



Teeing off

Golf is gaining a significant following in India, as stressed-out businessmen and executives take to the sport in growing numbers. Of course, many of them end up stitching business deals on the sprawling courses, writes **Anand Philar**.

THE first golf club constructed outside Great Britain was the Royal Golf Club, Kolkata, way back in 1829. But it has taken over 150 years for the sport to shed its elitist image and take strong roots in India. No doubt, golf is growing in popularity with an increasing number of youngsters taking to the sport.

The sport, by its very nature, symbolises class, elegance and an activity that is the exclusive preserve of the rich and famous. Even to this day, every golf club and course worth its name has its dress

code and time-honoured etiquette that reflect a level of sophistication not known to any other sport.

Golf has grown from being just a leisure sport to be considered a serious career option by many in India. When India won the gold medal at the 1982 Asian Games in New Delhi, golf took on a new avatar. But it was not until Ali Sher, son of a caddy at the Delhi Golf Club won the Indian Open in 1991 that golf underwent a dramatic transformation in the country.

“I think Ali Sher’s Open win was perhaps the most significant landmark

in Indian golf,” says Brandon de Souza, a former Indian player who later launched Tiger Sports Marketing that promoted and conducted the Indian golf tour. “His success in 1991 and again in 1996 at the same tournament virtually revolutionised golf in India. People began to believe that if Ali Sher could do it, then so could they and thus you had a new generation of people flocking to the greens.”

In fact, the Delhi Golf Club went on to offer membership to Ali Sher. Many golf clubs followed suit by opening their doors to new members, who wanted to



AN ELEGANT SPORT: Golf clubs have a time-honoured etiquette that reflect a level of sophistication not known to any other sport



INDIA'S CRÈME-DE-LA-CRÈME

play the sport and not so much utilise the premises for social purposes.

On the heels of Ali Sher came the exploits of a new generation of Indian golfers like Jeev Milkha Singh, Gaurav Ghei, Jyoti Randhawa, Arjun Atwal and more recently S.S.P. Chourasia. Their success on the Asian tour and in India catalysed the development of the sport and golf facilities continue to mushroom across India.

"There was an unbelievable demand for golf course designers," remarks de Souza. "In fact, a golf course was embedded in township plans. In the National Capital Region, for instance, Gurgaon boasted of a state-of-the-art golf course and soon, other establishments across the country followed suit."

In Bangalore, the Eagleton Resort was turned into a weekend getaway with facilities built around a sprawling golf course over 170 acres. It is considered among one of the top courses in the country.

An increasing number of builders these days include a nine-hole course in their package. "In fact, I would say that it is almost taken that the new townships

INDIA has over 140 golf courses spread across the country. We list some of the prominent ones.

Royal Springs, Srinagar: Among the most scenic in India, the course figures among the best in Asia. It boasts of a tricky 18-hole, par 72 course designed by Robert Trent Jones. Spread over 300 acres of undulating fairways and greens, the course uses the natural landscape to challenge the most discerning golfer. In a verdent setting, the magnificent ruins of the Pari Mahal provide it with a dramatic backdrop.

DLF Golf and Country Club, Gurgaon: The 7,176-yard course offers unique night golf under floodlights, and has been designed by Arnold Palmer. It will host the \$2.5 million 2008 Johnnie Walker Classic. The Aravali ranges provide it with a magnificent backdrop.

Classic Golf Resort, Gurgaon: The Jack Nicklaus-designed 7,114-yard, 18-hole course is one among the several to come up in recent times in the National Capital Region (NCR).

Jaypee Greens, Greater Noida: Operational since June 2000, Jaypee Greens golf course is the only Greg Norman-designed golf course in India with the country's longest championship course at 7,347 yards. With 14 lakes and water bodies and 88 snow-white bunkers, the playing surfaces have been carpeted with Bermuda Evergreen

on the fairways and Tifdwarf on the greens.

Eagleton Golf Resort, Bidadi (near Bangalore): A par-72, 6,632-yard course set on 170 acres and designed by Pacific Coast Designs Ltd., Australia, the tropical setting and course design match contemporary game play.

Delhi Golf Club: Built in 1931, par-72, with curving fairways and deep bunkers, the course attracts 300 species of migratory birds annually. It is built around medieval tombs and monuments dating back to the 14th century.

Karnataka Golf Association: A Peter Thompson-designed 18-hole, par-72 Championship course with a 30,000 sq ft clubhouse. Venue for Wills Southern Open, KGA Open Amateur Golf Championships and All India Ladies Amateur Golf Championship.

Bombay Presidency Golf Club: Built in 1826 and redesigned by Peter Thompson, the 6,223-yard, par-72 course is notorious for the narrow and tight fairways, and of course the sea breeze. The course has an unusual hazard at the 16th, called the elephant pit!

Royal Calcutta Golf Club: The oldest golf club in India and outside Great Britain, it was founded in 1829 and then moved to its present location in Tollygunge in 1910. It now boasts of a Peter Thompson-designed 7,100-yard 72-hole course.

Golf is good for your health and it is soothing to be out in the open among trees and greens. The intention to lay a mini-course was to encourage youngsters.

have a course attached to them," notes Rajan Syal, an avid golfer and a Chennai-based businessman.

"This has much to do with the influx of NRIs returning home. They bring golf culture with them because abroad, especially in the United States, a round of golf is built into your weekly routine."

The booming Indian economy has also facilitated development of golf into a thriving sport. The quantum leap in prize-money is a sure sign of development. The Indian Masters and Johnnie Walker Classic each offer \$2.5 million in prize-money while the Hero Honda Indian Open has upped it to \$500,000 and a relatively new entrant, the SAIL Open offers \$400,000.

Competitions are also held at the junior and even sub-junior levels, besides an exclusive professional tour for women. The actual growth index, however, lies in the number of youngsters taking to the sport and also membership lists across golf clubs in the country.

M P Ganesh, former India hockey captain and executive director of Sports Authority of India (SAI), was among the few, who foresaw golf becoming a popular sport in India. At the sprawling SAI campus in Bangalore, Ganesh squeezed in a nine-

TRENDY GEAR FOR GOLFERS

International merchandisers of golfing accessories and apparel are setting up shop in India, offering a trendy range of products for enthusiasts, says **Shraddha Sawhney**.



INTERNATIONAL companies, marketing golfing accessories are eyeing the burgeoning market in India. As a new breed of golfers – young, upwardly mobile executives – take to the sport, merchandisers are expecting a surge in demand for a range of accessories including golf bags, gloves, fashion-wear and other equipment.

"Golf has emerged as one of the trendiest games in India, especially for the young," remarks Ramneek Gujral, joint managing partner, i Golf Indoor Golfing Solutions, Gurgaon, a company that both imports and manufactures equipment.

Demand for golf simulators, swing analysers, practice nets, mats, clubs and other accessories are soaring. "With international firms setting up shop in India, the price for equipment and accessories is falling drastically," says Gujral.

According to Rahul Khanna, a dealer of international golf equipment (he is also the South Asia representative for Cleveland Golf, a leading US-based manufacturer of clubs, apparel and accessories), the price of golf clubs has fallen by nearly 20 per cent over the past five years. Khanna points out that demand for golfing equipment and accessories has grown tremendously in recent years.

He believes that the Indian Rupee becoming stronger, thereby making imports cheaper, is not the only reason for prices having dropped. Many golfers go to online sites and check the prices - American rates are the benchmark - and then confront dealers here with the rates; even with a 10 to 15 per cent premium, they are lower than the dealer rates.

International brands like TaylorMade, Callaway, Titleist and Etonic now have a presence in the major metros and cities through dealers and representatives.

Umesh Vasudeva, CEO, Leo Technova, which manufactures accessories, says beginners usually hire kits from clubs. But with prices falling sharply, many are going in for their own golf sets and accessories.

Hyderabad-based Anil Kumar, who represents Canadian artificial grass and sports flooring major FieldTurf Tarkett in India and South Asia, notes that the growing popularity of golf is reflected in the trend of consumers buying artificial grass for their lawns or rooftops, where they practice their shots.



STRIKING DEALS: Many golfers discuss business on the course, as there is privacy and a feeling of exclusivity

hole course that barely met the standards, but provided an opportunity to beginners.

“Golf is good for your health and it is soothing to be out in the open among trees and greens,” says Ganesh. “The intention to lay a mini-course was also to encourage youngsters to take to the game as we could offer basic facilities.”

Rahul Seth from Mumbai who is a regular golfer, took to the sport because of the business opportunities it offers. “I am a businessman and some of the better deals I struck were on golf courses. A golf course offers you privacy and since you cannot use cellphones, you have the undivided attention of your client. In many ways, golf also acts as an icebreaker. There is a feeling of exclusivity when you walk around the course and it is an environment you cannot get even in the best of hotels,” he adds.

Mahesh Ganapathy, a Chennai-based software techie, perhaps best exemplifies the trend among the upwardly mobile young. “I run my own backend BPO with clients in the US. Through the week, the stress levels are pretty high and you put in about 16 to 18 hours a day on an average.

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On the odd free weekend, golf is a great way to chill out. I prefer a round of golf to a long drive and beers. I enjoy those private moments on the course. For me, golf is the best stress-reliever as it takes your mind off work,” he asserts.

Indeed, like other Asian countries,

India is promoting itself as a premier golf destination. Although India has over 140 golf courses in the most picturesque locales imaginable, few meet international standards. Now the government is encouraging the creation of several state-of-the-art golf resorts in various parts of the country.

With the growth in golf, international equipment manufacturers have been targeting India, setting up outlets. “You get virtually any and every top brand equipment in India these days,” points out de Souza. “For about \$400, you can have a basic set. I think, accessibility and affordability have contributed to the growth of golf even in the middle-class strata of Indian society.”

India’s best known-golfer, Jeev Milkha Singh probably sums it up aptly: “It is the fastest growing sport in India. Golf has attracted a lot of interest among youngsters over the years. It is a matter of time when India can match the growth of the sport in China. With two of the first three events on the Asian Tour to be staged in India, it signals the growth of the sport here.”