

Americans cash in on European jackpot

BY MARK LESLIE

Golf's popularity is skyrocketing around the world and American experts and manufacturers are eyeing countries from East to West to export their knowledge and hardware.

"Whereas the United States is in the second or third golf boom, Europe and Asia are in their first — and they're lacking expertise in several areas," said James E. McLoughlin of The McLoughlin Group, who is spending more and more time consulting would-be golf course developers in Thailand, Italy, Austria, Norway, Belgium and even Yugoslavia.

American golf course architects, builders, club managers, and consultants like the Pleasantville, N.Y.-based McLoughlin are being beckoned to Europe and Asia to fill that void in expertise as the golf boom spreads internationally.

Allard Hoogland, managing partner of Expoconsult in Holland which is organizing the first Golf Course Europe exhibition and conference, said, "There are more than 500 new courses planned in Europe and many more plans are being made, and a lot of Europeans are looking to the U.S. for information."

Perry Dye, the new president of the Golf Course Builders Association, agreed, "There's no doubt (golf expertise) is an asset that Americans can export..."

"The golfing capital of the world is the United States. We have 13,000 golf courses and a country like Japan, which is crazy over golf, only has 1,500," Dye said. "We definitely have the expertise. We've built more golf courses; we have more golf course architects in the United States. So it's a natural exporter."

"It's becoming pretty common knowledge that the golf explosion is going on around the world: the Far East, Europe, even South America," Dye said.

Tremendous interest

Club Car President George Inman, president of the Golf Car Manufacturers Association, said there is "tremendous activity overseas" in his business. "We have had more interest in international sales in the last six to 12 months than we have had in all my history in the business — and that's all the way from the East to the West," he said.

"Europe is getting ready to really bust open. There's no doubt about that," he added, "and it's going to be very interesting to see what happens in Russia. I think it's amazing that those of us who are in golf could even be thinking about (a Russian market)."

And Jim Hinckley, president of Club Corp. America International, headquartered in

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managing partner of Expoconsult

Houston, Texas, and the world's largest club management company, said his firm is very busy developing golf courses and resorts in Europe, especially in Germany, France and Spain, Portugal and Italy.

What's lacking

McLoughlin said golf course developers in foreign countries:

- lack an adequate education in course maintenance and operating the equipment;
- need help in overall management of their properties; and
- most often can't afford the "heavy-weight" architects, who generally make their own management teams available.

McLoughlin said, "The Dyes, Palmers, Nicklauses — the heavy hitters — are (involved) all over the world."

Yet only the 10-15 percent of the new courses that are exclusive private clubs or resorts can afford those "big names," he said, and "when you look below the American heavyweights you see a very steady, very strong growth in the developing of golf courses by local designers and contractors..."

"There's a scrambling going on" among those architects who are designing courses below resort level for the average player, and that's the essence of the game... what's going to establish the growth of the game overseas," McLoughlin added.

American architects in fact are in high demand. Some are accepting European proposals; others are staying close to home where they find they have enough business to keep them busy.

Tom Fazio, with six children at home in Florida, is content to stay basically in the Eastern United States — despite repeated calls from a Japanese contingent intent on recruiting his talents.

Fazio acknowledges golf's explosion. "If you were looking at where the hot spots of golf are, it's here, it's Europe, it's Asia, it's all over..." he said. "The interest in golf is continually going up. Seve Ballesteros, Bernhard Langer, all the European players, with the European tour growing so well, and such popular players, and the Ryder Cup victory just recently, international competition has really spurred golf substantially in Germany, France, Italy and Spain, just all

over..."

Architect Keith Foster at Arthur Hills and Associates in Ohio said, "We've been getting inquiries but we're not interested yet. We just turned down a course in Saudi Arabia because of the time involved (in the travel)."

And Jeffrey Brauer of Golfscapes in Arlington, Texas, with a growing family at home, has decided against pursuing inquiries from people from France, Japan and Sweden among other countries.

But many architects are tapping into the overseas market. The Joneses, Robert Trent Sr. and Jr., have both been designing courses on that continent, including one by Robert Jr. outside Moscow. Pete Dye, Palmer Design, Ron Fremme and Robert von Hagge and others are involved overseas.

Management inroads

Meanwhile, Hinckley's Club Corp. of America International has also made inroads in foreign countries.

"We now are building two country clubs in Germany, one city club in Germany and are looking at a couple of sites outside Paris," said Hinckley.

Hinckley said that in the past European courses were built by groups of golfers, and the result was "plain vanilla golf courses." His company is concentrating on the high-end resort courses.

CCA International, which investigated the European market in 1986 and in cooperation with Deutchbank in Germany formed a company called Club Corp. of Europe, has since begun acquiring land to build and operate country clubs in Germany, Italy, France, Spain and Portugal. Hinckley said he has nine projects in Spain, Italy, France and Germany in which the company is finishing the contracts for the land.

"With the opening up of the European Common Market in 1992 you are starting to see a lot of development in Spain, particularly in the resort area," Hinckley said. "Spain will be the big growth area. In France and Germany it takes two to three years to get permission to develop... Spain is less complicated and it's not as difficult to obtain a permit there. Also, Spain is trying to encourage growth, particularly in the resort areas."

Hinckley said 90 percent of the golf courses being built in Europe are on land leased from converted farms and on old family estates that have 150 to 200 acres of unused land.

"There are a few superintendents over there from the United States and quite a few from the United Kingdom," Hinckley said. "What you're going to find is more international-level golf courses with higher maintenance standards. You're going to have to develop more qualified talent over there, and some of that is going to have to be brought over from the United States — superintendents who in turn can train some of the locals."

Foreign visitors

Don Padgett, director of golf at Pinehurst (N.C.) Country Club and regional director of golf operations for CCA subsidiary Club Resorts, said contingents from foreign golf course developers visit his course on fact-finding trips every couple of weeks.

"They don't have the people (trained) to maintain the courses or run the clubs," Padgett said. When they come to this country and CCA they look at what they have for a pool at home and see that it's not so full."

Lack of training in operating golf courses is a major obstacle for foreign developers, Padgett said. "A lot of education has to be done. Probably the largest change in American golf in the last 20 or 30 years has been in the conditioning of the golf courses, and that's not going to happen (overseas) overnight... I'm talking about the upkeep and quality of the planing surface."

Padgett said when foreigners who plan to develop courses see the condition of American courses firsthand "that's exactly what they're going to want over there (abroad)."

And "I'm sure most of the American companies will be there to help them," he added.

Hoogland of Expoconsults said the number of golfers in Europe has doubled in the last decade and that number is expected to double again in the next 10 years.

All parties involved agree the scramble to fill the needs of all those course developers will be interesting.

Europe

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information about all aspects of planning and running a golf course, and Golf Course Europe will, for the first time, be a specialized meeting point for them. He said he expects between 100 and 150 exhibitors this first year.

"It will be an event, not for the golf public but only for golf course supervisors and golf club managers," the conference brochure says. "On design and financing, on equipment and golf shop management: at GCE '89 one will be able to get all necessary information."

"There will be plenty of opportunity to develop a new outlook on the problems of the existing and newly planned golf

courses of Europe during the conference sessions."

Hoogland has put out a call for technical, instructive and commercially relevant papers for presentation at the conference. People should send a 200-word summary that Expoconsult must have in hand by April 21. Organizers will select the papers by June and typewritten papers will be required by Aug. 25 so that they can be printed for delegates at the conference.

"We start marketing the program in June. So it will give us ample time to be ready in October," Hoogland said.

The agenda for Oct. 4 includes golf course design principles, financing new golf courses, legal and tax matters, and

clubhouse architecture and infrastructure.

The Oct. 5 sessions will cover the European golf market in the 1990s, golf shop management, the golf club as a going concern, and sponsoring, green fees and advertising.

The topics for Oct. 6 include irrigation techniques, remodeling golf courses, golf course maintenance principles, and public golf courses.

Hoogland is also pulling together industry suppliers for "the only European trade exhibition," and he is selling the show as "a unique opportunity for every company marketing to this rapidly growing market."

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