

Cautious note emerges amid Asian golf development boom

By Brook Taliaferro

SINGAPORE — Several speakers at the Golf Asia '92 conference, held here recently, voiced concern over the pace of golf development in the Far East. Yet their caution was nearly lost in the enthusiasm over the growth of golf here as Southeast Asia emerges as a major resort destination for the Pacific Rim.

"The boom has resulted in a backlash against golf course development. We have witnessed this to a major degree in Hawaii, Japan and Europe and are now even seeing it to some degree in Thailand," said Robin Nelson, director of Nelson & Wright Golf Design Group of Honolulu. "Whether it be France, Bali or the South Pacific, we are bringing a wonderful game to many people, but it is also their land. Their willingness to accept a new land use may hinge upon the respect we show them."

Nelson's comments came during the 2nd annual Golf Asia conference and exhibit, an event which has doubled in size to 250 exhibitors and 6,000 attendees. Exhibitors representing major golf architectural firms and many equipment manufacturers were on hand as well as officials of golf development projects who were selling memberships in clubs from Australia to Bali to Malaysia.

While the effect of regulation has yet to be felt throughout Asia, and the mood in no way reflected the stifled frustration of European developers attending Golf Europe last fall, this area of the world is not immune.

"In areas such as Taiwan and Japan, relatively flat land is strictly reserved for the cultivation of farm crops, forcing golf to take to the slopes," said Nelson. "Some spectacular golf courses have been built around the Pacific Rim using extensive cut-and-fill techniques. But these courses are expensive and will not help to lower the already high green fees and maintenance costs."

Concern also centered on pesticide use as countries in this part of the world wrestle with the same environmental issues that trouble environmental group and golf developers in the United States and Europe.

"The ramifications of future pesticide use for countries in Southeast Asia revolve around unprecedented economic growth seen in countries like Thailand with rates of 14 percent in 1989," said Gary W. Beehan, senior turfgrass consultant with Australian Turfgrass Research Institute.

Beehan said: "The huge number of planned and current golf course construction projects on relatively cheap land, in a speculative market, will demand increased importation of pesticides and fertilizers. Golf developments on previously agricultural land, which is close to urban areas, will inevitably result in increased government regulations."

He added that the level of local expertise, with assistance from abroad, will need to keep pace with such regulatory changes to avoid unnecessary chemical application and waste as well as environmental risk. Product and equipment infra-

structures will be vital to allow use of the most appropriate products.

Such concern is not inappropriate where it can be more economical to build a course by hand with only few large earth-moving machines. Nor is it uncommon to see pesticides applied by barefoot workers with the mixture stirred with a bare hand.

While the conference was brimming with astounding slides of tropical golf developments just completed, several speakers warned of the growing inattention to the business side of Asia's golf boom.

"Asian developers often defy logic and commit to project development without formal feasibility studies," said James E. McLoughlin, of the New York-based McLoughlin Group. McLoughlin suggested that feasibility studies are foregone because "market deficiencies are more obvious outside the United States and because funding is often readily available with feasibility back-up."

Such lack of planning has led to spectacular mismatches in the commercial side of the development both in the United States and now in

Southeast Asia, McLoughlin said. "Miscalculation in (the mix of residential and hotel housing) is the single greatest reason why golf course-based real-estate developments fail," he said.

Perhaps the most ominous note of all was sounded by the conference's final speaker, Bryan G. Griffiths from GolfConsult International, Ltd.

"The highest profile developments in the Pacific Rim in recent years have been the corporate and exclusive private end of the market. It cannot expand indefinitely," said Griffiths. "The prudent investor should be examining

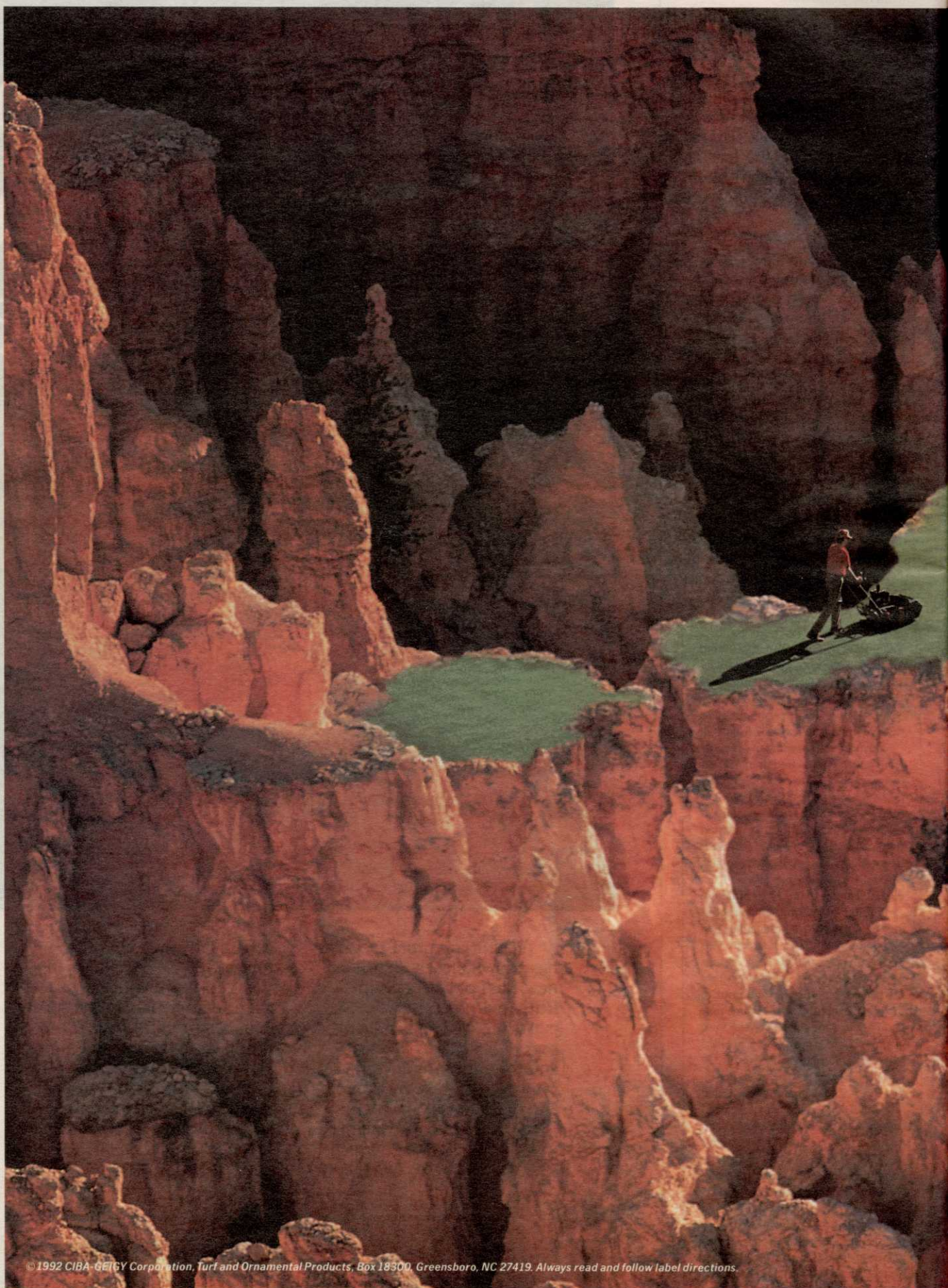
the scope for lower profile investment."

As an example, Griffiths, who is based in London, spoke of five megacourses in the United Kingdom that folded during 1991. "That was \$120 million quid that went down the pipe last year," he said.

Griffiths repeatedly warned about the dangers of design-led golf projects: an emphasis upon the topographical and the physical rather than economic viability.

"It is a travesty to suggest the

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Course design subject of Golf Asia '92 conference

SINGAPORE — Today's golf course architects must take a team approach toward course design, architect Mark Hollinger told an audience at Golf Asia '92 here.

According to Hollinger, senior designer with JMP Golf Design of Saratoga, Calif., "The days of a one-man firm designing the golf course out in the field with a sketch pad are gone forever. It takes a group of highly specialized professionals working together to get the job done."

Hollinger told the gathering of international architects, contractors and developers that designing golf courses is an extremely complex task today.

"As in the past, a love of the game, a sense of aesthetics, and an understanding of strategic design principles are crucial. But now we must also be conversant with the latest innovations in a number of highly technical disciplines. And," he said, "we must be able to assemble and work with a team of experts."

In order to design world-class courses in today's golf design environ-

ment, Hollinger said a course design firm must have a staff of in-house professionals whose expertise spans a wide range of fields — from land planning to landscape architecture, stormwater engineering to turfgrass.

He said it's critical the firm be able to deal successfully with governmental agencies whose regulations can vary from state-to-state and country-to-country. And, they must be skilled in helping move the project through the often highly demanding permit process, he said.

"Designing courses today involves working with difficult terrain under problematic circumstances and with numerous constraints. Because the land allocated for golf course development is often very limited, nine times out of 10, we have to design courses on extremely severe sites," Hollinger said.

"The design team concept gives the owner, the golf designer and the golf-playing public the confidence that the course will meet the highest golfing standards."

New Asian supers assn. seeks experts

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — In moving the newly formed Asia/Pacific Golf Course Superintendents Association (APGCSA) closer to becoming reality, Col. Harbans Singh called for experts in turf management to help establish training programs in Southeast Asia.

"We're looking for instructors," said Singh at the recent Golf Asia '92 conference held in Singapore. "We need experts from the field in everything from basic turf maintenance to top management. Education is the key to any association and we are looking to the United States for expertise."

The APGCSA was originally conceived at Golf Asia '91 and has since been building a network of interested superintendents. Singh has recruited consultants and educators from the golf industry to help build a curriculum. Such a program might eventually result in certification-type courses held throughout Southeast Asia.

Those interested in participating may contact the APGCSA through the Singh's Kuala Lumpur office at FAX 037572701.

Show postponed

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Asian Golf Course '92, a regional conference with international speakers, has been postponed from June 24-27 to Sept. 10-13.

Catered to golf course superintendents and club managers, the conference and exhibition will be held at Putra World Trade Centre.

Show organizer Zainal Abidin can be reached at Asian Exhibitions Management Pte Ltd, 1 Marine Parade Central #12-01 Parkway Builders Centre, Singapore 1544; telephone 4473680.

Asia '92

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more expansive-style course is 'better' or more 'desirable,' said Griffiths. "They are certainly not more profitable than lower-cost, high-quality natural courses."

As long as the recent collapse of mega-courses such as Desaru, an ambitious expansion in Johor, Indonesia, that called for four signature golf courses, nine hotels, a yacht marina, an equestrian center and a tennis academy, is seen as an anomaly rather than a potential danger to Southeast Asian golf development, such cautionary words will probably not be heeded.

David G. Inglis, director of Golf Asia '92, won unanimous endorsement for formation of the Southeast Asian Golf Association. Membership will consist of developers, builders, architects suppliers and financial institutions.

The principal goal will be to foster information flow among concerned companies as regulatory pressures increase. The association may be contacted through the offices of AGMS in Singapore at FAX 65-2277303.

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