

Fuji Tee's Out of Driving Range

Five-hundred-yard flights the reward for a five-hour climb

BY BRAD EWART

When you stand on the world's highest golf tee and prepare to hit your drive, the overwhelming feeling is that you could hit the ball for miles.

And it's almost within reason, because the conditions are perfect for achieving maximum distance from almost every shot. Here at 3,776 metres above sea level, the air is extremely thin, meaning there's little drag on the ball. And when the ball does come down, the landing area is rock-hard and the extra bounce-and-roll factor is wonderful.

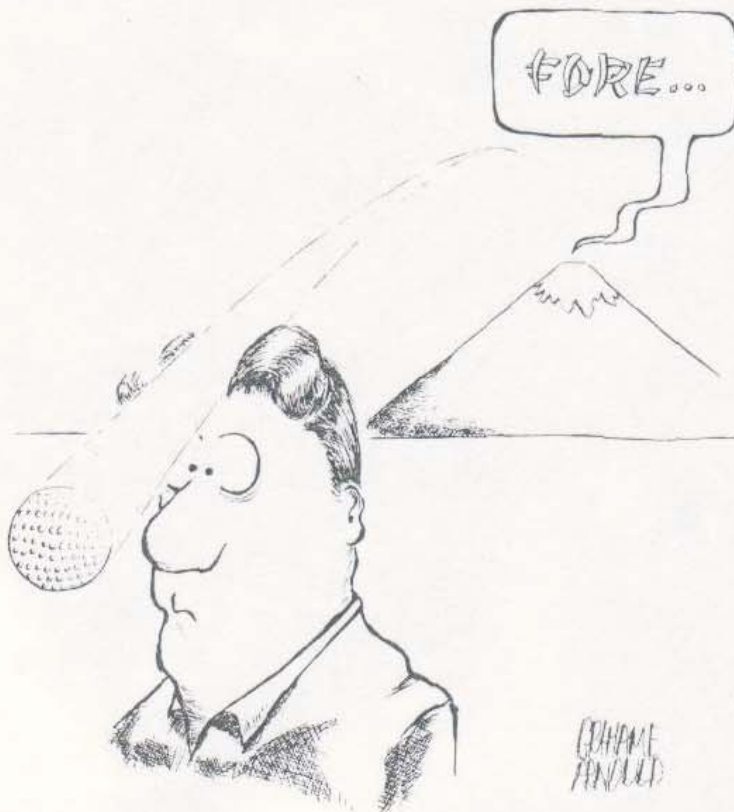
Three-hundred-yard drives are commonplace, and, with a tailwind, 500 yards is a reasonable target. Move over, John Daly, and make room for the new long-ball champion of the world. The only problem is that it takes about five hours of strenuous climbing to get from the parking lot to the first tee. Sorry, there are no golf carts. Walking is the only way up.

If you live in Tokyo, on a clear day you can see the golf course. I call it the Mount Fuji Golf & Country Club, and I'm the founding member—and probably the only member.

"Mt. Fuji? You've got to be kidding me," I hear you say. "That's a volcano, the most famous mountain in all of Japan." Okay, you're right. There is no golf course on top of the mountain, only a makeshift tee ground with the *Pacific Ocean on one side, the Kanto Plains on the other, and, to the north, the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama.*

If you've read this far, you probably think I either suffer from altitude sickness or got hit on the head by someone's tee shot. Fact is, I'm reasonably sane—but I may be the only golfer to have driven a ball from the top of Mt. Fuji.

The first time I travelled to Japan was in 1977. During the train ride to the Izu Peninsula, I went past the majestic, snowcapped mountain and made it my personal goal to one day climb to the top. More recently, when I was living in Tokyo, I played many of the courses at Mt. Fuji's foot. In total, more than 50 courses have been built around the mountain. (The volcano last erupted in 1707, so local golfers don't worry about Mt. Fuji spewing hot ash and lava over their fairways.)



Each weekend during the climbing season, which extends from July 1 to August 26, between 10,000 and 20,000 people make the arduous hike to the top. On the occasion of my ascent, my three climbing companions were Yaesu, Urubo, and Kasai. Our journey began at Shinjuku Station, and from there we travelled more than two hours by car to the Kawaguchiko Gate, one of the most popular starting points of the five paths to the top.

As we began our climb, it was raining hard and visibility was limited. Most people who climb Mt. Fuji carry a walking stick—I was carrying my driver. The first hour of climbing is fairly simple, but after that it gets tough.

Only one week before my journey began, a 103-year-old man had reached the summit. That was incentive enough for me. Every time I got tired, I thought about the old man, and that was enough to keep my body's engine burning and my tired legs moving.

After three hours of climbing, we stopped for dinner and rested for a few hours in a lodge built on the side of the mountain. At 1:30 a.m., we set off to climb the few hundred metres to the top. This was the toughest part, as you climb up an almost 65-degree pitch.

At exactly 3:17 a.m., we reached the top of Mt. Fuji. I felt exhausted yet

jubilant. The air was crisp and clean, and the view was spectacular. I'll never forget the beautiful colours of orange, yellow, and red as the morning sun began its daily climb into the sky.

Once the sun had risen, it was time to play golf. As I mentioned, there are five paths to the top of Mt. Fuji, and I had to find an area to drive the ball where nobody would be in danger of being hit. After scouting out a safe landing area and a flat tee ground, I prepared to drive the first of five balls from the summit.

We will never know how far any of my tee shots really travelled. Where they landed, hundreds of yards below in the fields of hardened lava, it's almost impossible to walk. Yaesu said the drives went at least 500 yards before the ball stopped bouncing. That could easily beat John Daly, and that's good enough for me.

There is a saying in Japanese folklore that goes like this: "You should climb to the top of Mt. Fuji once in your lifetime. If you climb twice, you must be stupid." There is no saying regarding people who drive golf balls from its summit. But for just one day, I was on top of the world. And until someone else climbs to the top of Mt. Fuji and hits the ball farther, I will regard myself as the world's longest-drive champion. ■