

Laosian officials eye golf possibilities

By PETER BLAIS

It wasn't so long ago a bunker was a place Laotians hid from U.S. bombs. Soon it could be the place a ball seeks shelter from the blast of a U.S. golfer.

Fred Downes recently returned from a scouting trip of the Southeast Asian nation. His mission: to seek out the best location for that country's first golf course.

Downes, the director of golf at Sugarloaf Golf Course in Carrabassett Valley, Maine, visited Laos in September at the behest of Scott Co. Ltd., a U.S. real-estate

development company in Southeast Asia. Owner Don Scott is well known for his humanitarian efforts in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam.

The Laotian government approached Scott last year about building resorts in the hotel room-poor country. Officials later suggested a golf course and Scott sent Downes, a construction foreman for many years for architect Robert Trent Jones Jr., to find the most cost-efficient site.

The government, which offered land as its part of a joint venture with Scott investors, designated

four potential sites. Downes immediately eliminated two—the first because the 80 rolling acres were simply too small for an 18-hole course and the second because of an ugly approach that led to an area of alkaline soil.

The two best locations are within a stone's throw of Vientiane.

Building a golf course over flooded rice patties may seem an impossible task. But Downes learned an important lesson while working for Jones, who floated over the site of Thailand's Navatane Country Club by boat before having it drained and turned into

one of the world's top courses.

"You can build a course anywhere," said Downes. "All you need is land and money."

The main problems developers will encounter in Laos have less to do with the land than with a bureaucracy that is just starting to open the nation's doors to the rest of the world after 14 years of post-Vietnam War isolation, according to Downes.

"They're the type of problems that will be resolved. The government seems committed to change. But I wasted a lot of time just waiting. I could have done in

three or four days what actually took me 11," he said.

The first developer is likely to run into supply problems, Downes predicted. Heavy equipment, piping and pumps are rare, often requiring trips into Vietnam or Thailand to procure. Land and labor (the average wage is \$11 a month) are more plentiful.

There is no set timetable for Laos' first 18. A design decision is still a year away, according to Downes. Then there is the matter of lining up investors and gaining approval from the government for the necessary foreign expertise to enter the country.

Working a plan through various environmental agencies, which can take years in the United States, should be a relative breeze in Laos, where there is no Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Environmental Protection or similar governmental watchdog.

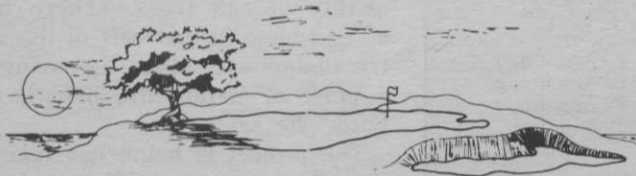
"There are no environmental laws, so we'll pretty much monitor ourselves," said Downes. "I'm sure we'll set some good standards, things they probably have never thought of."

Construction should take no more than nine months, assuming adequate supplies, especially to do the extensive ponding required to carry off rainy-season downpours. Bermudagrass 328 plant cuttings, the most commonly used turf in that area of the world, take less than a month to reach mowable height.

And who will use it? There is an expatriate population of about 200, consisting mainly of Australians, French, British, Dutch, Scandinavians, Americans, Russians and Japanese, all of whom are excited at the prospect of a golf course.

The Japanese also figure to be one of the major visitors.

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