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GOLF IN CHINA

In some ways, China's golf's evolution is like stepping into a time machine.

I have been fortunate to secure design commissions in China this year. Given the lull in new course design in the US, it is fun to travel and design new courses there. Since it's on my mind, it seems reasonable to take a break from writing about down to earth, practical matters I usually tackle in this space, and look at golf as it develops in China.

There are similarities to golf in the U.S. now, and to golf as it developed in the U.S. about 120 years ago.

In both cases, the rich found golf to be a pleasant diversion, and are enthusiastic participants. In both cases, most of the early courses are private. Semi-private and public courses are slowly starting to appear, but are small in number. And given it is generally a sport of the wealthy, they want what they perceive to be "the best" and generally can afford it.

It strikes me that whereas golf (and golf architecture) in America got its start from Scottish golf pros, who adapted the ancient game to American conditions. Not much was known about agriculture and turf in those days, but the Chinese have fewer problems, since they have imported more than a 100 years of US golf technology in design, irrigation, construction and turf science. Golf in China is definitely modeled after the modern U.S. golf industry, and some would say they have imported both the best and worst of American golf.

There are some spectacular successes. They mostly use U.S. architects, including those at the top of their game, like Bill Coore, ASGCA and Ben Crenshaw. On a spectacular ocean-front site at Shankqin Bay, on Hainan Island, they designed a course that deserves early inclusion in sev-

eral World Top 100 lists.

Of course, not every site can be spectacular, ocean front land. Like Japan, it seems they reserve the gently rolling land for agriculture, meaning many courses are built on mountainous sites we would not consider building in the U.S. On my last trip, I ascended (and descended) almost 900 vertical feet one day – equaling walking to the top of a skyscraper. Typically, they move 1–2 million cubic meters of earth, at least five times more than typical on U.S. courses. Chinese practice areas also more closely resemble those from Japan,

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with their AstroTurf practice tee mats and covered double-deck structures.

They also build courses to promote real estate. With their typical high-rise housing, some courses are true “condo canyons.” Early development courses were far too tight, but golf acreage is increasing. Recently, landing zones have been made wider (450 feet, when 400 feet is the most I've seen in the U.S.). They have also embraced some of the newer housing trends, as enlightened developers realize that single fairways, loaded with towers on each side may not create the maximum value. Double fairway corridors are more common to give a better green belt effect.

Environmentalism is highly valued,

whether cleansing runoff with ponds, or using electric vehicles to reduce the carbon footprint.

It appears they are following U.S. design trends from the 1990-2007 period, when designs were based on the tournament length/quality, cart golf, signature holes, one-upmanship and potential rankings and publicity. Water hazards and heavy bunkering are prevalent, making many courses too tough for average players, especially where a larger percentage are new golfers. However, they seem to like such difficulty, and there is talk of courses being “too easy,” which we

have moved away from in the US.

Based on wear patterns, it seems most golfers play from the blue tees no matter what the course yardage is. “Tee it Forward” hasn't caught on in China. Speaking of wear patterns, while carts are the norm, each player gets his own cart and a caddie who rides with them. As turf expert Kun Li told me, “Greens and tees are oversized compared to the U.S., because 20,000 rounds equals 40,000 rounds of traffic on a US course.”

The clubhouses are also typically oversized, providing excellent amenities and service levels, because they say the “culture” demands it.

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On many days, staff outnumbers players. Like some U.S. clubs, they are run by smart business executives who meet budgets at work, but overspend on their club. Chinese are known to be practical, so how long will that trend continue? As you can tell, I wish they would learn some of lessons more quickly.

This is the first time a country is undertaking new golf development based on the U.S. golf model, which has evolved from its Scottish roots over the last 120 years. Some worry that there is too much disconnect from golf's origins and roots in the U.S. model. In my opinion, golf's adaptability to different climates and cultures proves that the essence of the game remains powerful enough to thrive and endure as strongly in the next 500 years, as it has in the last 500. Overall, golf will thrive in China, and they will be good stewards of the game's many traditions, even while adapting them to their unique conditions. GCI

three decades from a discipline where success was often dependent on art and experience to one where new, young superintendents are better trained in the sciences and quickly embrace technological advances. As such, the discipline has moved to a much more science-based effort. Of course, golf course supers are also required now to be much more well-rounded in communications, personnel management, and business skills to be successful."

From a soil physicist: "Science and technology will never replace the real masters and artisans. Rather, we're talking art, or a natural world that just to happens to be labeled 'golf course.' It's unfortunate more golf course superintendents don't understand their role or have the passion to understand the artisan's role in these natural settings. In my mind, it's a natural palette of bio-mass that has been refined and in many cases,

a lot like a work of art."

A turf grass specialist: "For most modern-day superintendents, it is mostly science. But, when you get to the best conditions and the best superintendents, it becomes more of an art."

In all of those quotations, even the ones that give a nod to science, it is the ability to understand the artistic side that separates the best from the rest. Even if art is knowing how to evaluate the science and choose what's best for your course.

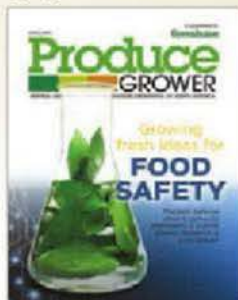
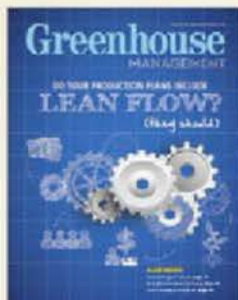
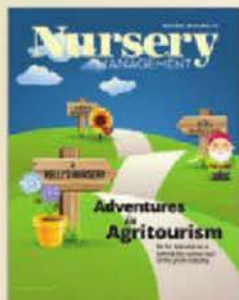
I've used this column for years to advocate more out-of-the-box thinking in agronomy. I fear that a science-only approach puts us back in the box, a box that is now a computer or a smartphone.

Learn the science, use the science. But never forget that at its best, agronomy is first and foremost an art because every golf course – like every other masterpiece – is unique. GCI

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