

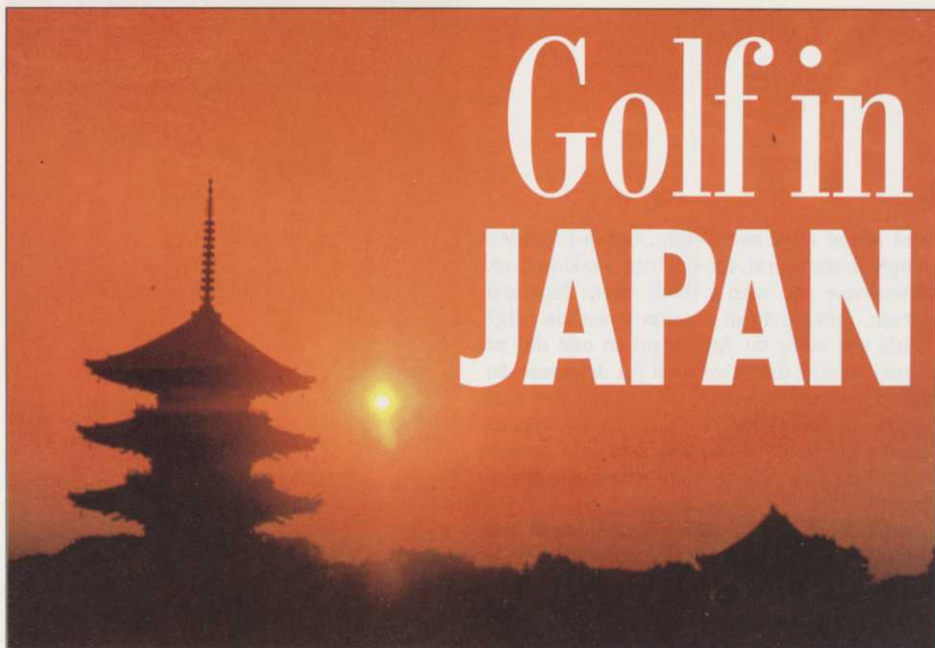
## What I like and don't like about Japanese golf, by Gary Wiren

**Y**ou've probably read about the cost of Japanese golf; if you thought it was an exaggeration, don't, it is probably true.

Koganei Country Club on the outskirts of Tokyo at one point cost \$3.2 million to join (not to buy). The price is down right now to a more affordable \$1.7 million. That's the most costly. Golf membership at a more typical private club, however, runs closer to \$250,000... a real bargain. In both cases you still have to pay green fees.

For those people not members of a club, a day at a semi-private course or resort, or as a member's guest, may average \$250 per round, not counting the transportation to get there. That's one of the aspects about Japanese golf in the negative category, it's too darned expensive.

A practice that fuels this heavy price is the selling of memberships to non-golfers purely on a speculative basis. Hundreds of clubs in Japan have membership rolls filled with 'investors' who keep the price up, but may never have played their course. Since one can sell one's membership at any time, it becomes the same as playing the stock market. The good news is that developers commanding extremely high membership fees can afford to build world-class facilities. Some of the new clubhouses and courses are truly elegant. Though extravagance is not a practice I find necessary for the enjoyment of golf, one can't



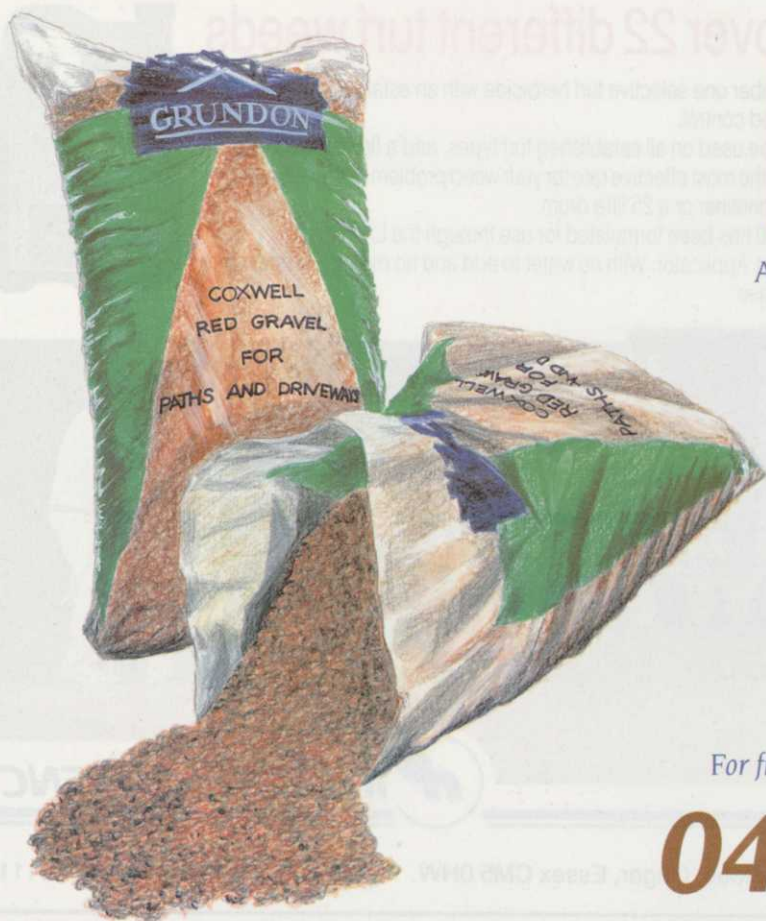
# Golf in JAPAN

help appreciating some of their amenities, landscaping, and quality of the clubhouses.

One of the customs that makes Japanese golf a less rewarding experience for me is the starting and stopping for refreshments and lunch. During a recent round at a very up-scale course, we were offered coffee and juice before our 9am tee time, stopped after the third hole for refreshments at the 'Quarter Way House,' partook in an hour-long lunch after nine holes, stopped again at the 'Three-Quarter Way House' following the 12th hole, and finished with a nice light meal at the prize-giving following the round. I do under-

stand the reason: golf is an all-day experience to be savoured in Japan, and this they most certainly do. But if you are interested in your performance, it sure breaks up the rhythm of the game.

Some of the 'good news' for Japanese golf is that you get to walk off that food and drink. In 12 years of regularly going to Japan, I have never played a round of golf riding in a golf car, nor do I remember seeing anyone else do so. Golf in Japan, like golf in Scotland, England, Ireland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Europe and most other nations, is primarily a walking game. Yet in the US, the



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land of the most overweight, out-of-condition people in the world, the golf car is taking over. When have you seen a really obese Japanese person, other than in a sumo wrestling ring? You'll see more fat Americans in one day at Disney World than I've seen fat Japanese on 22 visits to that country. It's not just diet that makes the difference, but also activity, and an activity like walking the hilly Japanese courses is perfect. The Japanese are smart enough to recognise this.

Golf course superintendents in Japan can drive me up the wall with pin placements. At one club, each time I played there, the flagsticks were in the same location on every green, ie. all front right, or all back left, etc. for the entire 18 holes. When I questioned the management about it, the response was "it's easier for workers to remember where to cut the cups." Compare that to a recent round at a US resort where on the score card for the day all the green depths and widely varied pin locations were printed on an extension of the card. Some flagsticks were located short left, some middle, some back right, etc., in a more interesting and challenging presentation.

More good news for Japanese golf is that if you are frustrated with the course set-up or how you played, there is the wonderful *ofuro* to wash away those anxieties. I've played some lousy rounds which upon completion left me

less than content with myself. But the *ofuro* lulled me into a peaceful relaxation, with its steaming waters from the Japanese king-sized version of a hot tub. It is a wonderful practice, and one I'd recommend to every cold weather golfing facility that can afford the hot water bill.

Speaking of being happy, Japanese golfers, almost to the letter, do not display anger on the course. That is most commendable. It is considered bad manners and a weakness in character to do so. I've never seen a Japanese throw a club. I've seen Americans throw their whole bag. It appears to me that Japanese enjoy their golf more because they appreciate all the game has to offer: a nature walk, sharing with friends, and time away from their life's routine. They don't measure the success or failure of the day simply on what they shot.

I don't like the Japanese double green system where one green is *Korai* (Korean Grass) for summer months, the other *Bento* (Bent Grass) for the cooler season. Jamming two greens into a landing area destroys some of the aesthetics and quality of design. In addition, *Korai* is a terribly stiff-bladed grass, grainier than the most severe Bermuda, frustrating as all heck to putt, and used too frequently when the *Bento* would work. Fortunately, this double green practice is dying out with the advent of new types of stronger heat-tolerant hybrid grasses.

In Japan, the quality of play, agronomy and management are all improving rapidly. In large part this is due to their national penchant for observing the best of other countries, then adopting and modifying to fit their conditions. The rest of the golf world could take some equally beneficial lessons from Japan.

■ The author, Dr Gary Wiren, is a golf educator and former national (US) PGA staff director. Wiren, a PGA Master Professional, has written or co-authored more than 160 magazine articles and seven books, including the *PGA Teaching Manual* and the *PGA Manual of Golf*.

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