

# FINDING GOOD Fortune

The golf rush brought American superintendents to China several years ago.

*They don't plan on leaving*

BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

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PART 1

**W**ith the same fervor of the gold rush, some golf industry professionals have looked east to China in search of what the Chinese call “green opium.”

Since the first golf course opened on mainland China in 1984, the need for imported expertise in design, construction and maintenance has created lucrative jobs for experienced professionals such as Eugene Baston, a Georgia native who is now superintendent of the Tianma Country Club in Shanghai.

Baston, a former president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), says the “opportunity to be a part of the golf expansion in China” lured him to the country 10 years ago. At the time, only one course existed in Shanghai, and seven were under construction. Today there are 27 golf courses in the city and four more under way.

After receiving a turf degree from Pennsylvania State University, Lee Sellars started his professional career at the Loxahatchee Club in Jupiter, Fla. He moved on to a superintendent position at Wycliffe Country Club in Palm Beach. After working there for a year, an industry friend called to tell him about a superintendent position at the Discovery Bay Golf Club in Hong Kong.

“I was nervous, but Hong Kong sounded exotic,” Sellars says. “I had already made up my mind [to go there] before I hung up the phone.”

After spending 10 years living and working in Asia, Sellars has discovered the secret to surviving as a foreign superintendent in China — the willingness to adapt to existing cultural norms, both personally and professionally. It wasn't easy, though. Adjusting to a different lifestyle abroad took time.

“I came here with a two-year contract with every intention of going back home,” he says.



"I'm still here. I really want to be able to maintain a golf course standard that I maintained in Florida. Every year I step closer to that standard. That's what keeps me going. Plus, I love Hong Kong. I love the culture, my friends and my lifestyle here."

Baston and Sellars have found good fortune in the Chinese golf industry. However, the Chinese government has placed a three-year, nationwide moratorium on new course constructions. The restriction represents a concerted effort to address water conservation and slow the pace at which valu-

able farmland is being gobbled up by golf course developers.

Few worry the ban will bring an end to the golf rush in China, however.

"We are in a wait-and-see mode to evaluate the impact of this restriction," Baston says. "But I believe golf will continue to grow in China. I think it will be a lot slower than some of our industry friends would like it to be, but certainly it will grow on a scale to meet the demand."

Currently, the demand for the game in China remains relatively low. The way economists describe the Chinese thirst for all things Western, one might assume that every Tom, Dick and Yao has picked up a set of golf clubs, but that's clearly not the case. The sport remains a pastime for foreign expatriates as well as the rich and powerful. The average Jiao

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**Lee Sellars and assistant Chan Yuen Hung communicate well because Hung speaks English fluently.**





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Darren Cribbes says finding qualified maintenance employees is a major challenge.

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cannot afford the cost of a membership that ranges from \$35,000 to \$100,000.

The moratorium may be good news for the few who can afford to play the game. Without worrying about increasing competition, existing facilities can focus on improving play conditions, something that has been lacking at many Chinese courses, explains Darren Cribbes of TurfGrass Systems, an independent management and agronomy consultancy based in Hong Kong.

"I'm seeing significant issues for clubs at the 10-year-age group," he says. "These include poor grassing selections, grass contamination, wear and tear from increased golf play, worn equipment and equipment selection unsuitable to the needs of the course, nor changed as different phases of maturity occurred."

Cribbes believes that bad advice during golf's pioneer days in China and misunderstandings about the game contributed to the problems that plague older courses today. Furthermore, finding qualified maintenance employees continues to be a problem.

"The present lack of experience and support education for golf workers and managers creates a situation where it's easier for them to devise a means around an issue rather conduct a sound repair," he says.

Horror stories abound across China. On more than one occasion, inexperienced maintenance crews have operated new equipment until it stopped functioning. Thinking a machine had broken down, they cannibalized it for spare parts, not realizing it had only needed gasoline.

One legend has it that a greenskeeper in Shenzhen applied Roundup on the greens to kill the weeds. That tale didn't have a happy ending.

"The stories we come across are often sad misfortunes," Cribbes says. "My business is about supporting clients' moves forward."

Cribbes developed expertise in how to do just that after receiving an offer 10 years ago to renovate a run-down golf course in Hong Kong. At the time, little potential for career advancement existed in his home country of Australia, so he jumped at the opportunity.

Like other foreign superintendents in China, Cribbes was driven by the overwhelming desire to make a difference. Over the next decade he learned how to manage staff and plan in a cross-cultural environment, among other things.

By the time he started TurfGrass Systems in 2002, Cribbes had amassed a wealth of experience in course management and the application of agronomic

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scientific methods in China. Now he has created a niche for himself by helping other struggling courses "achieve their goals in an efficient and environmentally conscious manner."

In addition to working with individual clients to achieve their goals, TurfGrass Systems offers two yearly IPM classes. Furthermore, Cribbes has partnered with Dr. Zhaolong Wang at Jiao Tong University in Shanghai to establish a diagnostic lab on Chinese soil to aid in insect, disease and weed identification problems.

"This is a small way in which focused effort can support the industry with

independent and specific assistance at the university level," he explains.

While physical, scientific and engineering issues are universal, Cribbes identifies three key differences in how golf courses are managed in China:

**1** **Costs to operate facilities can be underestimated.** Little regard is given to long-term maintenance and the expense associated with some projects. It's also difficult for some club managers to understand the consequences of uneducated free advice on the health of the facility.

**2** **Water conservation.** "Water resources across China can be managed significantly better by improving efficiency of use," Cribbes says. "It would provide far greater benefit."

Water conservation is a big issue worldwide, particularly in populous China. The Chinese government has issued strict rules on the monitoring of

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### IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

The country with the largest population can also boast having the largest golf course complex in the world. Mission Hills (below) in Shenzhen, China, features 10 award-winning golf courses designed by some of the best golfers in the world. When the club opened in 1994, it had few golfers, according to Peter Goh, general manager of golf operations. But many more flock to the club daily today.

Mission Hills' 7,400-yard Olazabal Course, designed by Jose Maria Olazabal, features seashore paspalum on fairways and TifEagle on greens.



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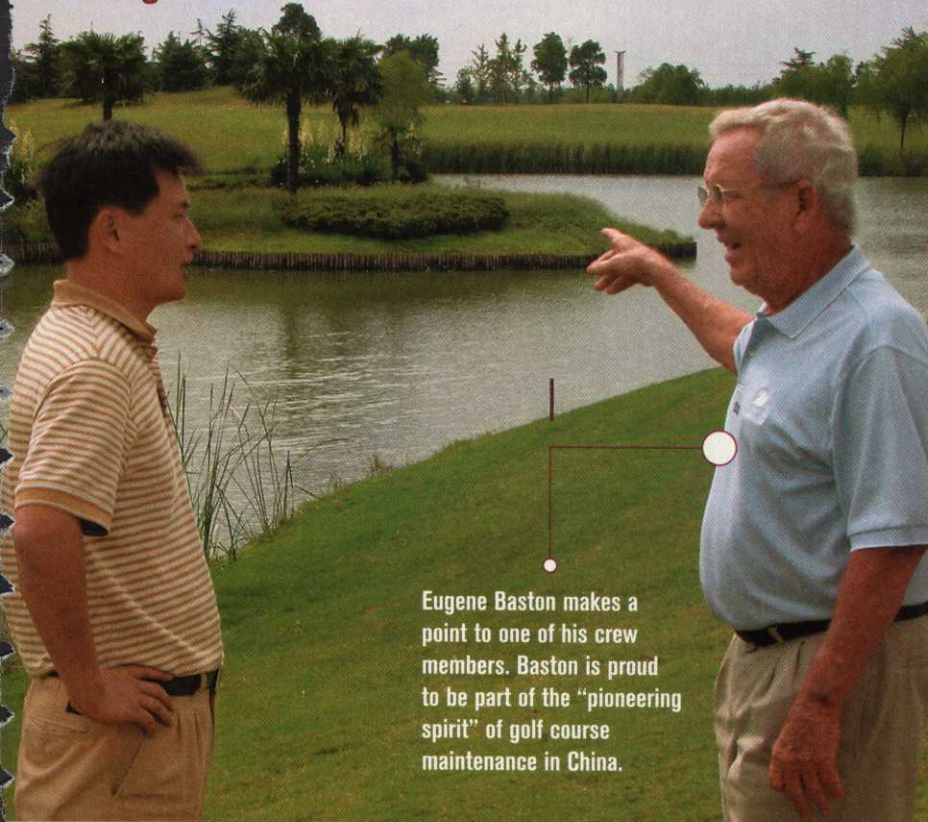
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Eugene Baston makes a point to one of his crew members. Baston is proud to be part of the "pioneering spirit" of golf course maintenance in China.

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wastewater and pollution entering the water supply. The general decline in water quality in rivers appears to require additional intervention and community support.

Furthermore, the water issue is linked to land use. Many courses build water reservoirs and hold large amounts of the water needed throughout the year. Yet obtaining large tracts of quality land is difficult considering the Chinese government's reluctance to give up land that is otherwise suitable for agriculture.

**3 Management planning takes a greater emphasis.** While more local products are becoming available, most of the materials and equipment used for golf course maintenance are imported. Hence, products cost more, and superintendents have to wait longer for them to arrive.

"Superintendents spend significant time chasing orders and delivery of parts and products," Cribbes says. "The distribution agent may be a phone call away. But the products are very often not."

Despite the difficulties of operating in

China, most of the obstacles faced by superintendents can be overcome with a little patience and foresight. Cribbes recommends that his clients get the scientific facts, set and communicate ideal case goals, and seek out mentors and educators for support.

As an experienced mentor himself, Eugene Baston has identified yet another key element to a superintendent's success in China—the pioneering spirit.

"The superintendents here have a saying, 'We have done so much with so little for so long that we can do anything with nothing,' " he explains. "If an individual can adapt to this philosophy, he just might make it here."

Sellers has not only adopted that philosophy, he has embraced the culture. Both have kept him in China longer than he thought.

"I wasn't going to live a typical expat life where you don't get exposed to the community," Sellers says. "The connection to the culture has been very important. I'd hate to look back on this experience and say, 'Why didn't I do this?' or 'Why didn't I do that?' " ■



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