



An Adventure in Life

By Randy Witt, CGCS

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For those of you who do not know me, a brief introduction is in order. A lifelong Wisconsinite, Packer fan, Penn State alum, I have been a superintendent at various clubs in Wisconsin since 1974. I have served as superintendent at Reedsburg C.C., Janesville C.C., Oneida Golf and C.C. and the Bull @ Pinehurst Farms. A desire of mine has always been to try my hand at growing grass in a foreign country. Through a long-time friend, I was able to realize this dream beginning in February of this year. My first official act was attending the GIS in Atlanta. What a way to start. Most of my friends no doubt think that I am crazy, but my belief is you only have one shot at life, so go for it and live it to the fullest. This first article will serve to provide an introduction and set the scene for upcoming articles about my experiences and observations of dealing with warm season grasses and golf in a very different culture.

So on February 18, with three suitcases and my golf clubs, I boarded a United flight in Milwaukee for Hong Kong. I left my wife, dog, home, cottage up north, and



a mail-it-in position for a country and club I was able to visit for seven days in November, 2005. My wife Mary, an elementary teacher in Green Bay, is holding down the fort. My son Ryan, on the staff at Woodhill C.C. in Wayzata, lends support to his mom.

My employer, Quality Golf of Bangkok, Thailand, holds the golf course management contract for The Hong Kong Golf Club. Quality Golf manages properties in Thailand, Hong Kong and Singapore, while providing consulting services at other courses in the Asian market.

Hong Kong Golf Club consists of three courses: The New Course, The Old Course and The Eden Course. The Old Course was built in 1893; the New Course in 1939 and the Eden Course in 1970. A road created by the Japanese march into Hong Kong in World War II divides the Old Course basically in half. The HKGC has 2,500 members from within the Asian market as well as Great Britain. A unique feature within the clubhouse is a hotel for membership and guest use. The closest hotel is in Central Hong Kong, about 30 minutes away. Thus, a hotel was built many years ago for membership use. The Hong Kong Open, a stop on the Asian Tour, is held in early December. Last

year's winner was Colin Montgomery. The Hong Kong Jockey Club is located next door to the club. The Jockey Club is partnering with the HKGC to hold all the equestrian events for the 2008 Olympics on various parts of the three courses. The Equestrian route will cover parts of the three courses. Construction of ponds, jumps, etc. has already begun. I can see that this is going to be a challenge in coordination and a constant inconvenience for the golfers.

Hong Kong was ruled by Great Britain until 1997. Hong Kong now has its own government, Special Administrative Region, with influences from Red China. Hong Kong consists of Hong Kong Island and the New Territories, which is a more rural type area, comprised of many villages. These villages are not like what we refer to as villages in the states. I will speak about villages at a later time. It is within the New Territories where HKGC is located, about 30 miles north of the city of Hong Kong and about 10 miles south of the border of Red China. Zhenzhen, China, a city of about 8,000,000 people, is visible from some of the higher elevations of the courses.

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As Senior Superintendent, I am responsible for the three golf courses. I have two assistants per course, an equipment manager with a staff of 11 technicians, a landscape staff of 11, an irrigation staff of three, a special projects staff of 12, an arborist staff of five, nursery staff of three, two storekeepers, two secretaries and a greenskeeping staff of 18-20 people per course plus temporary seasonal workers. The staff is all Chinese, with the management positions filled by individuals who are bilingual. These solve the language problem for dealing with all the staff members. The Eden and New Courses receive about 4,000 rounds of golf per month. Various strains of Bermuda, Zoysia, Paspalum, Carpetgrass and even some Annual Bluegrass make up the turf cover. Just about every type of warm season grass is present. The Old course is presently undergoing a renovation program with the target date of opening the course for play around September 1. A new irrigation system is being installed, bunkers redone, two greens rebuilt, fairways re-sodded to Paspalum, roughs sodded to carpetgrass and a cart path system installed.

So, after 10 weeks, I find everyday seems to fill with new and different experiences and challenges. Some old constants such as green speeds, bunkers, weather, members and staff I guess never change, even in a foreign environment. Faces may change, but personality types are constant wherever one goes. My last



few years in the states I found myself no longer really being challenged by the golf course. After 30 years of cool season experience, I found a sense of challenge lacking. Here, challenge is an everyday occurrence. Organization and education have proven to be a large part of this position. With three courses and a large number of staff, organization, communication and education are critical. A major criteria when the assistants were hired was that each assistant was bilingual. I have a second assistant hired in September that had never been on a golf course until being hired here! Put into a second assistant's position. Golf is only enjoyed by the very rich in Hong Kong, as well as most of Asia. Finding potential employees with

any type of golf experience or education is for the most part non-existent. So in essence, I have a large classroom each and every day. The quest and hunger by some of the assistants for some knowledge is amazing and refreshing. Many times at the end of the day I find myself sitting around just talking shop with these young men. A couple are enrolled in the Penn State online program as an avenue for education. There are no turf type educational programs in the Asian world. Americans are held in high regard in Asia because of the knowledge and experience they bring. Golf is booming in the Asian market. Red China is experiencing a tremendous building boom of golf courses. As the Chinese people gain more wealth, golf is becoming a very popular sport. This boom reminds me of the big golf course building boom that took place in the United States years ago.

So, with this background, here I am. Warm season grasses, turf diseases, foods, language, travel, Golf Show in Beijing, superstitions, beliefs, monkeys, everyday life. Some very humorous, some very serious, all very interesting. Over the next months I'll try to convey my thoughts, feelings, experiences and challenges of maintaining golf courses in Asia. Also, I'll attempt to convey the experiences and challenges of living, experiencing and dealing with a whole new culture. Already, those have been numerous and given me pause for a lot of thought about the American way of life and life in general. Hopefully, I can provide a little insight and interest for everyone who takes the time to read the articles.

