

Shaping China's Golfing Future

At least 200 new golf courses have been built in China in the past five years, and several times that many newcomers are predicted for the coming decade. China is in the midst of a golf boom. It has the opportunity to build wonderful golf courses and shape the future of its golf by deciding, in part, what type of facilities it builds. So say golf course architects James Duncan and Tim Liddy.

FROM HISTORY we have learned some important lessons about golf development. First we owe the 'spirit of golf' to St Andrews. The top courses in the world today are the ones whose characteristics present that spirit in the most enduring way. At St Andrews, golf has been refined over time upon the basis of how 'good sport' can be extracted from the game's basic components.

We have learned a great deal from this. Certain spatial arrangements, contours, angles, placements and textures have been found to be more interesting than others. These observations provided the underpinnings of what later became golf course architecture.

Second, we have learned that where golf has been transplanted upon the basis of traditional golf, it has thrived. In those instances, sites that provided sporting, fun courses were selected.

The playing of golf was treated as a competitive game that engendered good camaraderie and friendships, and the spirit of the game's traditions was upheld.

Chinese golf is about to make its own discoveries in these regards. Experimentation invites the potential for fail-

ure as well as success. A few mistakes go hand in hand with the prospects of great achievements.

The potential for advancing the game in China, however, is so profound that a few pointers, viewed through the prism of golf history, should at least be considered.

Understanding the Roots of the Game

Since the beginnings of golf course architecture, the main practitioners of this field have all been familiar with the attractions of natural golf. When these men have thought about golf, what golf means and what golf courses should play like, they have had a clear mental image of the Old Course at St Andrews and other natural courses.

They have understood – thankfully for us – that courses don't need to look like the ancient links in order to play a little bit like them. They have known that certain design guidelines are important, and that new projects can benefit from adhering to these in creating compelling golf.

They have valued placement, shape and texture over appearance. They have made reference to the marvels of proper

turf – a firm, beautiful and responsive surface which results from fine-bladed grasses being nurtured to grow slowly and densely on well-drained soils or sand.

Until very recently, golf was guided by a distinctly amateur spirit, like the spirit of the Olympic Games. Even today, despite St Andrews being home to the Royal & Ancient Golf Club and a half-dozen other private clubs – and the host of the largest golf tournament in the world – it is a place where everyone knows golf firstly as a game.

Gaining admission into one of the better clubs there may be considered the pinnacle of achievement in social circles, but it has relatively little to do with the act of playing golf. Cobblers and blacksmiths have played there with kings, for centuries.

Making the Game Affordable

To a large degree, China can decide how it wishes to make golf available to the public, and at what price. Hopefully it will take its cue from those countries where golf is the most diverse, and the most interesting.

There is not a place in the world in which the roots of golf are stronger than where golf is available to the highest number of people. The most coveted private clubs generally exist in these locales, too. Providing golf to the public by no means diminishes the interest in private clubs. The precise opposite statement is arguably more accurate.

Recognising the Importance of Site Selection

Traditional golf takes place on a human scale, and while large features can provide great drama and definition on a course, it is typically the smaller contours and the

interest of concepts for holes that endow a golf course with lasting interest. Finding a site that either has interesting features at a human scale to begin with, or that lends itself to the creation of features at that scale, is usually an important starting point. A flattish site is almost always better than a site that is too steep.

Most developers, today and in days past, recognise the benefits that can be reaped from investing time and effort in finding the best site available for a given development. In this regard, China has tremendous potential. Because of its structure, it is not hard to imagine the leaders of Chinese golf launching a programme to identify and promote China's best golf sites, or golf regions.

Think of the Melbourne sand belt, the Sand Hills of North Carolina and Nebraska or Eastern Long Island in New York. These locales we take for granted as golf destinations today, but they were identified for golf by visionary developers who recognised that they had natural qualities that made them ideal for golf.

courses have wonderful contours and interesting, attractive features. Natural courses are full of such details – ripples, ridges, hollows and plateaus, sandy scrapes, bumps and hillocks. Crafting such features artificially, however, is a specialised skill involving a combination of machinery and hand finishing. It is a fluid process that requires trusting a creative journey, an exploration.

Initially this will present a challenge for modern China, since everything is currently quantified, measured and accounted for in advance. There is no such thing as making it up on the go, trusting an unpredictable process – even if it is familiar to those who use it. This is the preferred method used by most architects who are doing interesting work, in golf and elsewhere, but it is not currently part of the typical Chinese project management mindset.

In time, however, this challenge will be mastered, and when it does China will be able to reap its manpower advantage. When it happens, the focus

Mechanical eradication would have been necessary.

Manual labour slows down the process and provides the ability to create something of greater interest than if heavier, faster impact is made by mechanical means.

Besides, China does not need help from others in conceiving big, fast-track projects. If anything, China needs a reminder of its rich, diverse architectural history. In the near future China will likely continue building large projects linked to real estate developments. Right now the opportunity to create very successful speculative projects is too compelling for most developers to concern themselves with the salient points of golf course architecture.

At some juncture, however, as the real estate demand becomes supplied and the

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Chinese golf scene becomes more sophisticated, individuals and companies will start to see that sometimes less can be more ... and that size and scale does matter in the creation of outstanding golf facilities.

Summary

- ▶ If the game is made available to as many people as possible, it will have the greatest chance of growing stronger over time. Not every facility can be 'championship standard' or 'world-class' quality;
- ▶ There is nothing wrong with large development involving golf, but exceptional golf courses almost always result from smaller-scaled developments;
- ▶ Exceptional golf courses can be built on marginal properties, but it is infinitely easier and less expensive to build an interesting, distinctive golf course on a good piece of property;
- ▶ If Chinese landscapes, and a Chinese design aesthetic, can form the basis for Chinese golf architecture, the results will have the greatest chance of being appropriate for China, and of lasting interest;
- ▶ Remember where and how it all started and that golf is firstly, mostly, and hopefully always will remain a wonderful game.

** James Duncan is a golf course designer associated primarily with Coore & Crenshaw, a company with which he has been associated for 12 years. Tim Liddy is an Indiana-based course designer who has collaborated extensively with Pete Dye for two decades. Duncan and Liddy met and collaborated at St Andrews, and intend to collaborate on a golf course design project in the future.*



This kind of detective work may already be happening in China, and it should be greatly encouraged. There is a huge brain trust and work force available, which, with the right kind of guidance, can help position golf course development in China on a healthy path by identifying and promoting good sites.

With a good site in hand, the potential is there to create something distinctive and enduring. The land can be permitted to direct the style of a design. Interesting, unusual solutions to design challenges can come to life, and give Chinese golf courses their own distinctive character.

Crafting a Course

Few courses of distinction are built and finished in accordance with a set of plans. Good golf is crafted, using a combination of plans for guidance and abundant field adjustments. This was true 100 years ago and it is true today. All the world's best

of attention needs to be directed in the right way. Putting manual labour to good use in golf course construction does not mean speedily patching up what heavy machinery ripped up. It means the ability to build gradually, in multiple iterations. This style of building allows the architect to mould a project as it happens, as opposed to building everything at once and thereby missing out on a tremendous creative opportunity.

For example, on a current project in Hainan, there is a chance to leave all the outer lying areas of the golf course – all the natural and previously farmed lands – undisturbed for the time being. The idea is to observe what happens in the next few years as the land transitions from farming to golf, and then selectively removing weeds and other unwanted vegetation by hand. Had hand labour been unavailable, this would have been impossible or prohibitively expensive.

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