

# TEEING AWAY TO GLORY

As an increasing number of business executives take to golf, over 50 new golf courses are coming up across the country. To cash in on the opportunity, international manufacturers of golf equipment are expanding their footprint in India. A report by **Anand Philar**.

**T**he importance and popularity that golf has acquired in the last decade is perhaps a good reflection of the growth in India's economy. Once seen as an elitist pastime, today golf is being played by an increasing number of people, especially youngsters.

While Jeev Milkha Singh, Gaganjeet Bhullar, Shiv Kapur and Jyoti Randhawa have put India on the world map, the popularity of the sport within the country is also soaring by the day. Not surprisingly then, that property developers, ever on the lookout for a viable commercial proposition, have jumped on the bandwagon leading to a profusion of golf courses and resorts and townships built around designer golf courses.

# 'GOLF IS THE FASTEST-GROWING SPORT IN INDIA TODAY'

An interview with **Padamjit Singh Sandhu**, director, Professional GolfTour of India (PGTI)

**The number of competitive golfers in India is on the increase, as also people taking to the sport. Is this a phenomenon or a natural progression of a sport that was once branded elitist?**

Golf is getting popular in India and is today the fastest-growing sport in the country. A key catalyst for this has been the robust growth and consolidation of the PGTI, which has happened over the last three years. A competitive platform has been created by PGTI for our players at the domestic level and that has helped them to be in contention and win at the international stage. Earnings at the domestic and international levels have reaffirmed faith in golf as a career, thereby attracting fresh talent. In the last three years (2006 -2009) prize money went up by over 250 per cent compared to almost no growth in the 15-odd years before that.

There has been an increase in the number of professional tournaments. More Asian Tours and joint sanctioned events will be played in 2010, and the number could be four or five and up to six in 2011, with increasing prize money. The PGTI will start a B-tour from 2010 to create more playing opportunities for our second-rung professionals who otherwise do not get to play on the main tour.

**Do you attribute the growing popularity of the sport to Indian performances on the pro tour or because of the increasing involvement of corporate, hence sponsorship, and real estate developers, making golf a 'lifestyle' proposition?**

I would say both. And more importantly, the very supporting and important role the media has played in helping take the sport to the masses.

**Has the profusion of golf course-linked residential properties/townships in the past years directly contributed to the promotion of golf?**

It certainly has, but what is more important for the sport to really be able to achieve its true potential in India will be the support of the public sector and the governments both at the centre and at the state level in helping set up more public golf courses and driving ranges. We have seen a positive start in that direction in some states, and are hopeful the trend will spread across the country.

**What are PGTI's targets and programmes for the coming years?**

For 2010, the target will be 24 Order of Merit events, eight B-Tour events and three to four Asian Tours, plus European Tour events in India. Prize money for the Order of Merit events is expected to be over US\$ 2.15 million, which will be 30 per cent over the 2009 season.

**What are PGTI's initiatives to heighten the profile of golf and its promotion in India?**

The initiatives include: conscious efforts to take professional golf tournaments to all parts of the country; working towards setting up teaching and certification academies across India over the next few years; through our media partner Sport18 – highlighting player achievements, tournament coverage, teaching tips with our top players in the electronic media, golf magazine shows to highlight infrastructure development and tourism potential of places with golf courses; golf clinics by our top professionals with high net worth individuals and corporate houses who we feel will over time partner with PGTI and invest in bigger and better opportunities for our players and the tour.

We will stay focussed on creating more competitive playing opportunities for our players on the main tour and develop and create career options for our professional players beyond their competitive playing years. PGTI is in the business of golf and is committed to producing quality players in increasing numbers, who go on to become global brand ambassadors for India and Indian golf.





One of the first privately-owned golf courses to be launched in the country was the Eagleton Golf Resort on the outskirts of Bengaluru in 1996. Ashok Kumar Meda, chairman, Eagleton Golf Resort, thought of a championship golf course with a star hotel and resort with a residential enclave, when the sport was just beginning to gain popularity.

The resort has since evolved into one of the finest in the country, boasting of an 18-hole, 7,100-yard championship course with on-site residential facilities like expansive villas, recreational facilities and corporate conveniences.

Chetan Meda, director, Eagleton Golf Resort, says: "Over the years we have added facilities to Eagleton, offering services such as corporate conferencing, besides conducting major tournaments, including the European women's tour event in 2007. We are now hoping to start a sister facility in Mysore called Eagleberg, which will have the country's longest course spread over nearly 200

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director, Kensville Golf & Country Club

acres."

Meda believes that the attraction of green housing and lower noise and pollution levels at such complexes should

encourage consumers to look at golf homes. In the past decade several real estate developers decided to ride the wave, offering a lifestyle option complete with a golf course, be it 18- or nine-hole, as an 'incentive' to affluent Indians. Many of the courses were developed by internationally-renowned course designers. But the major hitch is acquiring large tracts of land for golf courses in cities.

Golf is one of the fastest-growing sports in the country and a growing number of young people are taking to the sport. Eagleton has produced the likes of Anirban Lahiri (No1 professional in India), Chikka Rangappa (No1 junior) and Abhishek Jha (No.1 amateur).

Another venture, Kensville Golf and Country Club, was established at Dev Dholera, about 40 km from Ahmedabad. The resort, besides an 18-hole championship golf course, has a swimming pool, library, fitness centre, guest rooms, spa and other recreational facilities.

"A golf course adds value to the

## TEEING OFF ON A NEW COURSE

WAY back in 1829, the first golf course outside Britain was built in Calcutta (now Kolkata). The Royal Calcutta Golf Club was followed by similar clubs, set up over the following 60 years, in places such as Bombay (now Mumbai), Bangalore (now Bengaluru) and Shillong.

Today, there are about 250 golf courses across the country and another 50 are being developed. At least half a million people have basic golf skills in the country and a growing number of professionals are making their mark internationally.

According to the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI), the official body of professional golf in the country, Indian golfers have achieved a string of successes in the last 15 years, having won more than 40 international titles on Asian, European and Japanese tours. Jeev Milkha Singh, Jyoti Randhawa and Arjun Atwal have more than 25 titles between them; other Indian winners in the international circuit include Gaurav Ghei, Gaganjeet Bhullar, S S P Chowrasia, Shiv Kapur, Chinnaswamy Muniyappa, Rahil Gangjee, Harmeet Kahlon and Vijay Kumar.

In February, the inaugural Avantha Masters was held at the DLF Golf and Country Club, Gurgaon, an event sanctioned by the Asian Tour, the

European Tour and the PGTI.

"Indian golf has been on the upswing for some time now," remarks Keith Waters, director, international policy, European Tour. "India already has multiple winners on European Tour with Jeev Milkha Singh and Arjun Atwal. The addition of Avantha Masters to the European and Asian Tours is further proof of that."

Luxury car-maker Mercedes-Benz has also been sponsoring golf events in the country. The 10th edition of the Mercedes Golf Trophy in India kicked off recently at the Eagleton Golf Club, Bengaluru, with a tee-off by Dr. Wilfried Aulbur, ceo and managing director, Mercedes-Benz India.

"The Mercedes Trophy has emerged as the largest golf extravaganza in India," points out Aulbur. "With 14 cities, 2000-plus golfers and very attractive awards, the Mercedes Trophy is the most premier and eagerly awaited event in the Indian golf calendar."

The Mercedes Trophy 2010 is a 10-leg club qualifier organised across 10 cities – Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Delhi, Chennai, Bengaluru, Pune, Mumbai and Kochi. The three top winners will participate in the Mercedes Trophy world finals to be held later in the year at Stuttgart in Germany.

property," explains Munish Patel, director of the 300-acre project. "We have an 18-hole championship course and I feel that such a project is the only way for golf to develop. The maintenance cost of a golf course is very high and the revenues are generated through other facilities, besides corporate events. Also, the value of the real estate is bound to appreciate over a period of time and so it is a win-win situation."

Other projects are on the anvil, including golf academies. Says Patel: "These are long-term options. There are many courses in India, but most have an entry-barrier and perhaps resorts such as ours offer opportunities for people to take to golf."

India's leading developer, DLF Ltd, is one of the prominent players in this industry; it developed the 18-hole, fully-floodlit, DLF Golf and Country Club in Gurgaon, on the outskirts of Delhi.

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The championship course at Amby Valley, promoted by the Sahara Group near Lonavala, about 100 km from Mumbai, was the second golf course to be fully flood-lit. The course is located within a 3,200-acre property. Sahara went the distance to promote its property by offering plush and well-appointed villas to sports celebrities, both Indian and international.





In nearby Pune, the Oxford Golf Country Club, located in the scenic Lavale valley on the outskirts of the city, is rated among the best in India. It too offers an 18-hole championship course apart from an array of facilities such as swimming pool, health club, badminton and tennis courts for other leisure activities. In the pipeline are a floodlit driving range and academy.

Similar ventures are being launched in Bengaluru (by the Prestige Group, with a Jack Nicklaus-designed course linked to a resort), Coimbatore and elsewhere in the country.

The trend has not missed the eagle

eye of the global golf equipment industry. Top of the line manufacturers including Callaway, Adams, TaylorMade and Ping already have a presence in India, either directly or through distributors. Some of them are in tie-ups with property developers for golf academies in an obvious bid to gain more visibility, besides making a significant contribution to the sport itself.

Sandeep Syal, one of India's better-known professional golfers, notes that world-class equipment is available in India, but at premium rates. "At the moment, you can get virtually any brand in India, although it is quite expensive. But I am pretty sure that it will get easier



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The 27-year old Syal says even custom-fitting is available in India. “Many of the top Indian pros go to Sandeep Verma in Delhi who runs Chimmy’s Golf store that offers custom-fitting,” says Syal. “When I began playing, I had to ask people returning from abroad to get me equipment, but it has changed a lot in the last few years. You even get launch monitors that provide telemetry on shots, like ball spin, angle of descent, the club speed, etc.”

Syal notes that many of the courses in India are of international standard, designed by professionals such as Arnold Palmer, Greg Norman and Jack Nicklaus. “Besides, there are companies who specialise in golf course designs that conform to international specifications,” he adds.

But is the boom in the business – reflected in the new courses that are being laid out near several cities – seeing an increase in the number of players on

the competition circuit?

“If you look at the increase in prize-money in the past few years, I would say that golf does offer a career and there is a lot of potential for it to grow further,” remarks Syal. “When I turned pro in 2002, the total prize-money was in the region of US\$ 430,000; but now it is considerably more.”

The recent Avanta Masters in Delhi offered prize-money of more than US\$ 2 million, and those in the know expect annual hikes with more corporates getting on the golf bandwagon for visibility and branding purposes.

Brandon de Souza, managing director, Tiger Sports Marketing (TSM), and the man who took golf in India to a different level by professionally managing and promoting the sport, feels that the mushrooming of resorts and golf-related real estate ventures may not necessarily contribute to the development of the sport, though it contributes enormously to its profiling.

“The Oxford Club in Pune perhaps best showcases this aspect of the sport’s development,” he points out. “This club is among the best facilities of its kind in India.”

The former golfer who played for India notes that when Ali Sher won the Indian Open in 1991, golf in India was ready to take a big step forward. “We worked with ITC initially and thereafter Hero Honda,” he says. “We also got major publishing houses like *The Hindu*, *Hindustan Times* and *The Telegraph* to support and sponsor golf tournaments. In a way, TSM started the process. The bottom-line in today’s scenario is the numbers. When we get 1,000 amateurs, I would say that golf has taken off in India in a big way as a sport.”

According to Sayeed Sanadi, director, TSM, there is need for public facilities for golf as well. “We could make a start by introducing driving ranges with an affordable pricing policy,” he says. “Only then can golf emerge as a mass sport like cricket.” 🌿