



Field Trip

By Annika Welander

A visit to Asia by a group of American collegians includes a local player.

Editor's Note: Each summer for the last 25 years, a team of collegiate women golfers representing the United States has toured parts of Asia. In 2006, Annika Welander, a resident of Winnetka and a junior at Princeton University, was selected as part of the team that visited South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and mainland China.

The only reservation in going was that I wouldn't be able to compete in the big national tournaments because the trip fell smack in the middle of summer.

I ended up missing out on the Women's Western Amateur and the U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links, but it was completely worth it. I have always had a great interest in Southeast Asia, and the experience has whetted my appetite for the culture, especially Japanese film.

The trip was completely funded by various corporate sponsors in each country (Lehman Brothers-Tokyo and Deutsche Bank-Hong Kong, for example) and we lived as a uniformed golf sorority, clad in matching polos and shorts when we played and T-shirts emblazoned with a giant American flag when we traveled.

The courses are similar to what you might encounter in Hawaii—we played in Hawaii over break last spring, so I know—lots of lush, green foliage, often set into the sides of mountains and some pretty significant elevation changes. We definitely encountered flatter, more typical courses in Hong Kong and Japan. On

a whole, the courses were as highly manicured as your exclusive club and resort courses in the United States. They are much less crowded and some of the Korean courses were lined with lights so you could play at night—kind of like a ski run.

Looking back on the trip now, it's obvious to me that our uniforms were not simply indicative of our common origin; they were symbolic of a shared American philosophy of golf.

I vividly remember my round at the majestic Grand Fields Golf Club in the Mt. Fuji region, with me posing for a picture on the first tee with three Japanese businessmen. My garish Pepto-Bismol pink uniform clashed as hard with the lush green foliage and smoky-blue background of Mt. Fuji as did my Western liberalities with the businessmen's highly structured Eastern formalities.

Grand Fields comes to mind because it is the most extreme case of the overwhelming grandeur and ceremony typical of every one of the courses we played in



The author (front row, second from left) and nine fellow collegians spent some of the summer far from home.

Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and China. It is simply the most striking example of the other.

We arrived at Grand Fields early enough that a thick layer of fog still clung to the stand of Japanese Pines discreetly guarding the clubhouse. The building itself was a marble behemoth, falling in style somewhere between the luxury of an 18th century estate and the austere lines of a governmental building. The stillness of the morning was broken as a half dozen uniformed footmen scurried out of the underbelly of the structure to grab our clubs and help us off the bus. This overabundance of help is not a strange phenomenon at Japanese courses. During a typical round a player will be waited on by perhaps 10 to 15 different people, in the form of “bag handlers,” locker room supervisors, front desk clerks, various managers of the course, waiters, rest house workers and the most attentive caddies in the golfing community.

Japanese caddies are typically middle-aged women capable of extreme multi-tasking. Although golf bags are stored on the back of a four-person cart and players ride the entire round, a single caddie will handle the

selection and cleaning of four sets of clubs, fix divots and ballmarks, clean, mark, and line up balls on the green, call off yardages, find lost balls, stock refreshments and keep score. She must also jog the entire round next to the cart she drives with a remote control.

Frankly, I was surprised to be allowed to swing a club by myself, but my partners were used to it. There is a definite separation between those serving and those being served, and no witty banter or storytelling is employed to break down this barrier. This is not to say that the women are treated poorly; they are not. Covering every inch of their skin with Burberry-patterned clothing, huge hats and little white gloves, their uniforms serve as an armor against the sun and a future at the local factory.

The class distinction that is so obvious in the caddie-player relationship also exists as a hierarchy among players. Because there is no tradition of inexpensive public courses in Japan, and membership fees to private clubs vary between \$8,000 and \$500,000, there is a definite ruling elite. Needless to say, it was a special occasion when most of the men I encountered were

able to express their love of golf somewhere other than on the countless ranges that scar the sky with towering black nets.

The length and ceremony involved in a round of golf is indicative of its rarity.

At Grand Fields we began the day with a traditional Japanese breakfast of rice, miso soup and fermented soybeans, followed by a six-hour round punctuated by an hourlong lunch (and a new back nine starting time) and stops at two different on-course tea-houses. The required trip to the bath house and a five-course meal brings a close to a typical 12-hour day.

Utmost respect for the game is the only way this day manages to stretch as long as it does. Every shot on every hole is played out, regardless of whether a player is making a birdie or double digits. I remember that one of the players in our group climbed a rocky 30-foot slope and gashed his wedge to make his eighth shot on a par 3. No one told him not to.

Tradition always manages to find its way onto the course, whether through the strict adherence to honors on the tee box, or the specific way you accept your drink in the teahouse. This attachment to cultural rules is what I came to most admire about golf in Japan, but it is by contrasting my golf experiences against this other-worldly social structure that I realize why I am a golfer. 🏌️‍♀️

Annika Welander, an English and Visual Arts major at Princeton, was the 2006 CDGA Women’s Amateur champion.



The scenery on a Japanese golf course was as different as the culture.