

East vs. West In Golf Course Management by Paul Mayes

I have lived in Japan now for over one year. During this time I have found both similarities and differences in the Far East on golf course maintenance compared to the United States.

I am presently consulting for three golf courses owned by the Towa Company. One course is an 18-hole Robert Trent Jones, Jr. design built in 1992. The second course is an older 27-hole layout built by a Japanese designer that opened in 1962. These two golf courses are located in north central Japan about 180 kilometers north of Tokyo. The third golf course is 90 kilometers west of Hiroshima. It is a 36-hole facility designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr. One 18-hole project was built in 1992, and the other 18-holes in 1993.

I am based at Towa's premier golf course, Nasu Highland Golf Club. I am at Nasu Highland on a daily basis. The second course, Towa Nasu Country Club, I visit two to four times per month. The 36-hole complex near Hiroshima, I visit two to three times a year.

Each course has similar grass types. They all use zoysia for roughs. Two courses have mainly zoysia tees and fairways. Nasu Highland has bluegrass tees and fairways. All these complexes have bentgrass greens. The older course has the traditional "two-green" complex for every hole. One green is bentgrass used during spring, fall and winter. The other green is zoysia used in the summer.

Japan is a mountainous country. It reminds me a lot of Hawaii except Japan doesn't have as moderate temperatures. The north half of Japan has all four seasons because of the elevations. Nasu Highlands' elevation is 620 meters at its lowest point and 800 meters at its highest. The truth of the matter, Japan has six seasons. We all are familiar with spring, summer, fall and winter. There are two more seasons here in Nippon. The rainy season comes in mid-June and will last until late July. During that period the average rainfall is 500mm, or 19 to 20 inches. The sixth season is typhoon season which occurs about mid-September to mid-October. Strong winds and heavy downpours of rain can occur in a very short period of time. Then there are always frequent lightning storms and earthquakes throughout the season to deal with. This makes turfgrass management a challenging experience.

My first impression of golf course management in Japan was as if I stepped back in time to the early 1950s in the United States. Many of the maintenance practices are being completed by manual labor. Also the vast majority of "keepers" and workers only experience is farming. There is no true turfgrass education for the Japanese to attend. All new innovative practices being used here come from western culture. Japan is going through the same growing pain that the United States did 40 years ago in turfgrass management. The advantage they have is the availability of products, education and technology from the western part of the world.

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There is an eagerness to learn more innovative methods of turfgrass management, but many Japanese philosophers hinder their progress. Japanese are very loyal to their people and country, something the United States could learn from. The Japanese do not wish to harm their people's economic situation in order to produce a most cost-effective product. Instead, they want to enhance the usefulness of their people to produce a perfect product. We can do this by perfecting each person's job task so they are able to complete each task in a more efficient matter and cover more area in a certain time frame.

Daily grooming here in Japan is actually a much easier task than in the west. The Japanese plan their day at the golf course to spend as much time at the club as possible. Therefore, play will begin around 8:00 a.m. and continue teeing off until around 12:00 noon. After that time, very few members start play because they would be unable to complete their round. They play their first nine holes in about 2½-3 hours. Then most players will stop for one hour for lunch and complete their 18 holes afterwards. This allows our staff to mow greens, tees, rake bunkers and change cups in the morning. Then in the afternoon we work behind play — mowing fairways, roughs and do project work. This way there is no disruption to the members during play.

Staff size varies from course to course as in the United States. One resource not available in Japan is college and high school students. Japanese students start university studies two weeks after high school graduation. Also summer vacation for students is only six weeks long (from mid-July to the end of August). Therefore, in seasonal play areas, part-time staff personnel are required during growing season. These people usually consist of older women who are not able to operate sophisticated machinery. This makes it necessary to use full-time staff for mechanical operations for morning and afternoon job tasks, leaving manual labor projects to part-time staff.

The Japanese want to maintain similar quality conditions as in the United States. To do so, they try to create the same conditions as in the United States. Japan soils are very heavy clay soils and volcanic rock. This makes it difficult to grow quality turfgrass. To achieve better soil profiles, they remove soil and rock in areas where tees, fairways and greens are to be located. They then replace this area with straight sand and soil amendments. They usually do a very good job with elaborate subsurface drainage. Problems arise when very little or no subsurface drainage is attained on these high sand profiles built on top of heavy clay and rock. This combined with the large amount of rain received each season will challenge even the best American superintendents to produce quality turfgrass. But through persistence and good water management (with a little help from drain tiling), quality turfgrass can successfully be attained.

Fertilizers are another inadequate resource for the Japanese greenskeepers. Most fertilizers produced here are of agriculture grade and ratios (such as 1:1:1). The nitrogen source is of high salt content and potassium is from chloride as mioviated materials. Fortunately, some American products are available at a slightly higher price.

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The problem is convincing the Japanese greenskeepers to stop thinking they are growing agriculture products and start thinking of fertilizing turfgrass. Their experience is very inadequate to produce quality turfgrass health.

Japan, as a country, has available to them some very good pest-control materials. Many chemicals used are the same as in the United States. There is a serious problem in their dilution rates. The Japanese greenskeepers are requested to spray materials at ten times the rate of water applied to the surface of the turfgrass than in the United States. This reduces the effectiveness of the pesticides used in most cases. I am having to retrain their thought process on spray application rates to achieve the best results for the pesticides.

Dealing with suppliers is very interesting in Japan. The traditional method of picking our suppliers is by whom you like to deal with. Most suppliers carry all products necessary for golf course maintenance. The same supplier will carry Toro, Jacobsen, Cushman and other brand equipment. They also may carry various golf course supplies from different companies. The problem with this method is there is no competitive bidding with other suppliers. Also, service needs are not considered as part of a good supplier. I am encouraged to see this way of thinking is changing because of economic restraints. The "money is no object" philosophy is definitely diminished in Japan.

Golf courses in Japan are coming of age. With the increased popularity of American management practices, Japanese courses can move quickly to a higher level of excellence. I hope I can help just a little in the movement in that direction. I look forward to a new year of growth with the Japanese greenskeepers. For now, West is on top. But with Japanese determination, East could soon equal or overcome the West's dominance.

Credit: Hole Notes 7/95

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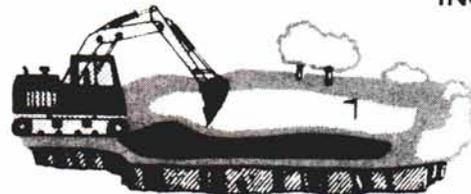
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