

Russians rush to golf, sack sanitarium for sport

By ERIC SCHWARTZ

SESTROYESTSK, Russia — It's as if the same voice that spoke to Kevin Costner in a "Field of Dreams," has also spoken to Sergei Spitsyn: "If you build it, they will come."

The field, in this case, is not an Iowa cornfield. It's the 90 hectares surrounding an aging Soviet sanitarium called The Dunes in this town, about 40 kilometers north of St. Petersburg. And rather than a baseball diamond, Spitsyn is building a six-hole, par-3 golf course.

Of course, Spitsyn attributes his decision to develop the course more to pragmatism than to any mystical belief. The former chief doctor at the sanitarium, Spitsyn said financial problems at the facility led management to the idea of creating a golf course, although none of them had much experience with the game.

But with more foreign businesses coming into the country and increased exposure to Western diversions, word about golf was coming to the Russians. Two courses were established in Moscow, but there was none in St. Petersburg. For

golfers in Northwest Russia, the closest options were in Finland or Estonia.

In 1996, Spitsyn and his colleagues developed a business plan, with emphasis on increasing the public's exposure to golf. First came a miniature course opened in November 1995. The sanitarium then built a driving range 180 meters long and 90 meters wide. A 35-meter extension of the range is already being seeded. The Dunes also has a putting green adjacent to the driving range.

The first six golf holes opened in mid-August, said Baranchukov, and there are plans for more. They range from 60 to 100 meters.

Expansion of the course "really depends on the investors," Baranchukov said.

The next step, he said, is to construct a clubhouse, with a restaurant, pro shop and locker room.

The Dunes has funded its development completely from within, said Spitsyn. But now the club is looking for outside inves-

tors. The sanitarium, which served top party members of the Leningrad area, is now leased from the state by its employees, who make the rent money by charging for the use of its facilities.

Spitsyn noted that it is these other facilities that will help maintain a solid source of funding for The Dunes during the off-golf season, which he said will be from the end of October to the beginning of May. The sanitarium also has a swimming pool, ski trails, snowmobiles, a shooting range, billiard tables, weight rooms, a beach and tennis court — all facilities that people will pay money to use.

Q&A: Marsh

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GCN: What does winning the U.S. Senior Open do for your design business.

GM: I believe that, rightly or wrongly, that there are developers that choose designers based on their name value and not always their skills. Certainly winning this year's U.S. Senior Open has given me a much higher profile in the country. It's given me a notch up for a profile and, to be honest, that's very important when it comes to project development.

The other thing that's important, is that all of those tournaments are televised throughout the Pacific Basin. The developers are watching these tournaments. So it will give me a boost in Southeast Asia as well.

GCN: You've been in the design business for 10 years. What has changed?

GM: It seems to go in cycles. In one stage, when I was getting into the business, there seemed to be a race to see who could design the hardest golf course. There's still a market for that, but I've seen a shift away from that back to more sound strategies, good basic design logic, the more playable golf course — and that works. You only have to talk to players to find that the solid principles still stand out.

GCN: Where do you see yourself fitting in?

GM: I'd have to say traditional. Traditional in terms in of design philosophies. We're known in Southeast Asia as resort designers. We've had to deal in a market there that's totally different than in the United States — not only in the construction issues but also in the market that you're dealing with.

The game of golf is not spread across in the population base like it is in the U.S., or Australia, or Europe. People don't have access. You get middle-aged people, more affluent people who join these clubs. So, if you give them a golf course that's too difficult for them then it's going to be a problem.

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