

China's Golf Boom—A New Frontier for American Instructors?

By David Gould, Staff Editor

When John Strawn wrote “Driving the Green,” a book that turned out to be the definitive case study of how golf courses get built, he hardly suspected he would one day become an expert on the golf industry in Asia. Likewise, Lee Schmidt didn't begin his golf architecture career hoping to become one of China's most prolific course designers—that's simply how things turned out. Recently back from a trip to the People's Republic, Schmidt took time to share a revealing story. It involves a meeting he had with a Chinese businessman whose first golf experience was a match against a friend who had been playing for some time.

“Of course the friend won,” says Schmidt, who is a partner in the highly successful Schmidt-Curley design firm. “But they made a rematch bet—for \$10,000. The guy telling me this story asked for one year to learn the game and get better, then they would play again, which they did,” Schmidt continues. “This time it went the other way, and he won his 10 grand. Now he's a member of five different country clubs and he's making plans to build his own golf course. That gives you a glimpse of what's going on now in China's golf culture.”

To many if not most Asian cultures, golf has the same hypnotic allure it has to you and me. Over the last six years in China the number of courses has soared from 170 to an estimated 550 or so. Hundreds more are under construction or in planning, although officially course-building is in a moratorium. Has the country hit either a big bump or an actual wall in its economic growth, and in its ability to continue with course construction?

Perhaps, but at least there is now a golf infrastructure. We asked John Strawn to help us understand how North American teaching professionals might fare if they ventured into this environment. A journalist and author whose career path has taken him to the position of CEO of the Robert Trent Jones II design firm and to his current post as president of Arthur Hills/Steve Forrest and Associates, Strawn offers his Asia expertise in this engaging Q & A about golf instruction opportunities on the other side of the globe.



Proponent Group: John, in your travels, how much golf instruction do you see actually taking place in Asia, at this time?

John Strawn: Let me start with what I think is good news from China. Despite Beijing's current moratorium on new course development, there's a tremendous interest in golf among young people, especially college-age students and young professionals. Knowing how to play golf and belonging to a club represent success in modern China. You could

say that golf membership is part of a “triple play” of most desirable accomplishments—owning an apartment or house, buying a car and belonging to a golf club.

PG: Seems like it would be relatively easier to get the house and the car, right?

JS: By far the golf membership is the most elusive of the three. The best guesses I've heard put the Chinese golfing population at only 30,000. There's some mystery around these stats, because new golf development is officially banned. Developers have used various ruses to build courses, including things like marking golf course acreage as an “eco-zone” or a “forest park” on plans submitted to the government. But lately the central government has become more determined—it's very tough now to get anything started.

PG: But still, for the golf instructor there doesn't need to be a constant flow of new projects.

JS: That's right. Wealthy Chinese and members of the ruling elite definitely play and they want to improve. The courses I visited this summer in Beijing were busy, especially on weekends, and the parking lots were full of luxury cars. Most of the clubs attempt to provide instruction, but many of the members have also traveled elsewhere in Asia, Europe and the USA to play golf.

PG: How do you measure the interest among young people, few of whom have actually played golf?

JS: I attend lots of golf trade shows, and simulator manufacturers form the single largest group of exhibitors. There were at least 20 companies showing off their sys-

tems at the last Beijing show in March and those booths were the most crowded. People lined up for a chance to hit shots, and large crowds gathered to watch mostly novice golfers hit shots.

From what I could see, the Chinese programmers are generous with their feedback. I saw swings that for sure would hit lazy slices about 130 yards fly down the simulated fairway about 230 yards. So as a teaching tool, maybe not so great, but as a means of encouraging people to learn to play golf—excellent.

PG: Once they're encouraged to play, and get excited about it—what's going to happen next?

JS: China now faces a situation similar to what Japanese golf confronted three decades ago—many more people wanting to play golf than there are opportunities to play. In North America and Europe, we're used to a system that lets anyone who can afford a green fee and a few lessons take up the game and have access to decent courses. But the barriers to playing in China are high, with only private clubs with pricey memberships available. Right now, there is no inclination in China to build daily fee or muni-type courses.

There are relatively few public driving ranges outside of Hong Kong, so simulators are now a popular option, and borrowing from a Korean example (and Korea is a huge trendsetter in Asian popular culture), putting simulators in bars and clubs is growing in popularity as a date-night activity.

If China is going to be the future of golf in Asia, as many people have thought over the last decade, a lot will have to change. But the interest in the game, which far outstrips what we see in the US among young people, is an encouraging sign of what could be possible.

PG: Is there a brand-name homegrown Chinese golf academy now? Is one of the foreign brand names at all established, anywhere in Asia?

JS: Cheng Jun, the first Chinese professional to win on a big tour when he won the European Tour's China Open in 1997, opened the Cheng Jun Academy in partnership with the well-known Australia touring pro turned teacher, Kal Llewelyn, in 2003. Their academy is at the Tian'an Golf Course, a 27-hole facility near the Beijing Capital Airport, which has a membership that includes many of Beijing's top golfers. Llewelyn and Cheng Jun taught Liang Wen-chong, who is China's top male professional. Llewelyn established his reputation in Australia, but has also taught in India as well as China. Gary Player Academies has established one facility in China, near Suzhou. Nicklaus Academy opened a facility at Ten Times Golf Resort in Qingdao, Shandong Province this summer. That's their only academy in Asia.

Gary Gilchrist has taught at Mission Hills in Shenzhen over the last several years, doing two-week tutorials for young players, and has also taught many Asian players at his Academy in Orlando.

Cindy Reid runs a golf academy also at Mission Hills, and Bloomberg News reported last year that she charges \$600/hour. Shanghai's Silport Golf Club has a David Leadbetter Golf Academy. Formerly the home of the China Open, Silport still has a strong membership but its two courses aren't quite up to the standard of the best new courses.

Dale Lynch, another top Australia teaching pro, worked with a number of Korean and Chinese players in Australia before moving his Academy to the USA three years ago. His biggest takeaway from working with Korean golfers, especially the girls, was that they would do anything asked of them to get better.

Their families, too, would make great sacrifices to support their careers, and the results of this commitment are clearly evident on the LPGA. New Zealand and Australia have both attracted aspiring golfers from Asia, in part because both have strong golf traditions, with affordable courses and teaching academies—again, unlike China, where the game now is exclusively for the elite.

PG: Would you imagine that a foreign brand-name instruction academy would have a big advantage over someone who was talented but little-known?

JS: Clearly, Asian luxury-goods consumers are highly brand-conscious, so just as Chinese developers have shown a strong preference for the top brand-name golf architects—Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman, Arnold Palmer, Gary Player—they will favor the best-known teaching academies. Right now, Chinese developers still look to the West on all important golf-related issues, although the future window for that preference is probably going to be measured in years, not decades.

But if a teacher comes in and has clearly demonstrable success—i.e., a player he or she has taught wins on a pro tour—that will probably translate into an enduring advantage. So while most Chinese know nothing about golf, the people who are important decision-makers in the golf world know golf's big names, therefore they recognize the names that will have power in the market.

PG: Could you make the case that teachers are needed and a skilled instructor who moves to Asia would be able to make his/her fortune?

JS: The success of the Korean women professionals on the LPGA Tour, and now with the first ripples of the Chinese wave hitting western shores with the major win by Feng Shanshan (LPGA Championship) and a 14-year-old Chinese boy, Andy Zhang, qualifying for the US Open at Olympic Club, shows how important good instruction is. Gary Gilchrist worked with Feng, for example, while Zhang is a product of Orlando's David Leadbetter Academy, where he has lived since the age of 10. For elite players with the resources, coming to train and play in the US (or Australia or New Zealand) will likely continue to be the preferred option for the foreseeable future.

PG: Could a U.S. citizen get the proper work visas to pursue his/her career there?

JS: That would not be a problem, especially if a local firm or person of influence was sponsoring the visit, or the company for whom the US citizen worked was well-known. Coming for visits of up to two months and working “informally” could also be arranged.

PG: Language is obviously an issue; can it be dealt with effectively?

JS: Language would not be a problem. More and more young people speak English, and arranging for full-time translators is easy. However, not every person who claims to speak English really can, so there are lots of opportunities for misunderstanding. For example, an American consultant I know sent an email to his Chinese client saying “I can’t wait to see you,” and that was interpreted as “I am not coming.”

PG: Do you notice any other “frontier” areas where a teaching pro with wanderlust might think about planting his or her flag?

JS: Russia has huge upside for golf, for many of the same reasons the game is popular in China. It’s a part of the package of a modern society’s amenities, and a symbol of success. That’s both good and bad.

It helps the game grow, though it reinforces the idea that the game is only for the wealthy, rather than being a popular sport, as it is in the USA and much of Europe. Swedes can join very good courses for the equivalent of \$1,500. But Russia is building some resort courses, and there is a lot of interest among young professionals in learning the game. Morocco, Turkey and Egypt have all built golf tourism facilities, too, although they tend to take their cues from Europe rather than the US.

PG: The Americans you know who have done well in Asia – do they share certain traits?

JS: Most of the expatriate Americans I know in Asia love the excitement and energy of its cities, which is the part of the culture most of them experience directly.

Dana Fry, for example, is an American golf course architect now living in Hong Kong, and he’s become what the British used to call “an Asian hand.” He told me he can’t imagine living anywhere else now. It takes a real commitment to making the adjustment—it’s not the pace, nor the rhythm, nor the space that we’re accustomed to. But people are people wherever you go, even if they do act funny at times.

The Troon View on Teaching in Asia: Ten Fundamentals

We also had a chance to connect with David Townend, an Australian PGA member who has been on the ground in Asia for 10-plus years and serves as Troon Golf’s director of operations for the Asian region. Here are excerpts from our conversation:



David Townend

- 1) The number of instructors migrating to Asia from the U.S., Europe and Australia is pretty staggering. In China you can find a Western professional teaching at a range in what would be considered a fourth-tier city. These are places that still don’t have McDonalds or Starbucks or even KFC.
- 2) Over the past decade big-name academies like David Leadbetter, Butch Harmon and Hank Haney came into China. Most are gone now. They’ve been replaced by local academies operated by Chinese instructors who learned under the marquee foreign professionals. Troon Golf has had some success with its academy brand in Korea and China.
- 3) Teaching professionals trained in the PGA programs of the Western world will remain in demand in Asia for a long time, due to the lack of any such programs or courses in Asia.
- 4) Whether or not a skilled instructor will make his or her fortune in Asia is entirely up to them. There are barriers to success, such as language and culture.
- 5) Americans who succeed in Asia are the open-minded ones who leave personal baggage behind. They show that they care about the locals and they seldom comment about how things are done in America. Work ethic is very important. The foreigner who comes to China expecting a 9-to-5 workday quickly becomes the target of criticism.
- 6) Most golf instructors have an assistant who translates for them. You have to choose this person well and let them help you develop your language skills. There are Westerners who come to China to teach golf who have done well learning Chinese—usually people in their 20s.
- 7) Staying in one place geographically is important. It lets you establish a core clientele. Most instructors I’ve watched over the past decade move around too frequently to achieve this.
- 8) The newer and more developing areas for golf include Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and India. Golf will continue to grow in nearly all Southeast Asian countries. Qualifications as a PGA of America member are sufficient for a U.S. citizen to gain the proper working visas to operate in China and most other Asian countries.
- 9) Opportunities will be relationship-driven. Better jobs in big cities like Hong Kong, Singapore and Seoul depend on that factor. Anyone who is looking to take on a new life adventure has to realize that their life may be a lot harder for a number of years before it becomes better.
- 10) If you aren’t adventurous when it comes to trying new foods you should probably stay home. Asia is an exotic place with a unique culinary culture. As guests in these countries we need to impress our hosts that we’re open to giving everything a try.