

The European golf development market is not what you think

By DR. FALK BILLION

Five years ago, as the 1990s began, the Old World seemed to be a sleeping one in terms of golf course development. While in the New World, the National Golf Foundation was promoting nationwide targets like "one new golf course per day", nothing the like had been heard from across the Atlantic ocean. Traveling golfers still told the same old story about the same classic courses all over the British Isles and parts of the continent, and just some of the American golf course architects discussed the design of new courses in European regions.

This impression is wrong! In the four years beginning in 1990, no less than 1,111 new golf courses have opened all over Europe. This is a growth of nearly 32 percent compared to 1990. In the '90s, Europe has witnessed the opening of 278 new golf courses per year (which is not quite one new course per day, but in any case equals three quarters of a course per day). In respect to golf course developments, England takes the lead with 242 new courses, followed by France with 177, Sweden with 142 and Germany with 109 new golf courses over the last four years.

This rapid golf course development clearly is concen-

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Dr. Falk Billion

trated in the leading industrial nations of Western Europe. The Mediterranean sunshine belt does have an important share, too, with 129 new courses in Italy, Spain and Portugal. The countries of Eastern Europe, on the other hand (Croatia, The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia and Slovenia), have 28 golf courses

altogether, 17 of which (60 percent) opened during the last four years.

Western Europe — with 20 countries and a population of around 376 million — now boasts 4,600 golf courses, whereas the six countries of Eastern Europe — with 214 million people — account for 28. All over Western Europe, golf clubs count around 2.2 million which equals only 0.6 percent of

the total population. Club golfers amount to some 4 percent of the population in Scotland, Ireland and Sweden, with some remarkable percentages between 1 and 2 percent in England, Wales, Denmark and Iceland.

Public golf is widely spread only over the British Isles, with around 1.5 million non-club-member players reported to make use of municipal and pay-as-you-play-facilities in Great Britain. Public golf has how

been taking an increasing share in Sweden and France, too, as well as in the Netherlands. France has seen rapid growth of courses in the late '80s and early '90's, due to a government financed program of public (municipal) facilities.

More than 90 percent of Europe's older courses, however, still are member-owned facilities, mostly run by non-profit clubs and often ruled by voluntary club committees. Professional management, in the sense of profit making, is largely found on new golf

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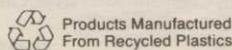
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CIRCLE #110

Obituaries

Bill Wooten, 61

Bill Wooten, whom many in Florida considered "Mr. Club Car," died of a heart attack on Feb. 22. He was 61.

After eight years of service with Textron's golf car division, Mr. Wooten joined the new management team at Club Car in 1978 and served a key role in building Club Car's early presence in Florida.

"Bill did so much for Club Car in his 16 years here," said George Inman, Club Car chairman and chief executive officer. "His professionalism and dedication to his customers set a standard for a lot of the younger people here... and were an inspiration to us all. We'll miss him."

Mr. Wooten was born in 1932 in Norfolk, Va. he is survived by his wife of 15 years, Jean, three children and two step children.

European golf development

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courses, which now tend to be run by management companies. These courses also show a tendency to open up the courses for non-club members.

Great hope regarding future golf course development in Europe often focus on Eastern Europe, after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Only 17 new courses over the last four years show the reality, though. There may be lots of attractive sites for golf courses; there may be big plans for new developments; there may even be financial power of investors in the European East. Investors have been discovering, however, there is very little demand for golf, as there is no sufficient buying power among the population in Eastern Europe.

This has been proven true on the fields of East Germany, where more than 120 applications for new golf course projects have been filed — only 8 of which actually have come into existence. Most of them are concentrated around Germany's new capital Berlin and until now and most of them, with memberships of around 200 each, are not posting wild success. East Germans, suffering from higher unemployment and lower wages than their fellow countrymen in the western part, prefer spending on new cars, new household goods or traveling rather than putting down some 20,000 Deutschmarks for a share in a new golf course.

Estimates of the European golf federations show there are some 360 new courses under construction — or in an advanced stage of planning — in Western Europe. At the same time, only nine new courses under construction are reported from the countries of Eastern Europe.

Most of the new golf course developments are actually promoted by professional golf management companies watching out for the profitability of their projects. One major problem that does effect these economic targets is the very strong influence on planning and construction costs stemming from environmental constraints. The need to provide much larger golf course sites (85 to 100 hectares for 18 holes), so as to establish ecological compensation areas on the courses, has resulted in much higher costs. Further, bank deposits are required by authorities in order to secure the implementation of such ecological motivated measures.

The European golf industry in 1992, as shown in a European golf market survey provided for Messe Muenchen (Munich trade fair) last October, amounted to around one billion U.S. dollars in retail for golf equipment, plus some 210 million U.S. dollars for golf course equipment. Despite past impressions, there is little doubt Europe has to be taken seriously as a rapid growth market.

Broadcaster Ben Wright to design first U.S. course

TRAVELERS REST, S.C. — Journalist and historian Ben Wright of Flat Rock, N.C., will design his first golf course in the United States for The Cliffs Golf & Country Club, according to Jim Anthony, president and chief executive officer of The Cliffs Development Co.

Wright, who designed several courses in France and England before joining CBS-TV in 1972, will create The Valley Course for The Cliffs Golf & Country Club.

The Valley Course will be the centerpiece of Cliffs Valley, a 600-acre private planned community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains

in the northwest corner of South Carolina.

Wright will incorporate a classic golf course architecture philosophy at Cliffs Valley.

The course will flow with the land around a 12-acre lake and past the two streams on the property. Several small waterfalls are expected to be integrated into the creeks to enhance the visual and audio aesthetics of the golf round. Bunkering is expected to be used sparingly, and more as a directional than penal element. As a means of giving a common signature to both The Valley and Cliffs courses, Wright will use native granite boulders to frame lakes, streams and fairways.

New nine this fall at Weston Hills

FT. LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Greensmix recently completed blending the root zone soil mixture for the new nine holes here at Weston Hills Country Club, a Robert Trent Jones II design that annually plays host to the PGA Tour's Honda Classic. Greensmix also performed the blending for the club's original 18 holes in the spring of 1990. The new nine, built by Jones' in-house construction firm, Greenscape, is expected to open this fall.

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