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THE GOLF MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

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"My idea of a sports psychologist
was a friendly bartender." p.100



**Adios Fidel,
Hello Tiger**

Inside Cuba's Golf Boom

by Josh Sens



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Fifty years ago Fidel Castro took power in Cuba. Two years later, after losing a golf match to Che Guevara, the dictator bulldozed most of his country's courses. Today, the island's tiny, eternally optimistic golf community is hoping to be freed for its second act.

WRITTEN by JOSH SENS PHOTOGRAPHY by ANGUS MURRAY

Adios Fidel, Hello Tiger



At Havana Golf Club, flagsticks are made from bamboo with rags attached.

IN THE TINY, TATTERED PRO SHOP where he presides, Johan Vega hangs a black-and-white photo of a famous twosome. It shows the pair in action on a shaggy green. One man wields a putter, the other watches, a mundane golf scene marked by a dress-code violation. Instead of collared shirts and spikes, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara wear boots and drab fatigues. Both could also use a shave, but Vega has no interest in their fashion sense. He prefers to focus on Che's poor form.

"Look at his hands," he says, pointing to the image of the guerrilla icon. "He holds them too far forward. You can tell that he doesn't really know how to play."

Vega earns a living dispensing swing tips, but he has few outlets for his expertise. As the sole instructor at Havana Golf Club, a lonely nine-hole track in the Cuban capital, the 38-year-old watches over a course that averages no more than a dozen rounds a day. >



Che Guevara putts as Fidel Castro looks on in 1961.

REUTERS/PRENSA LATINA/LANDOV





Far left: Johan Vega, an 8 handicap, is the head pro at Havana Golf Club. The clubs on the wall of his shop have gone unsold for 20 years.



THAT THE club operates at all makes it an exception. Built in 1953, it is one of just two golf courses in Cuba, and the only one that predates the revolution that swept Castro to power 50 years ago and purged the island of its capitalist playthings. Casinos were closed, country clubs shuttered. The Havana Golf Club, formerly known as the Rovers Athletic Club, was permitted to stay open as a small concession to British diplomats, who cared for the greens and accounted for the bulk of play.

For more than a decade, foreign outfits have been cutting through red tape and courting government officials in a push to create courses along the island's largely untouched coast. Nearly a dozen projects are in the pipeline, and though they still face hurdles—not the least of which is Cuban law, which forbids land ownership and complicates plans for real estate leasing—their architects insist that the finish line is in sight. They point not only to symbolic gestures, like the headline-making visit of Fidel's brother and successor, Raul, to an Italian golf course in 2007, but also to Cuba's increased openness to outside investment and tourist infrastructure, prompted by its ever-growing need for funds.

Half a century later, the club is both a time capsule and a paradox—a scruffy, forlorn layout from another era that caters exclusively to elites. The odd expat or tourist who ambles to the first tee encounters a course that is only a course in the loosest sense. Flagsticks are fashioned from bamboo poles and red rags. Tee boxes are hardpan, and the greens are as rough as the fairways at most munis. There is no driving range. On the rare occasion that Vega gives a lesson, he drops some battered balls along the tree line of the first hole, and shags them himself after the session.

"Look at the Berlin Wall," says Wally Berukoff, CEO of Leisure Canada, a Vancouver-based development company with plans to build three courses an hour east of Havana. "It took a while, but it fell."

"It's a humble facility," Vega says. "But in Cuba, golf culture simply doesn't exist. If you talk to people here about birdies and bogeys, they have no idea what you mean."

Ask him for a timeline, and Berukoff predicts a golf course ribbon-cutting "within three to five years." But he is not the first to offer upbeat forecasts, and some observers refuse to hold their breath. Put the golf course question to Johan Vega, and he smiles wanly. "When the new ones open, show them to me," he says. "Then I'll know it's true."

Yet if golf is a game of infinite hope, Cuba is a country of perpetual promise. And the latest assurances from overseas are that golf's fortunes on the island are about to change.

ANY TALK of golf in Cuba's future invariably reverts to talk of golf in Cuba's past. In the 1950s, Havana alone had two quality courses in



Big brother: The face of Che Guevara is omnipresent in Cuba, including at this market bookstand (far left); Near left: a 1950s Buick on a hillside overlooking Old Havana.





Left: the author at Havana Golf Club. Below: a colorful character giving tourists a photo opportunity in Old Havana.



addition to the Havana Golf Club, and the city hosted a stop on the PGA Tour. The island's reputation as a hedonist's delight was reflected in the spirit of the Havana Invitational, which was held at the posh Havana Country Club and infused with a strong scent of rum.

"That's where we learned to drink them mojitos," says Bob Toski, the 82-year-old former Tour star who won the event in 1953. "Some of us found out that we played better drunk than sober."

The year he claimed the crown, Toski shaped a 4-iron to two feet on the closing hole to avoid a four-way playoff, a shot he

calls "the greatest of my career." He was swarmed on the fairway by a crowd of buoyant Cubans that included the club's head pro, Rufino Gonzalez, a scrappy, homemade player who later fled the island. "The Cubans were real down-to-earth people and they appreciated a guy like me who had come up from nothing," Toski says. "In all my years of playing, I don't think I had a reception quite like that."

Though the tournament attracted a host of marquee names, from Jimmy Demaret to Arnold Palmer, its days were numbered. By 1958, Castro's forces had descended from encampments in the mountains and

the island echoed with unrest. Billy Casper, who won the Havana Invitational that year, recalls that in the run-up to the event, fellow Tour standout Frank Stranahan was warned by playing partners to steer clear of Cuba; they worried that Stranahan, whose multimillionaire father founded Champion Spark Plug, ran the risk of being kidnapped and held for ransom.

"We all knew about Castro and what was going on," Casper says. "When you drove around the island, there was tight security and armed checkpoints. But you didn't sense it on the golf course. You got to the first tee and you just played."

Within a year of Casper's triumph, Castro assumed power. The Havana Country Club was bulldozed, replaced by an art school. Later, in an act of historical revisionism, the PGA Tour erased the Invitational from its records, along with recognition of Casper's win.

In the 50-plus years since Casper struck his final putt in Cuba, the most noteworthy match to unfold on the island featured two outsize figures who could barely play. The pairing of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara took place in the spring of 1961, at Colinas de Villareal golf club in Havana, a month before the failed American-sponsored ➤

The yardage markers at Havana Golf Club are painted on trees.

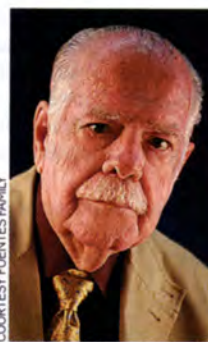


"That's where we learned to drink them mojitos. Some of us found out we played better drunk than sober."

Former Tour star Bob Toski



Above: The former du Pont mansion known as Xanadu now serves as the clubhouse at Varadero Golf Club, a newer addition in the popular tourist region east of the capital.



COURTESY FUENTES FAMILY

Left: Pedro Klein, Varadero's director of golf. Above: Jose Lorenzo Fuentes, who ran afoul of Castro after writing about his golf game.

invasion at the Bay of Pigs. Portrayed by the Cuban regime as a sporting event, the match was actually political theater, a thumb-nosing exercise intended as a mockery of the U.S.

Among the few spectators on that warm March day was Jose Lorenzo Fuentes, a prize-winning novelist and short-story writer who served as Castro's personal correspondent. Early that morning, Fuentes was ordered to a scenic promontory in the capital, where a black sedan awaited. In the back seat sat Castro and Guevara, dressed in military garb. "Fidel looked at me and said, 'Today we're playing golf, and I'm going to give you the headline for your story,'" says Fuentes, who is 81 years old and lives in Miami, having sought asylum there in 1992. "It will say, 'I could easily beat Kennedy at this game.'"

As it happened, Castro couldn't even beat his comrade. Guevara, who had caddied as a boy in his native Argentina, wasn't a threat to any course records but at least possessed the rudiments of a swing. According to Fuentes' written account, Castro scratched out a win on the first hole and was exultant. He repeated his boast about besting JFK as the pair moved to the second tee. But it wasn't long before the tables turned on Castro, and the match devolved into a lopsided hack-fest between two men who couldn't stand to lose.

"They both tried hard, but Che played with a great passion," Fuentes says. "In the end, it wasn't very close."

The results of the match had far worse repercussions for Fuentes. After the round, Castro asked the correspondent what he planned to write. "The truth," Fuentes said. Castro nodded and said nothing. But two days later, after his article had run in the

national paper, Fuentes was demoted to a lower government post. In 1969, on the outs with the regime, he was imprisoned and served a three-year sentence, falsely accused, he says, of working as a CIA liaison.

"The day I was sent to prison was the day I lost faith in the revolution," Fuentes says. "But looking back, the golf game was an early indication of the government's relationship to the truth."

PICTURES of the Castro-Guevara match are commonplace in Cuba, sold as postcards in souvenir shops and displayed in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional, Havana's most luxurious hotel. But other evidence of golf has been erased. The Villareal course long ago gave way to a military camp. And what was once a practice range on the west side of the city is now a beach club, enjoyed mostly by foreigners and government brass.

In Old Havana, the historic city center, where tail-fin sedans and worn colonial facades stand like stage props in a period piece, children play soccer in vacant lots and toss baseballs on cobblestone streets. They recognize names like A-Rod and Jeter but stare blankly at the mention of Woods and Mickelson. America's pastime is Cuba's national sport.

Golf's firmest foothold on the island, the Varadero Golf Club, is a two-hour drive from the capital, on a peninsula in a resort town of the same name. Designed by Les Furber, a Canadian architect and former protégé of Robert Trent Jones Sr., Varadero opened in 1998 and twice played host to final qualifying for the European Tour. But the site is perhaps best known as the one-time home of Irénée du Pont, the chemical company mogul, who, in 1927, built a mansion on the bluffs that he christened "Xanadu." The four-story, 11-bedroom former residence, adorned with precious hardwoods and laden with floors of Italian marble, is today the Varadero clubhouse, with a lavish top-floor bar overlooking the sea.

On a recent afternoon, with the wind whipping fiercely off the water, Pedro Klein breezed past the clubhouse on his way toward the first tee. A cheerful 50-year-old with close-cropped hair who looks like a burly version of Ben Kingsley, Klein came on board as Varadero's director of golf back when the Cuban government pumped \$27 million into building the course. His single-digit handicap makes him one of the country's most accomplished golfers, a qualified honor, given that of Cuba's 11 million citizens, only 120 or so play the game. Klein would like to boost that number.



Left: Scenes from the streets and marketplaces of Old Havana. **Below:** Architect Noel Fuentes on a bluff overlooking the site of what he hopes will be a new course, a spot once eyed by gangster Meyer Lansky for a casino.



“For anyone who has an interest in Cuba, the strategy is always about optimism, never about reality.”

A national golf association would be nice, he says. So would a junior golf program, and a year-round golf academy.

It's a wish list encumbered by catch-22's. As it stands, Varadero has a driving range and two Cuban instructors. They offer clinics but without the benefit of video equipment or enough local interest to occupy them full time. “It's challenging,” Klein said. “You want to develop the game by creating the infrastructure for it. But to create the infrastructure, you need to have the demand.”

He had reached the third hole, a long par-5, where the skeleton of an abandoned tee box stood to the right of the green. “See that?” Klein said. “That's a tee from the old course.”

In the 1930s, Irénée du Pont built a modest nine-hole track on his property and allowed

locals to play it on weekends for one peso. Its footprint is now covered by the Varadero club, which receives around 35,000 rounds a year, mostly from Canadian tourists. Greens fees in peak season are 70 pesos, or roughly \$75, nearly half of the average Cuban's monthly wage.

Just as simple economics keeps most Cubans from the golf course, politics restricts Klein's options at the club. Varadero's irrigation system could use an upgrade, but the California company that Klein says could do the best job at the best price is off-limits due to the U.S. embargo of Cuba. Almost any equipment Klein gets his hands on, from golf carts to pro shop merchandise, comes through a costly, circuitous route. Klein would like to sell Titleist golf balls with “Varadero Golf Club” imprinted on them, but under U.S. law, Cuban logos are forbidden to appear on American products.

“There are a number of things we wish were different,” Klein says. “But we have sit back and hope they change.”

“DOWN there is where the links course will begin.”

Noel Fuentes (no relation to Jose Lorenzo) was standing on a bluff, halfway between Havana and Varadero, overlooking a pristine stretch of shoreline, where the Jibacoa River spills

from the mountains of the Sierra Maestra into the turquoise sea. Before the revolution, the mobster Meyer Lansky dreamed of constructing casinos here. But foreign interests now envision different uses for the land. Under plans drawn up by Leisure Canada, which hired Fuentes as a design consultant, a golf resort is destined for Jibacoa, with three 18-hole courses, private villas and a hotel. The project is one of a number of golf ventures at various stages of development on the island. Another project, the Carbonera Club, driven by British-based Esencia Hotel & Resorts, calls for apartments, villas and a championship golf course just west of Varadero. Brochures for Carbonera announce the club's intentions to hold its first golf tournaments in 2012.

Such confident predictions have been made before in Cuba, only to bog down in bureaucracy or founder in the face of anti-free-market-think. As early as 1995, the Castro regime reviewed plans for a course in Jibacoa, but passed on the project. Leisure Canada's current proposal is farther along in a torturous approval process. But skeptics say that when it comes to golf, Cuba is the country of the future: always has been, always will be.

“For anyone who has an interest in the Cuban marketplace, the base strategy is all about optimism and never about reality,” says John Kavulich of the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, a nonprofit group that

analyzes economic and political relations between the two countries. "Over the years, there have been numerous occasions when Cuba's interest in golf has risen to a peak, then dropped suddenly into a valley."

Still, those bullish on the island insist that times have changed. Ideology, they say, has given way to pragmatism, as Cuba looks to stimulate a \$2 billion-a-year tourist industry that has shown signs of stagnation. Leisure Canada CEO Wally Berukoff says his company is all but ready to turn dirt in Jibacoa; it holds a 50-year lease on the property, with an option to renew, but it has petitioned the Cuban government to extend those terms to 75 years, the better to ensure a healthy return on investment. Berukoff says he has no doubt that this will happen.

Adding to his optimism is a trip he made to Cuba three years ago. Hearing that Berukoff was in Havana, Fidel Castro invited the developer to a private party that kicked off late at night and dragged on until dawn. In the midst of the festivities, Berukoff says, he and Castro had a three-hour conversation about golf. Gone, Berukoff says, was the Castro of 15 years ago, the hardliner who railed against the game as a capitalist pursuit. "His stance had mellowed," Berukoff says. "He was now justifying golf in terms of what it does to preserve green space and provide people with exercise."

As the sun rose on the capital, and Berukoff prepared to leave, Castro handed him a parting gift: an autographed poster of his golf match with Guevara.



The author surrounded by iconography.

EVEN AS Cuba's climate slowly shifts, Havana Golf Club remains largely unchanged, trapped in a state of suspended animation on the downtrodden outskirts of the capital. Once operated by the British embassy, the club was nationalized in 1980. It is kept afloat by the government, which also keeps it removed from the currents of contemporary sport. On one wall of the clubhouse hangs an ancient set of lefty Dunlop irons. Listed for \$166, they



The stunning coastal setting of Varadero illustrates why developers covet Cuba.

"He was now justifying golf in terms of what it does to preserve green space and provide people with exercise."

Developer Wally Berukoff, on Castro

have gone unsold for nearly 20 years.

On a recent late spring morning, a television in the corner was tuned to a government-sponsored newscast. Even in a golf shop, golf rarely airs in Cuba; Cubans are forbidden access to satellite TV. One of the club's three caddies, a silver-haired man named Leo, sat on a leather couch, half-watching the newscast but eager to talk shop. Though the Masters had ended nearly a month before, Leo hadn't heard who had won the year's first major.

"Cabrera?" he said, smiling at the news. "The Argentine, right?"

The clubhouse door swung open, and in stepped Johan Vega. Short and stocky, with a placid demeanor that suits his favorite sport, Vega enjoys a leisurely commute. He lives across the street and walks to the course from the pink stucco house where he was born. When Vega was a boy, his father worked as the club's greenskeeper, but Vega didn't take up the game until he was 23. An 8-handicap, he keeps up with swing theory by skimming any magazines that filter down to his shop.

He plays with a set of battered Snake Eye irons, hand-me-downs from a visiting Dutch teaching pro who vacationed in Cuba several years back.

"In Cuba," Vega says of his equipment, "you don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

The day was warm and windless, and Vega had no pressing obligations, so he'd opted to squeeze in a quick nine holes. He strolled to the first tee, which stands below the club's abandoned tennis courts, their cracked, concrete surfaces overgrown with weeds. Vega wagged and hit a lazy draw down the left side of the fairway. The ball landed on the rock-hard turf and caromed wildly into the trees. Vega shook his head and chuckled. Before he was the pro, Vega was the caddie master at the club, and he has looped the course more times than he can count. But the funhouse bounces still often surprise him. Now and then, he dreams of playing elsewhere, though he's not convinced he'd find the grass much greener.

His predecessor, he says, fell prey to that illusion. Jorge Duque was a gentlemanly pro and longtime lead instructor at the Havana Golf Club until five years ago, when he took a trip to Spain and chose not to return. The last Vega heard, Duque had found work at a pitch-and-putt. "In Cuba, El Duque was the king, but he goes to Spain and he struggles," Vega said.

He had found his ball and was surveying his next shot, an improbable approach around a tree. "People think if they leave the island, everything is glory," he said. "But life is not so simple. I have my house. I have my family. I have my job. Better to be happy with what matters most." ■