

Working overseas...

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

With the golf economy running flat in this country yet booming in other parts of the world, it stands to reason that those looking to grow the game on a global scale might look for experienced Americans and Canadians to help guide them through the process.

According to the National Golf Foundation, course closures last year in the United States outpaced openings for the first time since the World War II era. Conversely, the game today is growing at exponential rates across Europe and Asia, including some parts of the world where not long ago the thought of a building a golf course was nearly inconceivable.

As the global building boom continues, it made us pause and wonder about the experiences of North Americans working overseas. What criteria went into their decisions? How have those decisions affected their families?

Recently, we caught up with four superintendents peppered across the globe who agreed to share their stories. We'll start by highlighting the experiences of Dale Wesselman, who after stops at 17 courses on five continents, is at Villon Golf Club in Vilnius, Lithuania.

When Dale Wesselman and his wife-to-be, Audrey, relocated to Zimbabwe 12 years ago for her job with the United Nations, little did he know the move would lead to a globetrotting lifestyle as a turf consultant and construction superintendent that would include stops in South America and Eastern Europe. Looking back, he would have it no other way.

Wesselman insists it is not limited job opportunities in the United States that have led him to years of growing the game overseas as much as it is the opportunities that abound elsewhere.

Today, Wesselman is the construction superintendent at Villon Golf Club, a championship 18-hole resort course and golf academy being built at Le Meridien Villon Hotel & Resort.



Dale Wesselman and wife, Audrey Carr

“It was by my own choice that I took the position in Lithuania,” Wesselman, 50, wrote via e-mail. “The Baltic (Sea) region is one of the only remaining areas of the world where golf has not even come close to topping out yet.”



A par 3 tee shot at Villon Golf Club, under construction in Lithuania.

But being a world ambassador for the game has its price, for Wesselman and his wife live half a world apart. While Wesselman toils in golf course soil near the Russian steppe, Audrey, an immigration attorney in New York, lives in the couple’s home in Putnam County, north of New York City.

“It gets difficult sometimes, but she joins me overseas when her schedule allows,” Wesselman wrote. “We are both extremely busy in our respective professions, and we understand each other’s passion for our work. We are happy with the situation.”

By the time Wesselman and Audrey moved to Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1995, he already had worked at four clubs in the United States and spent time in Australia and New Zealand. A native of Webster City, Iowa, Wesselman’s stateside experience included

helping prepare Onion Creek Club in Austin, Texas, for the annual Legends of Golf event during winters away from his job as superintendent at Webster City Country Club. He also worked as assistant superintendent at Fishers Island (N.Y.) Club and later as assistant at The Country Club of Waterbury (Conn.).

At Waterbury, Wesselman learned the ropes not just on the Donald Ross-designed course, but also from Charlie Baskin Jr., CGCS (president of GCSAA in 1974), who knew Ross. Baskin's father, Charles Sr., was the club's first superintendent and often conferred with Ross in the family's home.

During his early days in Zimbabwe, a former British colony with many golf courses, Wesselman consulted with course managers throughout the area who were eager to have experienced, college-trained American advice.



The top drainage crew at Villon GC.

Wesselman returned to Texas while Audrey attended law school in San Antonio, but was soon coaxed back to Zimbabwe as a consultant for facilities like Royal Harare Golf Club and Leopard Rock Golf Resort and Hotel in Mutare. He also helped found the Greenkeepers' Association of Zimbabwe.

The travel bug soon nipped again at Wesselman's heels, this time taking him to a construction project in Uruguay and to prep Buenos Aires Golf Club in Argentina for the 2000 World Cup — all while his wife worked in Minneapolis. When in Uruguay, Wesselman helped start a fledgling superintendents' association there as well.

He returned to Minnesota to help build Loggers Trail GC in Stillwater, and then did renovation jobs in New York and Connecticut. But building golf courses and turning over operations to another superintendent eventually wore on Wesselman and he longed for the daily smell of freshly mown grass again. His next position as superintendent of Putnam National Golf Club in Mahopac, NY, allowed just that.



The Lithuanian countryside around Villon Golf Club.

When Villon owner Ben Brahms phoned him last June to inquire of his interest in overseeing construction of a new project in Lithuania — only the third golf course in that country — Wesselman was cautiously excited but interested only if he could stay on after construction. Brahms assured him he could stay on as long as he wanted.

Wesselman typically advises not to accept any job overseas without first visiting to see it firsthand, but in this case his previous experiences coupled with online research and multiple phone conversations gave him the green light without a formal visit.

The salary structures and benefit packages overseas are not that different than in the States, depending somewhat on the relative strength of the dollar compared to local currencies.

“Most often, Americans working overseas are paid in US dollars wired to bank accounts at home,” Wesselman wrote. “They are tax free to a certain point. I am also paid an amount in local currency each month, which is taxed according to the local rate.”

Currency exchange rates also affect the cost of equipment and supplies in other countries. “While we do have a few new bulldozers, the majority of the equipment is of older Russian descent. What a tale some of this equipment could tell!”

“In my situation, the dollar is very weak against the euro but fairly strong against the Lithuanian litas. However, the litas is not very strong against the euro, so equipment and soft goods are expensive here,” Wesselman advised. “While we do have a few new bulldozers, the majority of the equipment is of older Russian descent. What a tale some of this equipment could tell!”

Product support is often as difficult to obtain as the resources themselves. Local distributors are usually non-existent in areas like Lithuania.

“Ag products are readily available locally, but turf equipment and supplies are generally shipped in containers from ports in the United States. Major turf suppliers like Toro, John Deere and Jacobsen are usually several countries away,” Wesselman wrote. “In Lithuania I have a John Deere distributor less than five miles away, but they only know tractors and farm implements — nothing about turf equipment. I can get greensmowers and other products from them, but I can’t be confident of proper service when something breaks down.”

The closest Toro distributor is in Stockholm, Sweden, a 50-minute flight across the Baltic Sea from Vilnius. Since Sweden has over 500 golf courses, Wesselman is hoping to get quality service from there. He expects to obtain most of his fertilizers, chemicals and



An old Russian dozer still doing its thing in Lithuania.

accessories from Sweden.

Since the region is growing in many golf-related ways — in Lithuania alone there are 8-10 golf projects in planning stages, with similar activity in Latvia and Estonia and golf momentum gathering in Russia, Poland, Ukraine and Kazakhstan — other companies like E-Z-GO, Jacobsen and Club Car are beginning to open up regional distributorships, according to Wesselman.

“Over the years I’ve learned that patience, tolerance, and understanding are prerequisites for working overseas...”

Driving the golf demand in these developing areas is the number of younger people traveling to the UK or North America to work or study and learning the game there, then finding no place to play upon returning home. How about labor, and working with the locals?

“Over the years I’ve learned that patience, tolerance, and understanding are prerequisites for working overseas,” Wesselman wrote. “We Americans take a lot for granted. I typically work with very poor people for whom this golf thing is totally new. I have to show them photos of what we are building, as well as get down in a bunker or a trench to physically show them the proper way to do things.”



The Lithuanian version of Jiffy Lube, according to Dale Wesselman.

Wesselman has a translator who shadows him full-time, but since golf and construction are new to her as well, he must first explain to her so that she can in turn explain to the worker.

The pace of life in places Wesselman has worked is noticeably slower as well. Nothing gets done as quickly as we are accustomed to in the United States, he noted.

“If you aren’t patient and tolerant, you won’t last long. No matter how worked up you

get, people are not going to move any faster,” he commented.

Wesselman has never felt threatened as an American in a foreign country, but he tries to be aware and intelligent about it.

“You don’t go around boasting loudly about being American or complaining about the way things are done in other parts of the world,” he said. “I have felt jealousy and animosity towards me before but I think that was directed more towards my position than my nationality.”

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“Politically,” he continued, “I never cause waves with these people because they can make it terribly hard on you. It is much more difficult when there is a language barrier because I don’t know what they are saying right in front of me. They can be smiling and nodding their heads when actually they are thinking, ‘Screw this guy; we aren’t going to do anything he tells us.’ In most cases, however, the construction crew and operators know nothing about golf, let alone golf course construction, so are normally very receptive and appreciative of the advice and direction.”

Training his staff and seeing them grow is part of both the inspiration and reward for Wesselman, particularly as a golf course project nears completion.

“When a new golf course opens, all of the people involved with the construction sit back and take a look at what they’ve accomplished with their hard work,” he said. “They bring out their families and friends who walk on the manicured grounds, thinking it is artificial. Having never seen fine turf before, they are just in awe of the surroundings. The laborers are smiling and you can really sense how proud they feel. That sight alone is what makes me want to do it all over again.”