cayman Golf Co., which is Troy Puckett.

GCN: What's your interest in this in the first place?

BA: Bill Diddel, who I was working for in 1955 in Indianapolis, had come up with this idea in the early 1930s. He got a patent on a golf course in 1942, which was the other extreme. We needed some.

GCN: Were the architects who designed those courses partly at fault?

BA: Yes.

GCN: Would you do it again?

BA: No. First, we can't do it again. And we wouldn't do it again. Badly, the regulations have logic. What frustrates all of us — developers and architects included — is the paperwork, the hearings, the sometimes irrational public emotionalism. Also, the fact that some of it is bureaucracy that has no direct value. It's the system. But the system has been established and we must deal with it.

GCN: You've dealt with the activists in America. Do you think that with the testing being done on effects of pesticides and runoff, will the activists accept it if the facts come down on the side that golf courses do not pollute?

BA: What's being done as far as studying is valuable to us all. The regulators are certainly ahead — and often much ahead — of the public. In the state of Vermont there has been a lot of emotionalism and a lot of pure-and-simple anti-growth. And any basis — real or imagined — is sometimes used against individual projects. That will probably always be.

GCN: You are saying government officials are ahead of the public. But they are the ones who did the Cape Cod Study, which had positive results in the golf industry's eyes.

BA: What's frustrating the golf course architects is not so much dealing with the staff of the Corps of Engineers or the state. We can deal with it as long as we know what the regulations are and what we need to do to satisfy them. What frustrates us is when we get into public hearings and they go on and on and on. It becomes an emotional issue, and the people have an influence on the elected or appointed officials. And decisions are made not on staff recommendations, and not based on fact.

GCN: What has been your greatest joy designing golf courses?

BA: The reason I got into it, and what continues to please me most, is the process of fitting the best golf course possible onto the available piece of land — like a puzzle. That, I love to do. Solving the problems posed by each site and each situation. The uniqueness turns me on.