

Going Gaga Over Golf

LEBANONTURF SALESMAN EXPERIENCES CHINA'S LATEST CRAZE

By John Farrell

"You wanna go to China?" That's what my sales manager, Tim Layman, asked me last September. I answered, "Sure."

Tim told me that LebanonTurf needed its most expendable employee to go to China to give a talk to about 100 general managers at the Chinese Golf Course General Managers Association Conference.

I figured it was a great opportunity to visit a part of the world not many people get to see. I left Philadelphia, flew to Chicago and boarded a flight to Hong Kong — 19.5 hours and 8,000 miles from my home in New Jersey.

After a couple of days in Hong Kong, accompanied by my host, Rob Glucksmen of Witgang Far East Ltd., we took a 45-minute commuter train to the border checkpoint at Lo Wai. We crossed over into mainland China.

The Chinese love golf. With a population of 1 billion people, there's quite a scramble by Western companies for a piece of the pie. China has become the land of opportunity to companies struggling with a golf market on the decline at home.

The conference, which is the Chinese equivalent of the GCSAA show, is held at different golf resorts in China each year. This year's conference was held at the Sand River Golf Club in Shenzhen, China. Shenzhen was the first Special Economic Zone in China. It was created out of farmland and mangrove swamps. From a population of less than 20,000 in the 1970s, it has grown into a thriving metropolis of 2.5 million, home to China's highest-grossing industries. It's no wonder that golf has become such an important leisure activity for wealthy Chinese.

The event is put on by general managers who represent the roughly



John Farrell (third from left) says golf in China focuses on providing excellent customer service.

COURTESY OF JOHN FARRELL

180 courses throughout China. Most of the general managers bring along their superintendents.

General managers are the decision makers when it comes to club operations and agronomics in China. This is changing slowly and surely with influence from the West. Superintendents are becoming much more important to club operations. Chinese course operators are beginning to see the correlation between good turf and profits.

My boss told me I would speak to a group of about 100 general managers. The group was actually somewhere between 350 and 400. He also neglected to tell me that nine television stations and 17 magazines were covering the conference.

The seminars at the conference were similar to the ones here in the United States, where general managers and superintendents talk about management practices at their clubs. Someone from Phillips Lighting did a talk on lighting a golf course for night play (many of the resort courses throughout China have nine-hole, fully illuminated courses). My talk was on basic agronomics and nitrogen sources. This may be basic material for American superintendents, but not for many of the Chi-

nese turf professionals in the audience. Most courses throughout China either use all-mineral farm-grade fertilizers or the most primitive of fertilizers, manure.

Golf in China is a unique experience. The philosophy under which courses are run is based on service. As a guest of one of these resort courses in China, your every need is attended to. The clubhouse at Sand River was as ornate as any you will find anywhere in the world. Jobs at clubs like Sand River are highly sought after by locals, and they work hard to keep them.

Each player in the foursome has his own caddie who handles every detail of his or her round. To tell you the truth, it's a little disconcerting at times. Things you always do on your own, like marking your ball on the putting green, are attended to by the caddies.

Sand River Golf Club is wall-to-wall seashore paspalum. You won't find too many native areas at golf courses in China. Every inch of turf that could be mowed was mowed. Native plants and grasses were actually removed from Sand River and replaced by ornamental plants and grasses that did not fit. I was told course architect Gary Player was not happy with that. But I was also told that this was common practice at golf courses because the Chinese like the "Augusta National look."

The courses I visited were in remarkably good condition considering some of the maintenance practices used. The Chinese are eager to learn how we do things and are gradually changing the way their courses are maintained. The introduction of golf to China has created many opportunities for turf students or assistant superintendents from the United States. The Chinese respect our knowledge and are starting to hire American turf professionals.

My trip was a wonderful experience. It's great to see golf grow in a country like China where it was once thought of as a useless activity for rich Westerners.

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