With Stenson, Faldo steps up design activity

By Hal Phillips

WUHAN, Peoples Republic of China — With marketing guidance from International Management Group and architectural help from veteran designer Brit Stenson, Nick Faldo has leaped into the Asia-Pacific golf development fray.

With seven Asia-Pacific projects in the works — including Wukan International Golf Club here — Faldo is executing his decidedly traditional design style and enhancing project cachet as only a world No. 1 can.

"Nick's objective is to remain at the top of his sport while, at the same time, steadily increasing his design activities," explained IMG's Mike Fielly, who handles Faldo from the firm's Singapore office. "What Nick Faldo means to a golf development is immediate credibility, especially in Asia where the process is always membership-driven.

"Asia is probably the world's most active market, and that's why Nick is focusing his efforts here. But there's a desire for Nick to be in every market.

Faldo has eschewed the idea of reeling off various "signature" courses with a series of different lead architects. Instead, he has wedged himself to IMG and Stenson, who cut his design teeth with the TPCs in Nevada, U.S. PGA Tour during the 1980s.

Working alongside Bobby Weed, Stenson handled construction of the highly successful Tournament Players Club (TPC) courses before being named the PGA's director of design in 1988. He's responsible for the routing of TPCs in Nevada, Connecticut and Florida, all of which play host to PGA Tour and PGA Senior Tour events.

"If there's one thing that distinguishes Nick, it's that he wants the golfer to be confronted with options," Stenson explained. "He has a very strategic approach to the game. He wants the golfer to see the choices before him... Nick has a very traditional approach and that comes through in the design. Smallish, grass-faced bunkers — what you might expect from a guy who grew up playing golf in Europe and Scotland."

It should come as no surprise the only finished Faldo projects reside in Europe: Chart Hills in Kent, England, and Sporting Club Berlin in Germany. Yet the Briton is busiest in Asia-Pacific, where two Thai projects in Rayong should open this year. According to Stenson, nine holes at Great Lake have been grassed, while Rayong should open this year. As for TPC courses in Asia, it should come as no surprise to the TPC's knowledgeable patrons that Faldo's style is far more straightforward than TPC's, which is sort of exciting — driving to a site.

"And these are less complicated jobs. Instead of moving three or four million cubic yards of dirt, we'll move 300,000," Dye said.

Dye Designs was one of the first U.S. firms to take its product overseas in a big way, opening the door for flockes of architects to ply their wares in the lucrative, albeit speculative Asia-Pacific market. Yet Japanese money fueled much of the fire and, when the bottom fell out last year, Dye found himself overextended.

"We're still reeling from the Japanese bubble-burst," he said. "Right now, we have three projects under construction in Japan, whereas there have been times when we had 14.

"I'm gratified the value of Japanese memberships at my courses has held up 10 to 20 percent better than those at other courses. Not only my courses: A few designers have seen memberships at their courses really hold their value, which speaks to the quality of our work."

Will the Japanese funding return anytime soon?

"I don't think so," he answered. "It's got to be second-stage. And by that I mean they've got to start spending money in Japan before they'll fund anything overseas. Singapore, Thailand and China will be the funding mechanisms in Southeast Asia for the time being."

Indeed, according to Dye, business is continuing as usual in Southeast Asia. He said the firm has just signed another deal in southern Thailand, while Thai Muang Beach Resort opens for play near Phuket this spring. Laguna National — the 36-hole, upscale Singapore project designed by Andy Dye — is about to christen its second 18.

"And I'm still getting calls to do par 3s — because of Chicago," said Dye, referring to the 9-hole collection of famous par 3s from the Family Dye, located on 30 acres in downtown Chicago. "It was sodded before the snow came. We'll just have to see what lived and what didn't."

There's no getting around it: Dye Designs has been forced to downsize. Ten positions were eliminated in January, said Dye. The firm's focus has changed dramatically since the early 1990s, but some basic premises have not.

"You have to judge every deal by how much work it will be; where it's located, and how much you can do for the client," said Dye. "That never changes."

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