



How many of us really remember the dark days of golf at the start of the first decade of the New Millennium? Tough economic times and a general mood of depression had many a pundit of doom beating drums and feigning trances advocating the “death of golf”. Even books were written about the demise of the ancient game, but it proved difficult to bring it down. Golf dug deep and showed its resilience by keeping the dark angel of death at bay and finding a new pathway to recover and subsequently grow. During that period of depression, many golf courses shut down, rounds played saw a decline and the entire golf industry took a beating. This general state of malaise lasted through part of the second decade although there were pockets of growth in some parts of the world with Vietnam being one of the countries that recorded hyper growth especially around new golf course development. Then, towards the end of the second decade the scourge of the global pandemic hit and its impact and effect varied from region to region. While golf took a hiding in some parts of the world, North America and other regions of the Western Hemisphere reported through-the-roof sales for golf equipment and record rounds of golf played. Confusing as it may be, the golf industry has reported positive activity consistently for close on two years and this upward trend is expected to keep going. Against this positive backdrop, the American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) went ahead and elected a new president. The man at ASGCA’s helm is a young professional who has been touted as one of the best brains amongst the new genre of golf architects. Besides playing a key role in designing world class golf courses, he has also been recognised for his devotion to environmental golf course design and his philanthropic commitment to educating others within the golf community.

GOLF

IS IN A

GOOD PLACE!



JASON STRAKA

F/S FRY STRAKA
GLOBAL GOLF COURSE DESIGN

The new man who will set the course for the ASGCA is Jason Straka, a principal with Fry/Straka Global Golf Course Design. This is an important leadership assignment for a relatively young man who is now charged to spur the profession to new heights as golf shows continued signs of growth almost on a global scale.

Shortly after he took over the reigns of the ASGCA, ASIAN GOLF had a sit-down session with Straka which covered a wide range of topics on the future pathway for golf.

As expected, given the fact that he is the top dog amongst golf course architects in the world right now, it was only natural to get his thoughts on the global pandemic and its impact and effect on golf. It was refreshing to hear Straka's perspective on this catastrophe: "It's pretty clear the Covid-19 pandemic is the catalyst for the surge in golf. Golf was, and is, one of the few activities that can be enjoyed safely but provide social intercourse, and physical and mental exercise," Straka opined.

"It is a safe haven for people to laugh, interact with one another and, frankly, forget about their worries for a few hours. Additionally, Covid sparked lifestyle changes whereas people could work from home, sometimes with more flexible hours, which then allowed them to get out to

the course a lot easier. There has now been a reawakening of existing golfers and an avenue to encourage new ones," he explained.

This is not a spin, but a statement of fact and it is good to see how the profession views the global pandemic which has crippled and destroyed so many businesses in the world.

While Straka has taken a positive outlook, he was quick to caution: "For the near-term, the struggling global supply chain, ensuing inflation and a lack of labour in many markets is a direct threat. First, the golf market shouldn't get too far over its heels, meaning that just because funds and golfers are currently plentiful doesn't mean courses should be spending wildly. Secondly, those who can do more with less, both in terms of supply chain products and labour, will succeed the most."

This is wisdom – rather than curling up and covering oneself with a cloak of doom, act prudently and wisely to stay ahead of the challenges! Again, this is youngblood thinking and this is what we need more of in golf. The industry needs to be proactive and break away from the old ethos of doing the same old thing repeatedly! Remember the wise saying of Albert Einstein: Insanity Is Doing the Same Thing Over and Over Again and Expecting Different Results!

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PHOTO CREDIT : EVAN SCHILLER



ASGCA

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PHOTO CREDIT : SCOTT BORDNER

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JASON STRAKA (CENTRE) POSES WITH DANA FRY (LEFT) AND MICHAEL HURDZAN (RIGHT)

If there is one thing that excites ASIAN GOLF is the ability to change and keep on changing to stay ahead of the curve because therein lies the future and success. Being the so-called “new kid on the block”, ASIAN GOLF wanted Straka to look into the crystal ball and asked him:

ASIAN GOLF:

Your members make up the men and women who dream up plans to create the venues where the game of golf is enjoyed all over the world. Share with us your vision for the industry responsible for golf to be played?

STRAKA:

My vision is a direct reflection on my personal golf experiences gained over my lifetime. Golf was and is central to family time for me, not just with parents but with siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, and now with my children, wife and in-laws. Golf was very accessible to me as a junior too. At the time, it was US\$150 for a junior pass to play all year at our local course. Public golf was plentiful and inexpensive. My upbringing is very reminiscent as to how golf is front and centre to the lifestyle of so many people in Great Britain and Ireland.



PHOTO CREDIT : EVAN SCHILLER

JASON STRAKA AND DANA FRY



“ I am very active on the environmental side of our industry. My time away from golf is mostly spent fishing, camping and being in the outdoors. The natural environment is extremely important to me, and I want our children to have the same opportunities to live a healthy life and enjoy the recreational activities we do. Society owes that to the next generations, and I try and lead our industry to do its part. Both visions are complimentary and mean creating and retrofitting golf courses that are truly sustainable in terms of environmental and socio-economic ideals. ”

I wish that opportunity for all people. Secondly, as many know I am very active on the environmental side of our industry. My time away from golf is mostly spent fishing, camping and being in the outdoors. The natural environment is extremely important to me, and I want our children to have the same opportunities to live a healthy life and enjoy the recreational activities we do. Society owes that to the next generations, and I try and lead our industry to do its part. Both visions are complimentary and mean creating and retrofitting golf courses that are truly sustainable in terms of environmental and socio-economic ideals.”

It's a great vision – sort of taking golf back to its roots and making it accessible, affordable and enjoyable for everyone. Given the numerous social and health attributes of golf, national golf associations the world over should work to embrace this vision which will not only help to grow the game of golf but to help keep communities bonded, active and healthy. A wonderful elixir for a world that is becoming more distant and detached!

In support of his vision for golf and its evolution into becoming a global game, Straka gave this analogy: “The success of football is because so many people can play.

They play in urban plazas in Europe, home yards in the U.S. and just about every conceivable open space in the world. In developing markets golf doesn't always need championship courses immediately. It needs putting greens, short game areas, ranges and par 3 courses. Eventually those needs will change, and more sophisticated courses will need to be built as the market matures. Markets all age differently, so needs are not a one-size fits all. We are seeing an urbanization of golf too. This is evident in the success of TopGolf, PopStroke and others. I truly believe there are few places that golf cannot flourish.”

There is really no need to do a deep-dive analysis on what Straka has said. Like football, don't place constraints on golf's development. May the powers that be who have anointed themselves as the custodians of golf come down from their air-conditioned ivory towers and work towards making golf totally accessible especially to the vast developing parts of the world. That's where the future of golf is. Also, “entertainment” golf like Topgolf and its numerous wannabe competitors is great to grow the game of golf!

If there is one takeaway from Straka's statements, it is

all about making golf accessible and affordable. For those who have been strong proponents of accessible and affordable golf, this mission seems fraught with challenges. In this context, ASIAN GOLF posed the following question to Straka:

ASIAN GOLF:

While there has been talk about the need to design and build golf courses that are more accessible, affordable and playable in the context of growing the game in Asia, we continue to see new courses opening that do not necessarily conform to this thinking. More and more, Asia continues to be the poster boy for costly and challenging designer courses. Realising that golf course architects are businessmen who need to operate successful businesses, is it asking too much of them to satisfy the preaching of pundits and go against the wishes and desires of owners who determine what they want and pay for it? It's a dilemma – a sort of Catch-22 situation where you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. Your thoughts?

PHOENIX INTERNATIONAL GOLF CLUB, ANJI, CHINA





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STRAKA:

I think some of the public believe golf architects control the market of what gets built and where, and that is obviously not the case. My vision is for all people to have access to the game, from labourers to blue-collar workers as well as the socially elite. It's not an easy task and it's going to take everyone in our industry to keep talking about it, encouraging owners and governments to provide these opportunities. There are a lot of barriers to break down, but I've learned over my career that the most successful examples of affordable and accessible golf usually come from grass-roots efforts at a local level.

ASIAN GOLF:

Is there a way to move away from courses that provide owners with bragging rights to a more level-headed approach to design and build courses that help promote the game and generate more bottom-line income for course operators?

STRAKA:

The best way to do this is to find a local businessperson, humanitarian or government official that prioritises golf. Typically, they'll have been exposed to golf elsewhere, but not in all cases. I'll give you another personal example of

ASIAN GOLF:

Given Asia's large and relatively young population, what should the golf course industry be looking at to tap this huge potential and at the same time to help grow the game of golf exponentially on the Continent?

STRAKA:

I'd tell the success stories of any young golfers that do already exist and tell them well. I'd also find owners and governments willing to champion building affordable and accessible golf. Again, they don't have to be full-length golf courses to make golfers. Once you have a place to play, make programmes that are fun, and the crowds should follow. The young women of Korea are one of those success stories!

There is no denying that Straka is a very focused and clear-thinking man. He seems to know what he wants, and he knows how to get it! This laser-focus mindset is so vital in an industry where there is a tendency to speak from both sides of the mouth and one ridden with agendas and

gossip. Against this backdrop, Straka was asked a series of questions on the topic of the environment, a subject that has always been dear and close to his heart. With the growing concern of environmental issues affecting the Planet, and the role that golf courses can play in minimising the impact of damage to the environment, Straka was asked for his opinions.

ASIAN GOLF:

You have always been regarded as an architect who has been very conscious of the environment. Given the heightened level of concern on the Planet's environmental well-being, will this growing awareness place some challenges for the golf course industry which does collectively occupy quite a bit of space. Share with us your thoughts on this matter.

STRAKA:

The challenges you speak of are part and parcel to the work I do every single day. It's a complex issue. On one hand, coastal courses are under threat from rising sea level and ground-water, and many other courses are facing major drainage



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what I mean. Back in my younger days the state in which I grew up, Ohio, had a governor that decided to prioritise golf. He championed the building of 5 state-owned and operated courses in each region of the state. They are affordable, accessible, blend seamlessly into the state park environments they are part of, add to the local economy and are financially sustainable.

ASIAN GOLF:

Do you see this as the trend moving forward, especially in Asia?

STRAKA:

Yes, but it will not happen overnight. One of the best ways we as architects and media can help is to find those local success stories and help tell them. We can spread the good news which will hopefully encourage others to champion their own projects. Remember too, not all accessible and affordable facilities need to be full golf courses. They can start as relatively inexpensive places to build and maintain. Simple putting courses in an urban setting where there is no golf is a fine way to start.

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Photography

“ Like football, don’t place constraints on golf’s development. May the powers that be who have anointed themselves as the custodians of golf come down from their air-conditioned ivory towers and work towards making golf totally accessible especially to the vast developing parts of the world. That’s where the future of golf is. Also, “entertainment” golf like Topgolf and its numerous wannabe competitors is great to grow the game of golf! ”

issues due to more frequent, prolonged and intensive storms. On the other hand, many courses are in drought-stricken areas where access to quality water is difficult even for personal consumption and key life-sustaining industries. So, we as designers are charged with protecting existing assets, mitigating climate factors in new designs, all the while ensuring that our golf courses can do the most good as part of the environment they are part of. I will say on the latter issue that many owners are prioritizing environmentally positive values. In some cases, it’s market driven and in others they truly do want to make a difference. Regardless of the reason, it is at the forefront of most projects.

ASIAN GOLF:

While those opposed to golf courses continue their attacks, don’t you think that the time has come for the industry to embark on a campaign directed at all quarters, to educate and build a positive mindset towards how golf courses are playing

their part, and more importantly contributing to nations’ economies the world over?

STRAKA:

This has been accomplished in a number of places. I helped lead a campaign on a state level in Ohio a number of years ago. More recently the economic and environmental impact of golf was studied and published for the United States. In the United States there is a coalition of golf organizations, to include the ASGCA, USGA, GCSAA, GCBAA and many others called, ‘We are Golf’. It coincides with National Golf Day and leaders in golf descend upon Washington DC to meet with our congressional constituents to promote the economic, environmental and social benefits of golf. The bigger issue is to get our messages out to the non-golfing public. While it’s extremely important to educate government leaders who make daily decisions that affect golf in some capacity, it is quite another to educate the public at-large. That is where a lot of progress still needs to be made.

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PHOTO CREDIT : SCOTT BORDNER

ASIAN GOLF:

Continuing the topic of the environment as it relates to golf courses, would it be correct to say that the industry has worked hard to evolve and produce new hybrid grasses that complement good sustainable practices – hybrids that don't require a lot of water, low usage of pesticides etc. This is a godsend would you not say, and would it make sense for older courses to consider these plus points when reviewing plans for renovations?

STRAKA:

Yes, but it goes way beyond just grasses. Just like in the medical and tech industries, golf technology is rapidly evolving, and research continually provides insight into the best construction and management practices. Advancements in irrigation delivery, fertilizers, plant medicine, soil management, plant health monitoring, drainage and more, are light years ahead of where we were even just a decade ago. But our challenges are also mounting and evolving so we must continue our research to meet those challenges. Even the oldest courses in the world are utilizing new technology so, yes, for those courses that aren't, they need to be.

ASIAN GOLF:

Along with new species of grass, technology seems to have come to the fore in terms of golf course maintenance. More electric-powered equipment is being made available and put to use; more autonomous equipment is coming etc. Against this fast-changing operational landscape, would it be fair to say that maintenance costs of golf courses are set to come down and that advanced technology will go a long way towards helping golf courses become more environmentally friendly and sustainable and cost effective?

STRAKA:

There's a lot to unpack in this question. First, the maintenance technology that you speak of has been in existence for quite a long time. I recall seeing my first hydrogen-powered triplex mower about 15 years ago. I doubt anyone has seen one in actual use on a course yet. The reason is that technology needs to be cost effective to produce and utilize on a mass scale, and that takes time unless there are government subsidies or an owner with deep pockets. But it will come. Unfortunately, I don't know too many golf courses that are utilizing new technology to lower maintenance costs, yet.

Thus far new technology is being used to redirect costs to other budget categories. I will say that in the long term where new tech can hopefully help is to replace some labour where it is a majority of a maintenance budget. Please understand that I am not suggesting to replace workers. In many areas of the world, labour is relatively inexpensive and the biggest parts of maintenance budgets are not in labour costs. But elsewhere like the United States, labour is indeed a major part of the overall maintenance budget and most facilities cannot find qualified labour to work. In several surveys the lack of qualified labour is the most important issue

facing golf courses in the U.S. My hope is that new tech can be utilized to replace non-existent labour.

The final issue that Straka was drawn into during this session was the highly controversial matter of distances that golf balls are driven to these days. To this raging controversy which has drawn the ire of big driving professional golfers and club equipment manufacturers, Straka said, "I think most realize that we cannot continue down the same path we are on. Practice ranges are actually one of our biggest challenges right now. Ranges built even just 15 or 20 years ago are now obsolete for longer hitters. The



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KENWOOD COUNTRY CLUB, CINCINNATI, OH
PHOTO CREDIT - DAVE SANSOM

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bigger question is what to do about it. Bifurcation? That might seem logical to some but how do ball and club manufacturing companies justify the cost to develop and produce such equipment for professional golfers when traditionally that equipment is handed out to them for free? My personal preference would be a reasonable roll-back of the ball and/or clubs and shafts for everyone. The average golfer like myself could simply move up one set of tees – if they even need to at all. At least longer players could be reigned in and brought back to playing courses around 7,000 yards with some challenge. Right now, that length is a driver wedge on every hole for them.”

It is always an interesting journey to get into a man’s mind and obtain an insight into what he is thinking. Straka is a young man who is helping to set a pathway for the golf design and construction



industry as it moves into a new era – an era which hopefully will be focused on growth, accessibility and affordability of the game of golf and not one dominated by more designer and boutique golf courses which is especially the case in Asia. To this, Straka concluded: “It takes time, but it’s getting there. There are a good amount of resort and private courses being built. While that is certainly welcome because they provide for jobs and an influx of money into the local and regional economy, in general not enough facilities are being built for the local populations.”

On that note, let us hope that governments become more appreciative of golf and that corporations and investors develop new facilities in Asia that will be directed at growing the game and making golf accessible and affordable!



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