

# Finger takes expertise to wide-open territory — Mexico

By Frances G. Trimble

The adage, "Go west, young man," has taken a directional and age twist for semi-retired golf course architect Joe Finger, who has headed south to help Mexicans build courses.

Only about 150 private clubs and no municipal courses exist in Mexico, said Finger. Yet there is "a big market" for munis and daily fee tracks as times change in that country, he added.

Finger, who has formally retired from the firm he founded — Finger.Dye.Spann of Houston — said that, while demand for courses hasn't existed before, "The young Mexicans are real-estate hungry and are buying their homes and land away from the cities, where they can find peace, clean air and water.

"The country has been influenced by everything from affluence and Lee Trevino to the availability of American golf matches on cable TV."

Mexico does have a white-collar, golfing middle class, he said, adding, "Anyone who believes Mexico is a Third World country is foolish."

It is no surprise, Finger said, that Mexican developers are intent on giving American, Canadian and Japanese visitors what they want — golf.

But those developers face lack of know-how, shortage of parts and supplies, and hand-me-down equipment.

"In some respects the Mexicans are way ahead of us ... earthquake design, for instance. But on golf course contracting, they are behind because the demand hasn't been there in the past," Finger said.

He said although there are some excellent Mexican engineers and architects, top-notch golf course contractors simply do not exist.

With 34 years of design experience under his belt and being fluent in Spanish, Finger feels comfortable consulting and doing "plans in metric and specs in Spanish."

He is now working on two widely dissimilar projects — Cabo Real in Baja California Sur and Los Encinos Country Club near Toluca.

Mexicans are eager for the advice and assistance, said Finger, a chemical engineer who believes course architecture is "45 percent engineering, 25 percent golf knowledge and agronomy, 15 percent landscape architecture, and the rest an artistic sense that is either a gift or genetic."

The average Mexican developer is a babe in the woods, Finger said.

"The wealthy people who have the financial backing to do one of these courses don't know what it takes to build a good course," he added.

So they have sought Finger, author of "The Business End of Building or Rebuilding a Golf Course," a publication dealing with contracts, cost estimates, plans and specifications, checkpoints for design and construction, and choosing an architect and construction company.

"The Mexican developer has the



Joe Finger designed this waterway that runs through Los Encinos Country Club near Toluca, Mexico. Los Encinos was built by Mexican amateur champion Mauricio Urdaneta, with Finger's consultation.

right to expect the same kind of professionalism from the architect and contractors as one expects in the U.S.," Finger said. He added that even in the United States, professional standards are neither required by the industry nor offered by some individuals and companies.

Construction costs are similar in both countries.

"Even though labor is cheap, it takes a lot more of it," he said. "They are not as efficient."

Mexican equipment is frequently "American cast-off" and less powerful than that north of the border, he said. Parts and supplies are in short supply or unavailable.

"Herbicides approved for use here are held up by the Mexican

counterpart agency," Finger said.

The upside is Mexico's weather, which is better for building than that in the United States.

"They have a predictable rainy season when some work can be done. Otherwise, work is unhindered by weather," Finger said.

Mexico also offers spectacular sites for golf courses.

"Terrain varies from mountainous regions to swampland. There are areas that are rocky and covered with cactus and areas that look like the Austrian Alps. One course I consulted on — Los Encinos — was built by a Mexican amateur champion named Mauricio Urdaneta. Mauricio did a great job but called on me to help with the technical aspects of his operation. The water-

falls around the course are my doing," he said.

About 25 minutes from Mexico City and 10,000 feet above sea level, Los Encinos has 100-foot-tall white cedars, pines and eucalyptus all around. It is part of a residential development that will soon have townhouses for summer vacationers and is, according to Finger, "the place to join if you're a serious Mexican golfer."

The lead partner in the Cabo Real project near Cabo San Lucas is Corona beer owner Eduardo Sanchez Navarro.

"They already have a couple of beachfront hotels there," Finger said. The course will sit behind them on hillsides, with "hills and

ravines, huge cactus, but very little topsoil and water."

Though the contrast between Cabo Real and Los Encinos is striking, Finger said Mexico can always be counted on to amaze visitors with her "density of color," the year-round green of her courses, and the hospitality of her people.

Golf is certainly blooming in a country abundant in natural color. And Finger, who has designed or remodeled around 100 courses in the United States, intends to add to the nine "flowers" he has created there.

Frances G. Trimble is a freelance writer based in Houston, Texas.

## Quarantine Kikuyugrass, Finger urges

Houston golf course architect Joseph Finger said he has "begged" the U.S. Department of Agriculture to quarantine Kikuyugrass east of



Joe Finger

the Rocky Mountains.

Finger, who is also trying to keep Kikuyu from being exported from Mexico north into the United States, said, "It is controllable so long as there isn't enough water. But if it ever gets east of the Rockies, or north of the Rio Grande, we're in big trouble."

So far, the Department of Agriculture has not agreed to a quarantine on the grass, which spreads and becomes almost unplayable. It also goes dormant in the winter and becomes unsightly.

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