

Crossing bridges

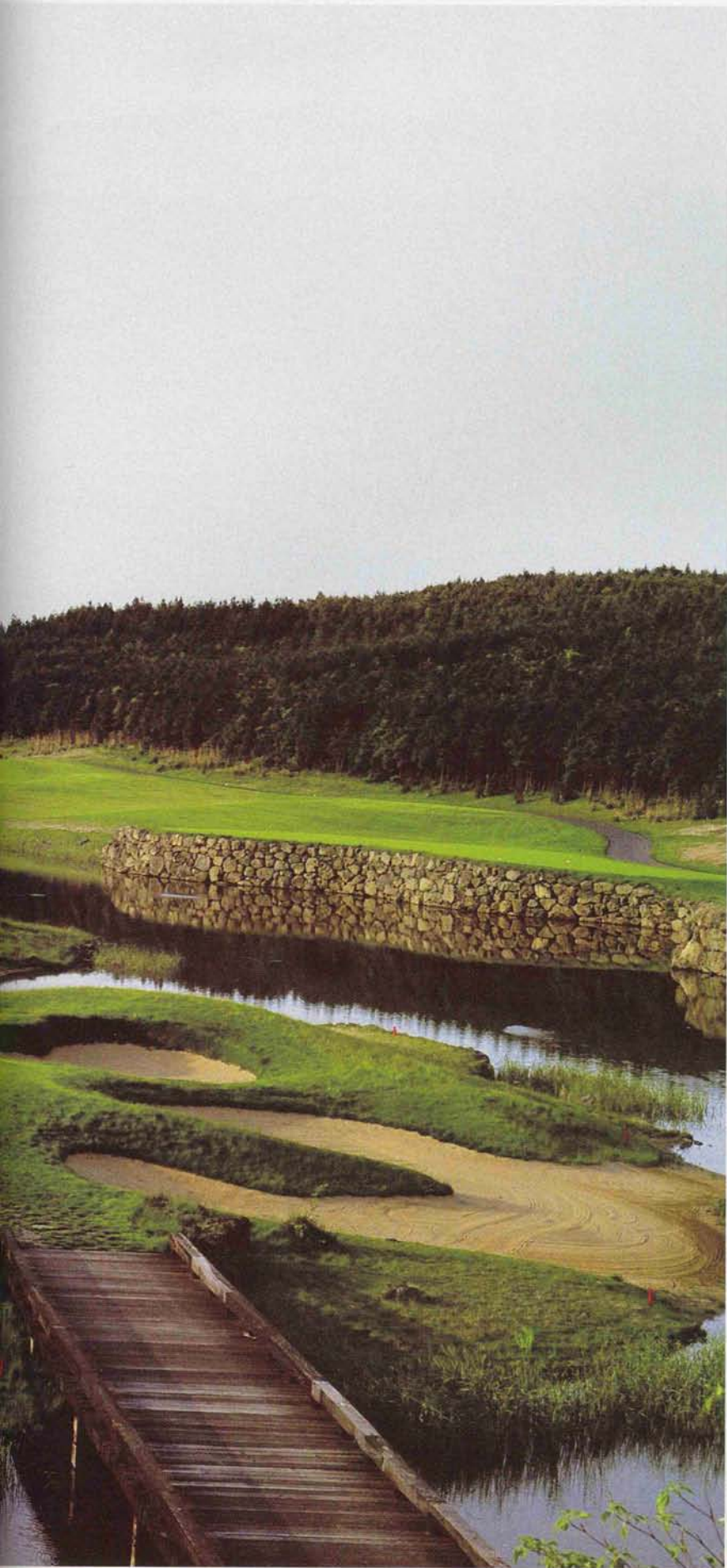
South Korean golf resort offers
unique maintenance experience.

Art Stricklin



The 18th hole at Nine Bridges has plenty of trouble for errant shots, including water and several of the course's 110 bunkers.

Photos courtesy of The Club at Nine Bridges





The phone call was immediately intriguing, informative and interesting.

“Be there just before 8 a.m. Friday, and you can be part of the crew. Just show up around the 18th green in work clothes, and you’ll be ready to go.”

I was staying at the new Nine Bridges Golf Resort on the small South Korean island of Jeju, a one-hour plane ride south of the capital city of Seoul. I had already witnessed a resort course unrivaled anywhere on the tiny Korean peninsula, if not in all of Asia, when it comes to money, luxury and uniqueness. Now, I was being asked to join the grounds crew — if only for a morning.

The course opened in late 2001 and through a sheer force of will and determination, not to mention tens of millions of dollars spent freely with no restrictions on quality, it is already well on its way to its single overriding goal — top 100 sta-

tus among golf layouts worldwide.

One man’s dream

Nine Bridges Resort was the dream of one man and the execution of another.

Korean-born developer Jay Lee, the grandson of the Samsung Electronics founder and the chairman of the huge, multi-national Cheil Jedang Corp., had the initial idea for the entire complex.

Along with the lush, par-72 golf course — with another currently on the drawing boards — is a huge multi-building clubhouse, an expansive spa and many large guesthouses, all made of Asian teak wood.

So far, Lee has pumped \$100 million into his project and turned it over to Southern California developer David V. Smith, a former European Tour player, to market and develop.

“Jay takes great pleasure in bringing to his homeland of Korea what they’ve never enjoyed before,” Smith says. “Nine

Bridges certainly fits that bill along with the new multiplex theaters he recently introduced to the country.”

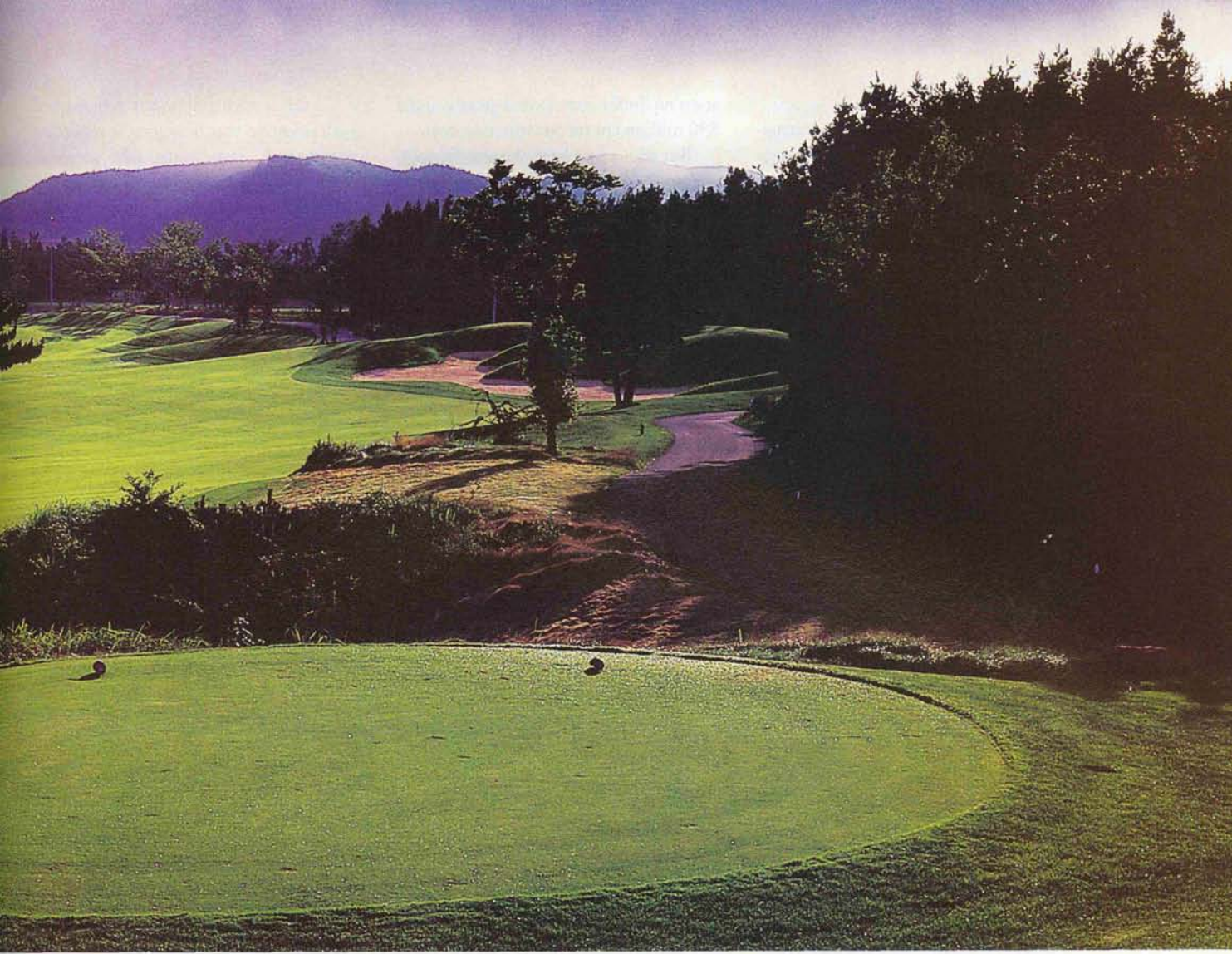
What may have become commonplace among the big money capitals of the United States or Europe is anything but on this small honeymooners’ island of South Korea.

“You wouldn’t believe how many times we were told this couldn’t be done, just because they had never done anything like this here,” Smith says.

Car paths only

With their pitched thatch hats, a daily morning group cheer and hand-done groundskeeping work, the maintenance crew at Nine Bridges is anything but typical by U.S. standards, but it was an experience I was eager to have.

The first lesson I learned working on the crew in South Korea is that many things we often take for granted in America normally don’t exist in this rel-



The Club at Nine Bridges on the small South Korean island of Jeju offers dramatic golf holes and stunning vistas.

atively golf-poor country. Take bentgrass for example. Due to the variety of growing conditions in South Korea, bentgrass simply has not been used in abundance on golf courses.

There is moderate to heavy snow here in the winter, 120 inches of rain during the year, primarily in the summer, with persistent high humidity giving it a similar climate to St. Louis'.

Until Nine Bridges opened, it would be uncommon in Korea to see a golf car on a fairway at any time. Caddies, mostly young women between the ages of 18-30, are still a strong part of the golf experience and are expected to carry the clubs from the car on the car path to the golfers in the fairways on every shot.

The idea that the golf car could carry the golfer right to his ball with his club close at hand was simply foreign to local golfers.

"They were simply not used to as high of a level of service and course con-

ditioning as we introduced at Nine Bridges. It was a real educational process for everyone," Smith says.

Working women

One of the biggest aids in the translation process was the hire of Jim Connolly as staff consultant for the entire course preparation and ongoing maintenance of Nine Bridges. Connolly, who was my host for my brief Korean groundskeeping stint, is a longtime grounds superintendent and president of JCC Consulting in Spokane, Wash. He spends about 150 days a year at Nine Bridges overseeing the complex project.

"The people in Korea are very hard workers by nature and the entire work ethic is quite strong," Connolly says. "The biggest hurdle was language and then trying new methods they haven't used before.

"The main thing was learning each group of people and knowing it's a very male-dominated society."

At Nine Bridges, as at most courses in Korea, the women, whose average age is 50, do all the manual work on the course, which includes replacing the divots by hand each day and tending to the vast amounts of shrubbery.

The average pay for the women for an eight- to 10-hour day is \$25. Of course, they must be allowed to leave by 3-4 p.m. so they can ride the bus home and have dinner ready for their husbands.

"In a lot of ways, it's a great place to be a man," Connolly says.

The men, whose average age is 28, operate the machines on the course and make \$15,000 a year — a good sum in an economy where a recent college graduate will make \$18,000 in a lower management position.

Give three cheers

Connolly passes along any instructions he has to Korean superintendent Kyoung Hyun Kim, a one-year member of GCSAA. Kim has only a limited knowledge of English, so Connolly tries to use what Korean he has picked up during his extended visits.

Each morning before the 40-person grounds crew goes out on the job, including the morning I arrived, Kim passes along any special instructions for the day. He gives the team a quick pep talk, and then leads them in three quick cheers, each ending with fists thrust in the air.

Thus fortified, the team, many wearing their pointed wooden hats to block out the sun and blowing debris, heads out on the rambling course, which is actually two nine-hole layouts with four lakes and four ravine crossings.

The grounds crew is usually 12-15 men and 25 women. The average experience on the crew is two years with the most by any single member at six, meaning there is often plenty of on-the-job instruction.

"A lot of times, I will tell Mr. Kim what needs to be done and the word does not get passed down totally or is not entirely correct, so we have to start all over two weeks later. It is not from a lack of effort, just a different experience from what they're used to," says Connolly, who lives in a small apartment in a nearby town during his visits.

A quick tour of the maintenance facility reveals a few more differences from what most top American courses provide.

While Lee had a turf nursery built on property — the first in Korea — and a large storage facility, they are not usually well lit or well insulated against the sudden changes of Korean weather.

The turf machines can also be affected by the blowing dust, which can come over from as far away as the Gobi Desert in Western China.

The entire course, which was designed by California architect Ron Fream, was routed on such rocky soil that 10 inches of sand eventually had to be laid over the entire property as a sand cap.

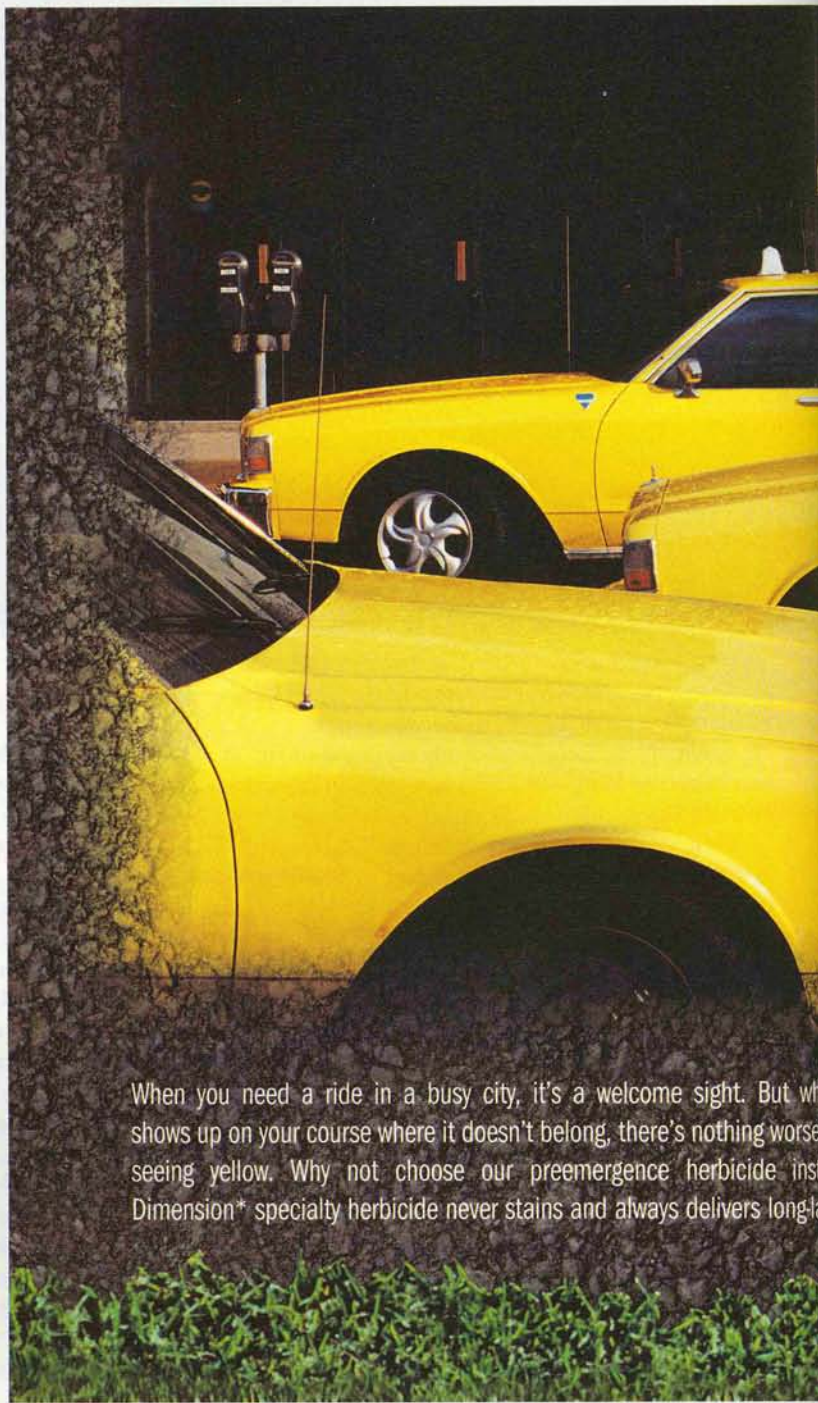
Lee had 190,000 metric tons of sand imported from China. It was delivered by huge barges, then trucked 30 miles to the site in one of the largest operations ever for a golf course in Asia. The oper-

ation no doubt contributed greatly to the \$30 million course construction cost.

But with a firm base, the tees, fairways and greens were planted with 58 acres of Pennlinks bentgrass, a first for an Asian course, giving Nine Bridges a lush, green look at almost any time of the year and giving Connolly and his team constant headaches and activity. The greens themselves were built on a foundation of sand and peatmoss to allow the bentgrass to provide a faster, purer putting surface.

"I think anyone who has ever worked with it knows that bentgrass is very temperamental," says Smith, who serves as president of Nine Bridges, operating out of his Southern California headquarters, not far from where Lee has also settled.

"We brought in a turfgrass expert in Jim Connolly, did extensive testing before we started with grassing and built a turf nursery to monitor the project, but it's still something we're constantly fighting," Smith adds. "We still have to work with



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the thatch buildup and compaction. We try to aerate the greens four times a year, but last year we could only do it three times because of the weather.

"When you play the great golf courses of the world, you always have a certain image in your mind and you might think courses in Korea are just not attractive," he continues. "When you get to Nine Bridges and see the lush surroundings, trees and mountains in the background, you could almost think you're in

Colorado."

Overcoming obstacles

Smith recently took an extensive tour of courses in Asia, including some world-ranked layouts in Japan, and came away more impressed with the uniqueness of his prized layout.

"I just think to have big, brown patches of dormant grass from November to April doesn't excite me," he says.

Another challenge for Connolly and

his team is the limited availability of pesticide use. The golf course is limited to about 60 percent of what would be normally required because of strict local and national environmental regulations.

The government mandates monthly government ground and lake water sampling for the four course lakes and soil sampling for pesticide detection.

Disease pressure comes in the form of dollar spot, brown patch, gray leaf spot and Pythium. Pressure is especially high during the summer or in times of high humidity and rainfall, which can cover most of the high heat months.

Irrigation comes from 1,500 Toro sprinklers, which are computerized with a Toro Site Pro weather station. The water quality is fair, according to Connolly, with some contamination of silt and clay from the lake bottoms and blowing dust.

Another source of dust and constant care are the 110 bunkers on the course; 45 are sod wall bunkers. The highest revetment on the course is 15 feet, but it is a never-ending challenge to keep the bunkers full and consistent with the Chinese sand.

While the majority of the playing surfaces are covered in the Pennlinks bentgrass, 30 acres of rough are maintained in Kentucky bluegrass and ryegrass, offering a nice contrast to the eye. An additional 25 acres are non-maintained fescue.

No matter how many modern grasses or how much equipment you may possess on the golf course, there is little substitute for on-your-knees, manual labor, endlessly replacing divots or sculpting landscaping around trees, grasses or shrubs.

A few minutes of this labor, much less several hours under a blazing sun or blowing dust, would make me glad I only write about golf course maintenance, not perform it on a daily basis.

"Jay Lee has only one principle: Strive for perfection in everything we do," Smith says.

Slowing the clock

Another factor that has helped Nine Bridges mature so gracefully is the protracted construction time.

Construction of the course, in the shadow of famed Mount Halla, began in 1996, but stopped later that year because of the International Monetary Fund economic crisis, which crippled the economies of Korea and much of Asia.



**Some things
are supposed
to be yellow.**

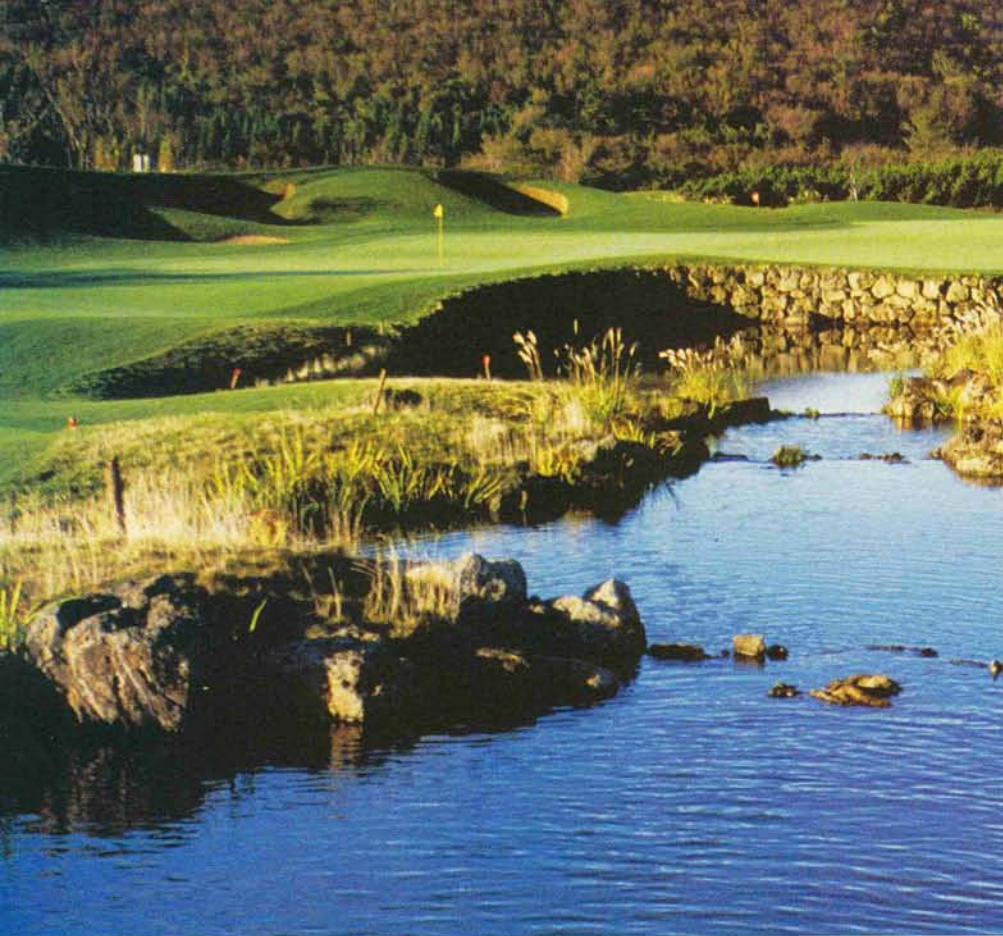
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of them.**

vention of crabgrass, *Poa annua* and several broadleaf weeds, including
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gether — turf maintenance suppliers historically don't keep a large number of excess supplies like they do in America. That means if a part wears out or breaks on a greensmower or other large piece of equipment, which is imported from dealers like Toro, Shibaura, Tsushiya or Cushman, it takes much longer to replace and will cost two to three times more than in the United States.

But all these obstacles haven't deterred Lee, Smith and Connolly from making Nine Bridges one of the best courses in Asia or the world.

"I think Jay Lee has shown he is committed in difficult and challenging circumstances to spending whatever it takes to build and maintain the best," Smith says. "It shows in bringing Connolly over here for 150 days a year, from importing a chef to teach the local cooks how to make fajitas, in giving English lessons to the caddies and grounds crew and spending whatever it take to get everything just right."

I don't know how giving an eager golf writer a one-morning trial on the grounds crew fits into that philosophy, but everything else about Nine Bridges is unique, so maybe this is as well.

On every scorecard the young, female caddie draws a smiley face for good luck and each card is labeled with the slogan, "The Dream JeJu Experience Begins." No exact translation is provided, but there is little doubt the building, care and continual upkeep of Nine Bridges is as unique a project as anyone in the golf maintenance industry can experience.



Art Stricklin is a Plano, Texas, golf writer and a regular contributor to *GCM*.



Top: With its lush surroundings, trees and mountains, the terrain at Nine Bridges reminds visitors of Colorado. The 11th hole is seen here.

Bottom: Construction of the course began in 1996 but was delayed until 1998 due to economic trouble in Asia. The course opened in late 2001.

Construction at Nine Bridges was not re-started until 1998 and not totally completed until 2001. The expanded interval allowed the course's root structure and sand cap to take hold, for the grassing to proceed smoothly and at a slow pace, and for the course to mature into its current state.

"As it turns out, the 18-month delay actually helped us a great deal and it's something we never planned or foresaw," Smith says.

Because of the small number of courses in Korea — fewer than 50 alto-