



TAIHEIYO CLUB, GOTEMBA COURSE, JAPAN

Gotemba renewed

Rees Jones describes his work on Taiheiyo Club's Gotemba course, which lies beside Mount Fuji in central Japan

Working in Japan over the years has been a very rewarding experience for Bryce Swanson [a senior designer at Rees Jones, Inc.] and myself. The Japanese are very golf savvy and extremely enthusiastic about the game.

Several years ago, we completely redesigned the West course at Ibaraki Country Club, near Osaka. Greens were converted from two per hole to one, and fairway bunkers and tees were all rethought, changed and rebuilt. Since that time the club has flourished and hosted both the Diamond Cup Golf and Panasonic Open on the Japan Golf Tour – the winning score on both occasions was nine under par.

The success of that assignment led to our firm being hired by Shun Han, owner of the Taiheiyo Club, to redesign the Gotemba course, which annually hosts the Taiheiyo Masters. The work was done mainly to improve the member experience, but also to present a more formidable challenge for the top golfers on the Japan Golf Tour. As with Ibaraki, we teamed up with Inaji Landscape & Construction Co.

From planning to completion, the design work took two years. Bryce and I made a combined 24 trips to oversee the Gotemba course redesign. Construction was completed in mid-summer 2018 and the Taiheiyo Masters was held in early November.



The par-four tenth hole at Gotemba, following renovation work by Rees Jones and Bryce Swanson

Professional golfer Hideki Matsuyama [pictured on page 26, with Jones] consulted with us on the project. He has won the tournament twice: as an amateur in 2011, and with a record 72-hole score of 23 under par in 2016. His desire was for the course to play in tournaments like East Lake, Bethpage Black or Torrey Pines, all courses that we had redesigned. We both feel we achieved that result; the winning score at the 2018 Taiheiyo Masters was nine under par, the lowest number it has been for 30 years.

The Gotemba course is a beautiful, tree-lined, parkland golf course with many views of Mount Fuji. It was well laid out by Japanese architect

Shunsuke Kato in 1976. The course measures over 7,300 yards; it can challenge all players and doesn't favour the long hitters. Having redesigned seven US Open venues, nine PGA Championship venues and six Ryder Cup venues, we have the experience to evaluate what needed to be done and what needed to be left alone on such a highly-regarded layout.

We left the green surfaces mostly intact, except for the par-three seventh hole, where the green was rebuilt because the contours were too severe. Some sections of other surfaces were re-graded or extended to add important manageable hole locations. All the green surfaces are now suitably

challenging for fast speeds during tournament play.

All tees were rebuilt. Some were added in order to increase length, improve angles and provide more flexibility for all golfers.

All the bunkers were reconceived and rebuilt in light of the character and demands of the modern game. They were redesigned to be natural looking, properly positioned and sized, and to allow recovery rather than being overly penal. The bunker floors were angled properly and the cavity was built to be easily maintained. Fairway bunkers were often offset to provide different challenges from the tee for every calibre of golfer. Fairway lines were changed



Photo: Taku Miyamoto

Front row, from left: Taiheiyo Club owner Shun Han, Inaji's managing director Hiromi Yanagisawa, Bryce Swanson and Rees Jones, on an October 2017 site visit. Right: bunkers, as seen here on the sixteenth, have been designed to allow recovery, rather than being overly penal

to provide fairer targets and reward properly-executed shots. Many closely-mown areas around the greens were created to penalise errant approach shots in various ways. Most of the greenside ponds were reconfigured to allow for increased shot options and to create additional challenging hole locations adjacent to them.

Trees and gardens are revered in Japan, so we were very selective in our tree removal. It was only done in order to provide dramatic views of Mount Fuji and to allow for more sunlight to improve turf conditions on greens.

Now that the course has fully reopened, every available tee time for



Photo: Rees Jones, Inc.

members and their guests has been booked. What is it that golfers find so appealing? The bunkers are properly placed, playable and pleasing to the eye. Golfers of all standards can find an appropriate tee to play from. Greens hold a well-executed shot and the various challenges around the greens are intriguing. The tree-lined fairways at Gotemba give the holes definition, and each hole has its own unique challenge.

The real reward for a golf course architect after completion of a major remodelling project is universal acceptance of the work from once-sceptical members. That has occurred at Gotemba – I am now an honorary member of the Taiheiyo Club. For me that is quite a tribute. **GCA**

Rees Jones has designed or redesigned more than 225 courses in over 50 years as a golf course architect