

# Greenkeeping is Different in Japan

**Q**

Have you ever worked outside the United States? What are some differences and similarities between the United States and other countries?

**A**

I've had the good fortune to work for somewhat extended periods in the United Kingdom and, most recently, Japan. While there's a lot of golf that occurs in other countries besides the United Kingdom and Japan, the two regions are certainly among the most golf-oriented of all.

Golf in the United Kingdom can almost be summarized as "a good way to take a walk." Lots of people play golf in the United Kingdom, but they aren't in the habit of renting "buggies" or paying much to play public courses. Who would pay a lot of money to take a walk?

Japan is different. Golf there costs a lot of money. Rumor was that the "Joe Sixpack" Japanese golfer could

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book a one-week vacation to Guam, pay for premium daily-fee golf every day at the highest-priced courses on the island, and that trip would be cheaper overall, including hotel and food, than one round of golf in Japan at a private club that even allowed outside play.

That may have been true in the past, but the present reality is that most courses in Japan are technically bankrupt, their parent companies are

**Been there, seen that**

BY MIKE HEACOCK



bankrupt, and the banks that loaned them the money to build are technically bankrupt.

As a result, a lot of courses in Japan are now being bought by American vulture-capital firms (Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley are two of the big players there today) and converted to daily-fee operations at U.S. prices from \$80 to \$200, which in Japan is considered reasonable, affordable and even inexpensive.

The Japanese superintendents I've met (called greenkeepers there) are, not surprisingly, conservative in their maintenance practices. Indeed, some of the things they do today in Japan are similar to the way American superintendents did things in the 1950s.

For instance, the customary practice is to use about 200 gallons of water to apply a fungicide to one green. As a result, each course has at least one big diesel truck-mounted spray rig with a long hose and an orchard gun. One guy "paints" the green with the gun, and then they go back to the shop to reload.

One reason for this is that many fungicide labels in Japan require 1:1,000 dilution, if you can believe it. Newer fungicides, like Heritage, are being registered in Japan with U.S.-style carrier requirements, but the older ones still have antique labels. But greenkeepers apply Heritage just like the older fungicides,

with a 1:1,000 dilution because that's the way it's always been done.

Another quirk in Japan is the local governments generally test the water on and around each golf course at least yearly and look for pesticide residues.

Because of budget shortfalls and resulting tight staffing, each particular governmental entity will only test for "X" number of pesticides, usually about 10. So if the greenkeeper wants to, say, add Primo to his list of chemicals used on his course, then he has to drop one of his old standbys and not use it anymore because the government won't test for 11 chemicals.

Why is the government so sensitive about pesticide issues on golf courses? Because, a cynic might say, it's so insensitive to pesticide issues on rice. Japan grows only 2 percent of the world's rice, but buys and uses 55 percent of all the pesticides used on rice in the entire world.

Partly that's due to the extra-intensive form of rice culture the Japanese have to practice because of the scarcity of land. Partly it's due to Japan's "that's the way it's done here" philosophy.

Japanese farmers have immense political clout. If a tree hugger wants to attack pesticide use in Japan, he doesn't attack rice farmers, he attacks golf. So if you want to use Primo on your Penncross greens, you've got to drop Daconil or something else from your program.

Let's hope Japan is not a model, in this regard, for where the United States is gradually going.

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*Editor's Note: Mike Heacock, former vice president of agronomy and maintenance for American Golf Corp., fields your questions in his bi-monthly column. You can reach him at: mike.heacock@verizon.net or 310-849-5011.*