

# 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

Over  
There  
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

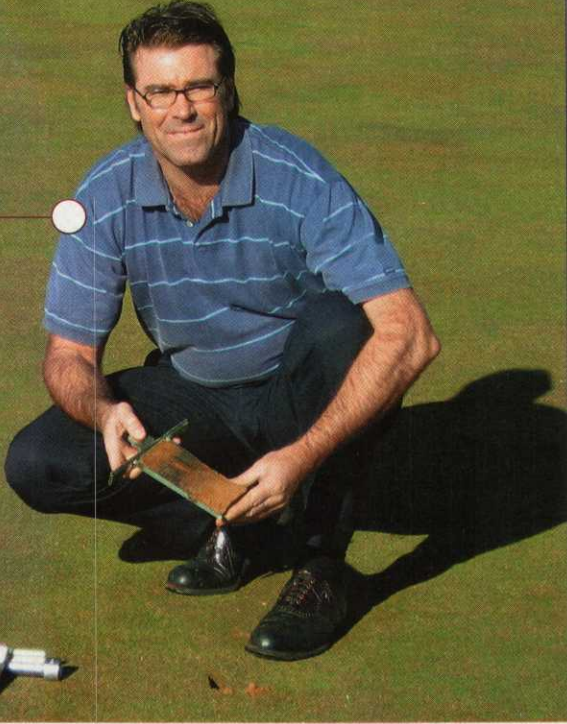
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**Lee Sellars and assistant Chan Yuen Hung communicate well because Hung speaks English fluently.**





## Finding Good Fortune



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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## Finding Good Fortune

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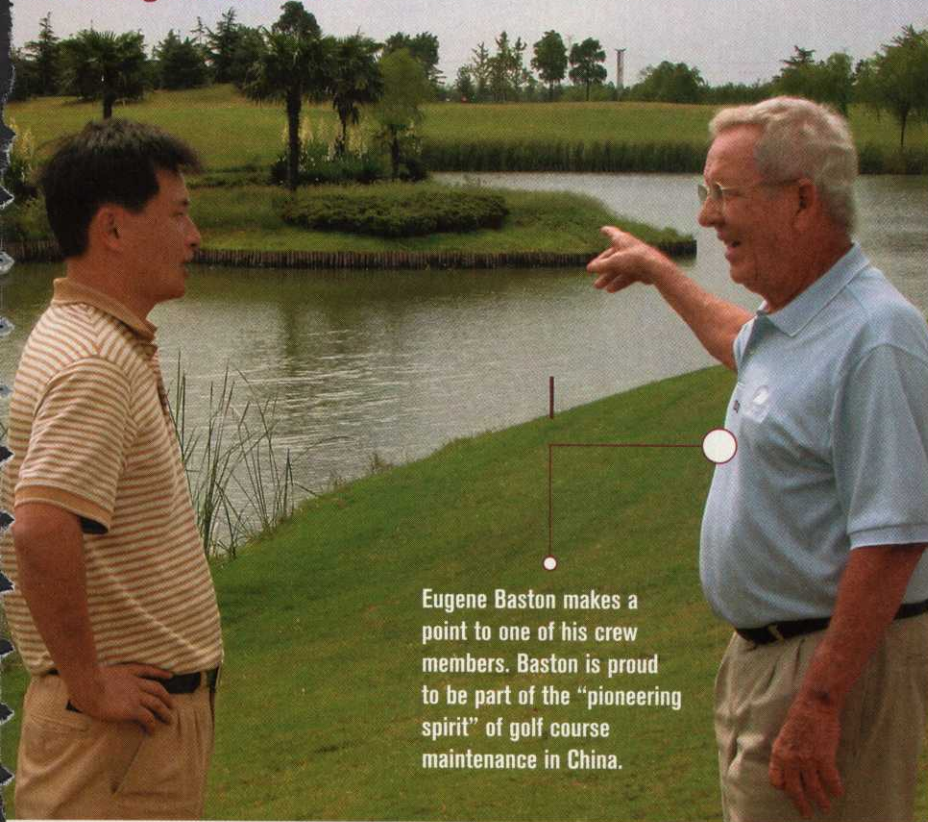
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Eugene Baston makes a point to one of his crew members. Baston is proud to be part of the "pioneering spirit" of golf course maintenance in China.

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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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# OVER THE Pond

European course managers face many of the same challenges as American superintendents.

*But they share some differences as well*

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

**T**he job keeps getting tougher. And tougher.  
And . . . tougher.

Archie Dunn, who has worked in the golf course maintenance industry for 27 of his 44 years, says he has many more challenges to deal with these days than he did several years ago. Dunn says today's golfers are high maintenance. They want this and complain about that. Dunn also says he has to deal with more environmental and safety issues than before.

Dunn could be any American superintendent working in any corner of the country. But he's not. Dunn, who speaks in a thicker-than-a-dark-ale brogue, is the course manager of Auchterarder Golf Club, an 18-hole semi-private club in Perthshire, Scotland.

The United States and the United Kingdom share many distinct differences: We drive on the right side of the road, and they drive on the left side; we call it a "rest room,"

and they call it a "toilet." But when it comes to golf course maintenance, there are more similarities than differences. (Although we call the job a "superintendent," and they call it a "course manager.")

For instance, course managers in the UK are under tremendous pressure — from golfers, not disease. Just like in America, many golfers in the United Kingdom expect superb golf course conditions from tee to green, and course managers are under pressure to deliver them.

"You're only as good as your last golf course preparation," says Scott MacCallum, communications manager for the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association (BIGGA). "Perfection is something everyone is trying to achieve. But no one ever will."

Ahh, the pursuit of perfection. Many American superintendents can relate to chasing it because it's what their courses' members and golfers expect these days.

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Perfection wasn't a big issue in the UK about 10 years ago, Dunn says. Back then such standards at golf courses were expected only on weekends. "But the expectations are there now on a daily basis," he adds.

Golfers want to play year-round in Scotland, and they expect high standards throughout the year. Problem is, the expectation levels keep going up while maintenance budgets get tighter.

"There's not as much money around to buy the equipment that's required to maintain the escalating standards of what's expected," MacCallum says.

While American superintendents face similar challenges, Dunn blames much of the problem on American golfers. Golfers in the UK are watching American golf tournaments such as the Masters on satellite television and, lo and behold, they see the perfection that is Augusta National.



**Wilson Morrison, a sales manager for a Ransomes Jacobsen dealer, says politics are a problem.**

"They want faster greens, but the average golfer can't play faster greens," Donaldson says.

MacCallum says course managers try to encourage golfers that greens don't need to be

"They expect [our] course to be like Augusta," Dunn says of his course's golfers. "That's just not possible."

Don Donaldson, owner of Farthingstone Golf Club in Northamptonshire, England, says golfers' expectations are a problem. They see greens on TV rolling at speeds they've never seen before and decide they want the same speeds on their courses' greens.

lush green and fast to be good. "Good grass can be grass that looks like it's about to die of thirst . . . but golfers don't necessarily appreciate that," MacCallum adds.

Politics have invaded golf course maintenance in the UK. Wilson Morrison, who works as a sales manager for a Ransomes Jacobsen dealer in northern Scotland, says the politics between course managers and green committees are a problem. They

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were a big reason why Morrison decided to go into sales after working as a course manager for 12 years in Scotland.

Morrison says he made the career change because he noticed green committee members were trying to run the show at Scottish courses. He says it became a case of amateurs telling professionals what to do.

"[The committees] began to dominate the [course managers]," Morrison says.

There was also no stability on the committees, Morrison notes, which led to inconsistencies on the golf course. One year, one committee would want one thing. Then the committee would change and the next year it would want something different.

Morrison says there are few courses in Scotland where committee members don't meddle with course managers' duties.

"They want to leave their marks," Morrison says. "It's a shame because it's

the only business where amateurs can dictate to a professional."

Dunn says golf clubs aren't clubs anymore — they're businesses. He says golfers and members want more for their money, but their lack of understanding for what he and his crew do is a problem.

One time, Dunn says a golfer approached him while he was working on the course in the late afternoon and said to him: "Why are you still on the course at 4:30? Why are you not at home at half past noon like the other greenkeepers?"

Here's something else occurring at UK clubs of which American superintendents can relate. Golfers, who belong to two different clubs, often compare the clubs' conditions. Then they complain to course managers that the greens at Club A are faster than the greens at Club B or vice versa.

In other parts of Europe, the politics aren't as bad. Seve Schmitz has worked in

the industry for 35 years, the last 17 years as course manager of Essener Golf Club, a private club in Essener, Germany. His course's green committee consists of three men who have been in place for 20 years. Schmitz only meets with the committee about once a year, although he meets with the men one on one often.

Schmitz says he gets along well with his club's members. They come to him less with complaints and more with polite requests. "I've only had one written complaint in the entire time I've been at the club," he says.

The trick to getting along with golfers is to keep the course in as tidy a state as possible, Schmitz says.

"They don't like to see things out of

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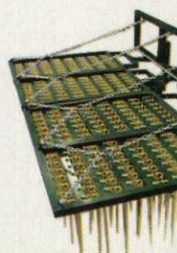


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place," he says. "If it's all in order and the greens are healthy and the ball is rolling, then they're pretty happy."

But Schmitz admits his club's members also suffer *greenitis* on occasion. He tries to convince them that green doesn't necessarily mean good.

Schmitz also battles to convince some golfers that quality putting greens should be measured on consistency, not speed.

"The problem is our members travel to Florida and California and experience fast greens," he says. "Then they come back and say they want the same [speeds] here."

American superintendents and European course managers also have differences in their jobs. For instance, European superintendents say they don't have the budgets and crew sizes of most U.S. golf courses.

MacCallum says budgets often dictate staffing levels and that budgets are getting tighter. He says a few golf courses in the UK have more than three to four crew members. "Some 18-hole courses are running with two people," he adds.

Schmitz employs five people full time from mid-December through March. He hires an additional person for the summer.

Essener is closed during the winter and no work is performed on the course, but the greenkeepers still receive paychecks. "We finish work in the middle of December and take our holiday," Schmitz says.

There has been no turnover on Schmitz's crew for several years. One crew member has worked at the course for 27 years and another for 16 years. Schmitz says the consistency in the work force has been



German course manager Seve Schmitz says he welcomes a reduction in pesticide use.

healthy for the maintenance operation.

Dunn also employs five people year-round. His budget is 110,000 pounds, including labor. His course's crew members are much younger, ranging in age from 16 to 20-something.

While securing reliable labor is not the same problem for course managers in Europe as it is for many superintendents in the United States, MacCallum says bigger clubs in the UK have had a harder time finding help. "In the London area, for instance, it's tough to get people because the salary is not enough to cover the cost of living," he says.

In Northamptonshire, located in central England, Donaldson says the pickings are slim for good employees. "We're in an area . . . where unemployment is down to 1.5 percent," he says. "That 1.5 percent is the sort of people you don't want to employ."

In the summer, Farthingstone employs several "immigrants," Donaldson says. They are students from the English colonies, who travel from places like South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, to work on golf courses.

Poor economics have also impacted European golf. In his area, Donaldson says there's pressure to reduce prices and that too many courses are chasing too little business.

In Scotland, the golf market is saturated, which has affected the industry negatively, Morrison says.

"Many smaller courses are struggling, especially in north Scotland," he adds. "There are golf courses fighting for business."

Schmitz says the German economy is suffering, but most golf courses are healthy. "The bulk of clubs that are more established have a good membership . . . and have waiting lists," he adds. "It's not quite the extreme situation as it is in the British Isles where they have to compete so desperately for every member."

Chemical and fertilizer use is also a big issue in Europe. Course managers anticipate they'll be using less of these products in coming years because of strict legislation.

Chemical use has been outlawed on golf courses in some countries, including Denmark. Schmitz says many course managers believe those bans will soon be issued in other European countries.

"In many ways I'd like to see it come," Schmitz says. "Because it will move us quicker into adapting more sensible ways to manage golf courses . . . and to not rely on chemicals for every small blemish."

Schmitz admits it wouldn't be easy to stop using pesticides completely. He also realizes it would be more difficult for U.S. courses to stop using them.

"I'm not sure it could be done in the United States because there's a broader range of diseases there," he says. "We also don't have anywhere near the insect problem there is in the United States." ■

