

Going ga-ga over golf

No sacrifice is too great for Japan's golfaholics

By BRAD EWART
Special to The Japan Times

The old saying goes "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." So in Japan, do as the Japanese and that means, "Let's go golfing."

Golf has swept Japan almost like a disease inflicting 20 million golfaholics along its way. Japanese people are golf "kichigai" and the disease continues to spread. The land of the rising sun takes on a whole new meaning. It's bright enough to golf so who tees off first and what's the bet today?

To be fair to the Japanese, the golf disease is spreading rapidly all over the world. The world is becoming golf "kichigai" and there seems no end in sight to the growth of the game of golf.

Historians still aren't sure if "golf" or "gawlf" actually started on the frozen ponds of Holland or along the seashore in Scotland. Of course the Scottish lay claim to discovering golf but historical evidence seems to show that maybe the Dutch invented the game.

It really doesn't matter who played golf first. Millions of people all over the world enjoy the inexorable pursuit of a tiny white ball. Everyone, no matter what their level of expertise, enjoys the same kind of excitement, frustration and reward from golf.

Here in Japan the game has been taken to an entirely different level.

Golf has become more than a sport in Japan. It is a social phenomenon. The demand is so great that some avid golfers may only get an opportunity to play golf two or three times a year.

If you are not a member of

a golf course it's almost impossible to get a tee time.

Often you can see people swinging golf clubs on the roof of their apartment or swinging their umbrellas in the subway station. Japan Railway should consider building chipping greens at every railway station and special putting greens in the green car of the shinkansen.

Great expense

Some people never get past the driving range and could never afford to play golf if they did. A day's golfing that includes green fee, local tax, caddie fee, the mandatory lunch break and a snack after golf will cost a minimum of ¥30,000. In North America the same day of golf will cost less than ¥10,000.

If you live in Tokyo it's easily a two-hour drive to the nearest golf course where you book a tee time a month in advance. Not many people in this country, unless they're wealthy, play more than 10 games of golf in a year. In many countries some people play every day of the week and twice on Sunday.

In Japan there are 14,500 driving ranges and every month another new range opens. People line up sometimes for two hours just to hit balls. They construct golf cages on the roof of buildings and by the light of the moon hit golf balls for hours.

Golfers ride the subway to work in the morning with their briefcase in one hand and a golf bag in the other. After work they race to their favorite driving range to practice.

There is certainly no shortage of golf magazines, instruction videos and television shows to help improve your game.

English golf teacher David Leadbetter has almost reached demigod status here in Japan. His face and lessons appear in almost every golf publication and golfers want to do it "the Leadbetter Way."

Leadbetter is probably one of the best instructors in the game so keep doing what he says. After all, his best students are Nick Faldo and Severiano Ballesteros and they aren't doing too bad.

Shiba Golf, one of the finest driving ranges in the world, is a three-tiered facility in the heart of Tokyo. The land where the driving range is built is so expensive that the owners could easily sell the land and build six golf courses in Canada.

Real estate in that part of Tokyo sells for more than ¥60,000 a square foot.

Land squeeze

Golf courses are built at the rate of 12 per year, but with the land squeeze in Japan, developers are now buying courses in the U.S., Australia, Southeast Asia and England. At last count there were more than 1,680 golf courses in Japan.

Soon, there will be no more land to build golf courses.

It's cheaper to take a golf holiday in Southeast Asia or North America than it is to play golf for five days here in Japan. Countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and South Korea are trying to cash in on the traveling Japanese tourist and a golf construction boom has hit all of these places.

On the plus side, the quality of golf courses in Japan is far superior to many other countries. Man-made lakes, streams, mountains, waterfalls and lifts that take you



DRIVING RANGES in Japan have become so crowded that many golfers face a two-hour wait before getting a chance to stand up to the tee and practice.

from one green to the next tee are unique. In Japan, more money is spent to build the clubhouse than it costs to build a golf course in other countries.

As a golf professional and journalist I have had the opportunity to play golf all over the world. Some of the finest golf courses I have ever played are right here in Japan. Kawaguchiko G.C., Ibaraki G.C., King Field G.C. and Totsuka G.C. are as good as any country club in the U.S. And these aren't even considered to be Japan's finest.

If I were to make one change in Japan, that would be to eliminate the break after the first nine holes for lunch. It's not good for your

golf game to play on a full stomach and during the back nine your body wastes more energy trying to burn off the excess calories. The lunch break also adds another hour to your day of golf.

Sport as fashion

Japanese golfers are trendy. They must have the best golf clubs, the best bag designer clothing and they use only brand-name golf balls.

The Japanese society is geared to a high level of productivity and success. After hectic day's work, golf has become the chosen escape from the stress and tension of the business world.

Now, where's the first tee and what's the course record