



Your Ad Here

Could American golf courses take a tip from this Nepalese golf course — and allow billboards to break up the beauty?

BY CURT HARLER

Ah, but it's wonderful to find golf in the foothills of the Himalaya. Walk with me across the deck and out of the clubhouse at the Gokarna Forest Resort in Kathmandu, Nepal. To the right, the entire northern horizon is framed with high mountains. To the left, an ancient forest. Ahead, a few hours of restful golf.

Wait a minute, an unusual sight forms the backdrop of the lovely No. 10 — a huge billboard touting vodka. Make that two billboards, the other touting golf.

Must be an unfortunate juxtaposition with a nearby road, right? No, make no mistake, this resort has allowed billboards to break up the beauty of its otherwise stellar surroundings.

Could billboards be the cash cow that saves American golf courses? There has been much debate about selling advertisements on team jerseys (and the lost revenue by not already doing so), especially in the NBA. Why not a billboard for Gatorade at the end of a long par 5? Or maybe a 5-Hour Energy Drink, endorsed by Jim Furyk?

Pondering the concept, I turn away and walk over to the putting green, knowing from my research that Gokarna has a local reputation as a fantastic course. Bentgrass greens are built to USGA specifications. Local Bermudagrass varieties make the fairways a pleasure to tread. Along most of the holes, the trees surrounding the path of play are older than many of the states in the USA.

There are 6,715 yards to this magical par 72 golf course... and a score card that delineates the house rules for balls that fall into hoof prints (hoof marks on the greens may be repaired, I learn).

Gokarna is a top-end course at a resort in Kathmandu. Most of the players are expats and diplomats living in Nepal, foreign corporations with a local presence, and the upper crust of Kathmandu society.

This is no nickel-and-dime operation. Membership is \$2,260 (in U.S. dollars) a year. That may not sound like much to a superintendent in North Carolina. But it is a mind-boggling figure by local standards; per capita income in Nepal is \$473 a year.

Being a proficient golfer, I practice putting with my head down. Being a curious

reporter with an urge to peek when playing a new course, my head bobs up. And there, just across the practice green, are three more billboards.

They belong right where they are. Two of them promote golf. One, however, is for McDowell's Signature Whisky, a libation that sounds more my style than the vodka at No. 10.

We turn to the beautiful tee box at No. 1. It plays 395 yards from the back tees and falls so sharply downhill that a mountain goat would feel at home. Even my wife, a short-but-straight hitter, is salivating at the prospect of seeing her drive cover 280 yards (that's 105 straight and 175 downhill). I swing, and look up toward Mount Everest in the distance. I top my shot and it still goes 200 yards.

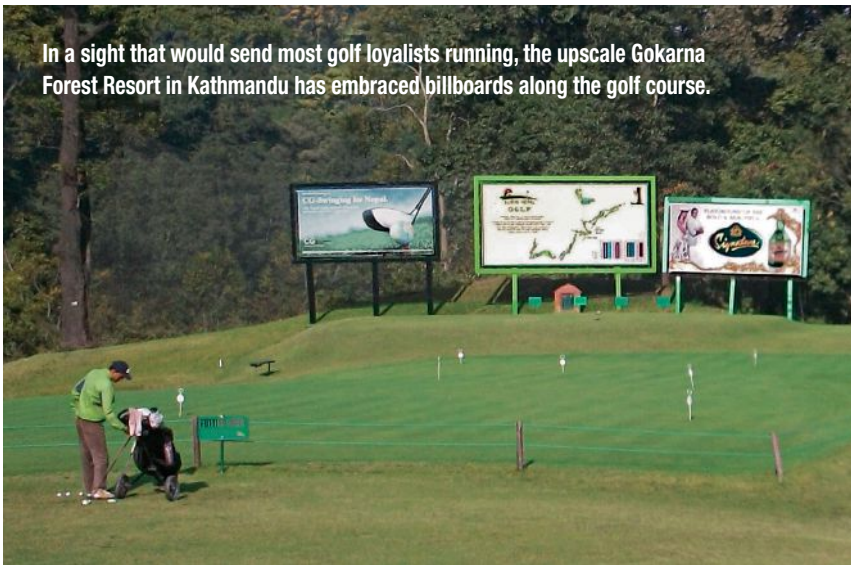
Most of the course is delightful and scenic. And that McDowell's Signature Whisky advertisement I see obviously works on me. Because back at the clubhouse, I down a glass of it, discovering that it really is a full-bodied blend of imported Scotch with Indian malts.

Later, I am gratified to learn that Signature is marketed to premium whisky drinkers who are younger, well heeled, well exposed and on the way to the top. In other words, guys who play at premier courses, guys...like me.

See? Advertising pays. ■

Contributing editor Curt Harler immediately changes the channel whenever "Flo," the Progressive Insurance spokesperson, comes on. But he likes the Geico gecko.

In a sight that would send most golf loyalists running, the upscale Gokarna Forest Resort in Kathmandu has embraced billboards along the golf course.



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