



TAKING ON THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Just two years after hosting the FIFA World Cup, Brazil will welcome golf back into the Olympic fold after 112 long years. Luke Norman finds out just what we can expect to find...

Photography: Getty Images

It's bigger than the whole of Western Europe, but doesn't have a single public golf course. Just 10,000 of its 200 million population have an official handicap, an almost nonexistent 0.005 per cent. It's currently in the grip of its first publicly fuelled democratic protests in modern history with high-profile, seemingly superfluous sports programmes firmly in the firing line. And now there are mini crocodiles (Caimans if you want to get technical) mating wildly all over the Olympic course. Can you think of a more inappropriate country than Brazil to host golf's triumphant return to the Olympic roster after 112 long years?

And yet... the Marapendi golf course on the edge of Rio de Janeiro's Barra Olympic Park may just spark a golfing revolution to rival that of Asia in the 1990s.

The Olympic community has certainly embraced golf with the fervent passion of the converted. The plans for the Olympic course are wondrously ambitious. Not only will it be a centre for local school kids and disadvantaged communities, but it will also be home to elite golf in Brazil, attract tourists from all over the world and prime that nationwide explosion everyone is after. Easy things, these plans.

"In my opinion, golf is by far the most promising case for a successful long-term legacy," says Gustavo Nascimento, head of sport venues design at the Rio 2016 Organising Committee. "The financial stability our world-class course offers will give golf a phenomenal base from which to grow," he adds. His logic is clear, if endearingly ambitious. Use the Olympics to show investors the attractiveness of golf. Watch courses spring up all over the country. Encourage kids to take up the sport and boom. "Brazil will be the centre of golf," as the forever-grinning president of the Brazilian Golf Federation (CBG), Paulo Pacheco, explains, with his tongue only half lodged in his cheek.

Is this even vaguely plausible, or should we keep Brazil locked in the samba, soccer and sirens category? Well, like a child facing a fiendish physics exam, let's answer the banker question first. If you like holidays you're liable to be keen on Brazil. If you like playing golf on those holidays and there's a chance to play the Olympic course, while staying in one of the most vibrant and vivacious cities on Earth, which just happens to be on a beach, happy days. Golf tourism in Rio de Janeiro? Tick.

Amid the relatively complicated world of the Olympics - they can make the coalition government look like a rational, coherent



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bunch - Rio 2016's direct legacy responsibility is remarkably straightforward. Make sure the design of the course delivers three things: a suitable test for the world's best golfers, facilities to inspire and spread the game, and a layout that will compel golf nuts to fly in from all over the world for a swing and a divot. By general consensus, they are set to deliver on all three.

HUGE PROGRESS

Rio 2016 has done this principally by selecting Gil Hanse's innovative and progressive design. This wasn't as easy as it sounds. The likes of Greg Norman, Gary Player and Jack Nicklaus all submitted proposals. The temptation to go with star quality must have been considerable. However, the man behind Castle Stuart, the ongoing renovations at Dorset's Blue Monster and the next course at Bandon Dunes deservedly got the nod.

Given its status as the only publicly accessible 18 holes in Brazil (impossible but true) the example the Olympic course sets in how it engages with its local community is imperative. Hanse has designed an extended range, featuring a permanent clinic for schoolchildren. Nearby communities will be encouraged to use all the facilities, including the clubhouse. Green fees will match local incomes. Where possible, the course will employ residents.

That's all very well, but Marapendi's responsibility extends far beyond its immediate geography. The CBG has long found it difficult to attract commercial interest to the game. Corporations are fearful of investing in golf, citing a lack of interest as the insurmountable obstacle. Of course, it's the eternal and damned chicken and egg situation. "People might be interested, but

where do they play?" asks Alexandre Rocha, just the second Brazilian in history to earn his PGA Tour card. "We need public courses in this country and until we get them, there will be no such thing as development."

The CBG knows this. Up steps Marapendi. If the private market won't help, then there is just one answer. "We must use the Olympic course to show governors all over Brazil that courses can support themselves. They all have this idea that you have to put money in every month to maintain a course. It's not true," Pacheco explains with no little exasperation.

It would be useful if a minister or two got bitten by the great bug, but here Brazil faces one of golf's oldest enemies. "Very few people from Brasilia (think a larger, purpose-built Westminster) play, they think it is an elitist sport," Pacheco says. However, baby steps are taking place. "At the Brazil Open (October 2015) I made huge progress, three or four leaps in one go. A member of the Ministry of Sport used our clinic with his little boy and his wife!" Pacheco says with the wild enthusiasm of a diehard 12-handicapper. "They will go back to Brasilia and say, 'you can't imagine it, golf is fantastic, my son loved it.' This is what we need."

LACK OF OPPORTUNITY

There are some deeply inspiring stories out there. None more so than Japeri Golf Club. It sits in the poorest region of Rio de Janeiro state, which, sadly, is saying something. The story of its foundation is as unlikely as its location. At the end of the 1990s, a dozen caddies at the exclusive Gavoa Golf & Country Club, in the heart of the city, began to get frustrated at their lack of opportunities to practise the game they were tilling in love with. Carrying Tuesday through Sunday. ➔