

Pitfalls, rewards await American golf

By Bob Spiwak

Golf is booming through out Asia. As new courses are contemplated, planned, designed and built, American architects more and more are getting the call to bring their artistry across the Pacific.

Heady stuff, exotic names. Have you heard of the Sultan of Brunei? Ron Fream has. He built a course for the reputed "richest man in the world" on his oil-rich enclave on the island of Borneo. Fream, of Golfplan in Santa Rosa, Calif., has been designing and building courses in Asia since mid-1972.

He reckons that after Robert Trent Jones Sr., his is one of the first modern American companies to design a course in Asia. And in the succeeding decades most of his work has been "centered" there.

While proclaiming no favorite country, Fream finds Japan easiest in which to work. "It's (working conditions) almost like America and I get an immense amount of satisfaction educating the workers," he said.

Ron Garl, an architect from Lakeland, Fla., is working in Thailand and Singapore. He seems especially taken with the Thais, whom he portrays as "...wonderful, marvelous people."

Garl is a relative newcomer to Asia, with his first job there less than two years ago.

Thailand has been good for Jack Nicklaus Golf Services as well, says General Manager Mark Hesemann, citing 11 jobs in 18 months. With Japan as its first Asian location, the Nicklaus company went next to Indonesia, then Thailand.

A major difference between working in the United States or Japan and the other Pacific Rim countries is the problem getting from place to place.

"Getting in and out is difficult," Hesemann said, adding, "The distances from project to project can be a problem."

For Damion Pascuzzo, senior associate of Robert Muir Graves at Walnut Creek, Calif., the major problem is local availability of materials.

"One of the toughest things is adapting materials to the standards that have been set. We roll with the punches and do the best with what we can get," he said. The Graves organization first entered the Asian market 15 years ago. The firm has built two courses in Malaysia, lists a half dozen in Japan built or in planning, and has a course under construction on Guam.

Palmer Course Design Co. has been across the Pacific since 1971, with the first course in Japan.

Vice President and senior golf course architect Harrison Minchew said Japan has far and away the toughest environmental regulations.

"In Japan we are required to leave a 30-meter buffer of existing trees

between the fairways. The retention lakes we build cannot have water in them, except when it rains," he said.

Fream agrees. Japan is (environmentally) leading the world out of necessity. It is learning from its mistakes, and the rest of Asia is getting more environmentally aware."

Hesemann called Japan's regulations "...the toughest in the world." Like his colleagues, he finds the

Southeast Asian nations more reasonable.

Outside of Japan, hundreds of hand laborers rather than machines are used in many areas of construction and maintenance.

Pascuzzo said: "They have such a large labor force. What we would do mechanically they do manually. Things like seeding, and picking rocks."

There appears consensus that in Thailand and Malaysia, for example,

laborers work for about 35 cents an hour. Five dollars a day is considered a good wage.

Hesemann thinks that after China, Indonesia is the most labor-intensive country. He cites "a hundred, 150 laborers doing day-to-day maintenance."

For Fream and Garl, the labor intensity takes on a philosophical, if not ethical, complexion.

Fream said: "I find it socially desirable to have hand labor. We'll

take 100 or 200 people with shovels, or Bedouins behind a camel pulling a plow and give them work they would not have otherwise... You're putting people out of work if you use machinery (where hand labor can do the job).

"It is harder than working in the States."

In the United States, architects and builders are spoiled, Fream said, adding, "Everything you want is just a phone call away."

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course architects in Asian countries

Garl considers the Thai people "very good at earthwork and construction. There are so many available for work, even at \$3 to \$5 a day," he said, adding that the local people are lacking experience in finishing, shaping and irrigation.

"We bring in our own shapers from the States and train the locals to be shapers... That's part of what we think we owe golf. We have an obligation to the people to teach them how to construct for future

projects in their countries."

The Japanese attitude toward golf courses differs from others', said Pascuzzo, in looking at a course as "... something to be savored, an all-day experience.

"In Japan it seems they are more interested in ornamental landscapes. They have great detail in their water features."

Hesemann admires the maintenance quality of Japan's courses. "In Japan," he noted, "the courses are

(maintained) like gardens."

Southeast Asian countries lack the experience in maintenance and Hesemann characterized them as "being in the 1930s or '40s in their perception of turf quality."

But as more courses are built, they will learn, he said.

In terms of activity, nothing, according to the architects, is stalled. But there is consensus that Japan is slowing down. This is attributed to greater environmental pressures,

especially in some prefectures, a fear of a lessening of traditional cultural values, a limited amount of land, and financial reasons.

Among the financial changes, according to Minchew, the government has now disallowed sale of course memberships until the course is actually built. In the past, memberships were bought and traded before construction even began. As memberships are traded on the Nikkei, or Japanese stock

exchange, without the initial infusion of venture capital, owners are not readily able to raise money.

The hot spots of activity seem to be centered in Southeast Asia. Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are the leaders.

Pascuzzo pointed out that these countries are a one- or two-hour flight from Tokyo, less from Osaka.

He explained that the Japanese may well ask, "Why should we develop (golf courses) on agricultural or mountain land when golf is so accessible in nearby countries?"

Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea and the Philippines are on the move in developing golf, and several architects mentioned Guam.

On Mainland China, Chung Shan Hot Springs Golf Club was completed by the Nicklaus group last year, adding 18 holes to a pre-existing 18 designed by Arnold Palmer.

Working with course builders does not seem to create any major difficulties.

There seems a greater language barrier in Japan than the neighboring nations. But the latter, according to Fream, "...don't have experienced course builders. They (builders) are road and dam contractors."

Fream feels that going into the job with the expectation that he will be dealing with different religions, ethics and social customs from those in America makes it easier. "You have to react to, and deal with, the local facts of life," he said.

Nicklaus, Garl and Graves bring in American shapers. For the Palmer organization, Minchew said the owners of the courses hire the construction company.

"In the last 10 years we have worked with one company which is as good as anybody in the world," he said. "We design the course, the owner hires the (construction) company, which does everything from A to Z."

USGA-SPEC GREENS

The greatest disparity among this group of architects is in the realm of official United States Golf Association-specified greens construction.

Last July, Turfgrass Scientific Services, Ltd. of Australia issued a memo to a course builder advising "... virtually every (USGA) green amended with peat has been dug out within five years of construction and replaced with pure sand."

Graves stated: "The only time we don't adhere to USGA greens is when there is a supply of exactly the right sand... We just do it by the book and if we can't get the proper sand, we go to them (USGA) and they work with us."

At the other end of the spectrum is Fream, who said: "I don't follow the USGA specs. We use the local materials from pig manure, rice husks or crushed olive pits to ground bark. It's not necessary to

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The 8th hole at Glenmoor Country Club in Japan's Chiba Prefecture shows the handiwork of designer-builder Perry Dye of Dye Designs International in Denver, Colo.

Photo by J. Pettibone

American golf course architects designing more projects in Asia

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follow the so-called USGA bible."

Minchew said: "We pretty much stick to USGA specs for greens ... or at least 'modified' USGA specs."

He sees this as a necessity to avoid later disputes and being accused of not following the specifications put forth by the USGA. What is most important, he feels, is to have a good superintendent,

"... who knows how to grow grass."

For Garl, the particle size of the sand is the most critical aspect of greens construction.

"We're going to build USGA greens," he said, but added "modification" to his ultimate product. Because of the monsoons in Thailand, where he is working, his mix is high in sand and low in organic content, a mix of 90/10 or 95/5. Modifying the USGA specifications around the world, according to specific sites, will produce better greens, he feels.

GROWING KNOWLEDGE

All the architects enjoy working in the region and see a growing golf awareness in all the countries.

Garl finds not only course owners, but landowners who sell small parcels of land along with other small landowners to provide the whole of a golf course, are receptive to golf.

"It creates future jobs," he said of Thailand, where "it's not uncommon for one person to have three caddies (one to carry the clubs, one an umbrella, and sometimes another carrying something else)."

As the various nations develop their tourist industries creating more jobs, and as old local enmities subside — as appears to be happening in Vietnam and Korea — more tourist dollars will engender more golf courses. This will create more jobs and the potential for yet more courses.

If the Japanese experience is any example, the sun is just beginning to rise on Southeast Asian golf.

"It is the new 'boom' area," said Minchew.

Less than a generation ago, much of the region was engulfed in bitter war. The once bloody soils are giving way to a wave of green, with American course architects at the crest.

Asia, EPA form partnership

SINGAPORE — U.S. President George Bush has announced a U.S.-Asia Environmental Partnership in Singapore. The partnership is intended to bring together business communities, government agencies and non-governmental organizations to address environmental problems that constrain growth and to improve the environment in the Asia-Pacific region.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will create the U.S. Environmental Training Institute to help fulfill the president's promises. The USETI will facilitate the transfer overseas of American environmental expertise, expanding eventually to Latin America and eastern Europe.



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