



ONE OF THE NEWEST COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD
PUSHES TO BUILD ITS PRESENCE OF GOLF

TAKING A SWING

By Connor Moriarty



Kosovo: A reforming eastern European country, dominated by soccer, has one place to hit a golf ball in the whole country. An overgrown driving range and a miniature golf course are all they have; the nearest full course is hundreds of miles away. But some passionate Kosovar golfers are making strides towards maximizing the presence of golf in Kosovo and introducing the foreign sport to people who may have never seen it before.

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PRISHTINA - Blerim dug his lime green shoes into the matching colored mat, relaxed his shoulders and slowly exhaled. It gave him the relaxed and ready feeling he loves so much– the feeling that he can't go a week without and that feeds his addiction.

He heard the rush of air through the grooves of the club and the flush sound of metal battling AstroTurf that is all too familiar to him. He looked up just in time to see the little white ball soaring to the clouds. To him, it was five seconds of pure bliss.

But the ball always comes down, and that day it came down in four feet of tall grass and weeds, not the usual sharp blades of Rye Grass in Germany or the pine trees of Turkey.

Blerim Sejdiu is a Kosovar businessman who works with German IT companies. When he travels he gets to play the sport he loves so much all around the world, but when he is home in Prishtina with his family all he gets is an overgrown driving range.

This driving range, paired with an 18-hole miniature golf course, makes up Prishtina Golf Facility, the only place to hit a golf ball in Kosovo.

"I love Prishtina Golf and have been playing here for a long time, but I wish there was someplace where

NEW TO GOLF?

In minigolf, players use a short club called a putter to roll a small ball across AstroTurf (meant to represent thinly cut grass) into a four-inch hole. The goal– avoid the immense number of obstacles and hills to get the ball in the hole in the fewest hits possible. If someone can avoid the rocks, sand and water for 18 consecutive holes, a score of about 60 total shots is average for this course. Minigolf literally is a miniature version of full-sized golf courses where players can hit the ball more than 200 meters on holes exceeding 400 meters, unlike the 20-meter holes at Prishtina Golf.

I could actually play near my home," Sejdiu said.

In 2010, Dino Asanaj, an Albanian-American from New York, decided he missed golf so much that he would bring it to Kosovo. Asanaj worked with City Golf Europe, a Swedish company that can build minigolf courses, to design a unique 18-hole course for Prishtina that cost €350,000. With the adjacent land Asanaj inserted a fenced driving range.



Today the minigolf course still maintains its vibrant green glow and its clear flowing water, even though Asanaj passed away two years ago. Lavdim Zylfiu, who is from Prishtina, runs the facility because of his zealous passion for golf that grew when he took control of Prishtina Golf. He also is the president of the Kosovo Minigolf Federation and coaches children who play minigolf both in Prishtina and internationally.

Zylfiu is pushing in many ways to increase the golf presence in Kosovo, but the natural imposing limitations of the new nation are pushing back. With unemployment rates so high and available land to purchase so low, full-size golf is hard to imagine in Kosovo's future, even though most Kosovars say there would love to play golf in Kosovo. To Zylfiu, focusing on minigolf makes more sense.

"Right now, Kosovo isn't very interested in full size golf because of the expense," he said. "Minigolf is our priority."

The minigolf course in Prishtina consists of 1:10 scale duplicates of the most famous full-sized golf courses around the world, including St. Andrews in Scotland and Augusta National in the United States. For example, one hole at Prishtina Golf is located on an island surrounded by water, a perfect representation of hole number seventeen of TPC Sawgrass in Florida.

Occasionally an out-of-town visitor will stop by to send a few balls flying down the range, but the minigolf pays the bills. 100 balls to hit on the driving range and a round of minigolf costs just €8 and €5 respectively, so when Kosovars aren't spending a couple laughs on the course, Zylfiu organizes local and international minigolf tournaments.

In 2012, Zylfiu hosted Kosovo's first international minigolf tournament at Prishtina Golf called The

Kosovo Open. Visiting teams had their doubts about playing in Kosovo, including the coach of the Finland Mini Golf Team, Pasi Aho. But the tournament succeeded in bringing money and recognition to the new Kosovo facility.

"The course proved to be very interesting and fair in the end, even if it was very different from all those we have played so far," Aho said. "I hope that the Kosovar players could also win new experiences from this event with international players and will use them when visiting the next international events such as in Porto and Istanbul."

Because of the doors opened by that tournament, Vullnet Mustafa, a 17-year-old Kosovar, was able to travel to Istanbul a month after the Kosovo Open to compete in The Minigolfstream Cup with his younger brother, Nderim. Vullnet made the drive back to Prishtina with a trophy on his lap after beating the competition by almost 40 strokes.

"I would say that minigolf chose me," he said with a smile.

The two brothers were first offered the opportunity to play at Prishtina Golf after it



VULLNET MUSTAFA

opened through a trip with their school. Since then they continue to practice with Zylfiu as their coach, and they play in tournaments all over Europe despite the fact that they only started playing golf four years ago.

"I am planning to send Vullnet and Nderim to the Youth World Championship in Lahti, Finland in the first week of August," Zylfiu said.

The Mustafa brothers express their overwhelming love for golf whenever they can, but they said living in a country where there is such a small golf presence can be hard. Golf is rarely even found on Kosovo television. For now, they said they will continue to focus on minigolf.

According to Zylfiu, that focus on minigolf is

why Prishtina Golf facility looks the way it does— one 50-foot tall fence perfectly separates a beautiful green AstroTurf minigolf course from an overgrown rotting driving range.

"I would like to see more full-size golf in Kosovo, but first I would like minigolf to move forward and for Kosovo to make more minigolf courses," Vullnet said. "There are almost no places to play minigolf in Kosovo. I wish there were more courses with different types of material like concrete and felt so we can practice before participating in a tournament."

Zylfiu said he is definitely pushing to establish full-size golf in Kosovo one day. He has after all worked for years to create, as Blerim Sejdiu said, "a golf network— a community of people who love the sport of golf in Kosovo." This



community ranges from 14-year-old children, to professional Kosovar golfers. All they need is somewhere to play.

Currently the Kosovar golfers that play full-size courses travel to south Albania, when they can, to practice. But Zylfiu and his colleagues agree that there should be full-sized courses more localized in Kosovo.

Duncan Weir is executive director for R&A, an international organization that works to encourage the playing of golf globally. R&A receives surplus money— about €6.3 million per year from The Open Championship in Great Britain so they can help countries educate people about golf, provide equipment and build facilities. One thing they will not do, though, is force golf upon a country.



“We work through over 100 international affiliates that apply to us so that we can help improve the status of golf in their countries,” Weir said during a phone interview. “From there we send teachers, officials, equipment and machinery to help them.”

R&A is assisting more than ten eastern European countries including Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Hungary, all of which are bordering or very close to Kosovo. They all have a strong enough golf presence, meaning large numbers of players and courses, to qualify for R&A's help. For example, R&A helps Macedonia run its National Open Tournament.


“It’s up to the people on the ground to build up golf presence and then apply to us for help.”

According to Weir R&A hasn’t helped Kosovo because of its naturally small number of golfers and zero courses.

“Historically speaking, there has never been a lot of golf in that small area of the world,” Weir said. “Plus the war hurt the progression of sports like golf in Kosovo and reestablishing it is very hard... It’s up to the people on the ground

to build up golf presence and then apply to us for help.”

Kosovo has various professional golfers scattered throughout the country, but they need more. Zylfiu said all he needs is local



sponsors to invest and help them travel through Europe to recruit more players for Kosovo. Once that is accomplished he believes Kosovo will have strong golf presence and maybe they could apply to R&A for some financial help.

Zylfiu is also working to build Kosovo's recognition in the eyes of the International Golf Federation (IGF) that has affiliates in 126 countries worldwide, including seven out of the eleven Balkan countries.

IGF affiliation, though, reaches much farther than just status. Golf will officially be a sport in the 2016 Summer Olympics, and all national golf federations affiliated to the IGF will automatically be included in the National Olympic Committees.

Weir predicted that as a new Olympic sport, golf will have vast promotion in summer months of 2016, therefore drawing attention to the countries participating. Those countries would receive funding and recognition that they may not have received otherwise.

For Kosovo, a nation now recognized as an independent republic by more than 100 countries, any form of recognition is more important than ever, according to Zylfiu.

"At this point, I think Kosovo playing golf in the Olympics is more important for Kosovo than taking a part in football in the World Championship," he said with confidence.

Zylfiu said Kosovo will most likely not partake in golf in the 2016 Olympics, but his hope is it

will by 2020. According to him there are many smaller initial steps to take before thinking about standing on the largest stage in the world.

According to Sejdiu, building full-sized golf courses in Kosovo is crucial but there is little available land.

"You can find a couple hectares there and another couple there, but you won't find enough for a full course," Sejdiu said while playing at Prishtina Golf. "Even the land you see here is owned by three different people."

An average golf course costs about €2.2 million to build and more than €200,000 per year to maintain, according to Turner Macpherson Golf Design. In a country where the unemployment rate is more than 30 percent and where nearly half the population lives in poverty, according to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the expense of a golf course seems astronomical.

But Sejdiu said Kosovars could afford to play golf if they had the courses.

"People here seem to think you need six zeros in your bank account to play golf, and that just isn't true," he said. "I think there is a way to make it work."

Public golf courses in surrounding countries cost about €15 to €40 to play. For example, Golf Club Centar in Zabalj, Serbia is a highly rated public course that costs €30 to play 18 holes.

Vullnet said such a course in Prishtina could be affordable to Kosovars.

He only recently played golf on a full course for the first time, but he said that seeing a real golf course in Kosovo would be a dream come true for him.

"I just think we have to learn that golf can be played everywhere and not only in the rich places," he said.

"Then we would need some investors and sponsors and for everyone to start playing golf."

Sejdiu and Zylfiu agree that finding those sponsors is the first step to help get more golfers in Kosovo. The sponsors would give the money the Kosovar golfers need to recruit other golfers to play in Kosovo. In Bosnia, for example, golf sponsors loan money to build three full golf holes, every so often, until a full course is completed. That is exactly what Zylfiu is hoping to receive.

Weir said that if Kosovo applied to R&A and had legitimate plans of action for improving the quality of golf in the country, R&A would most likely support them.



Golf may potentially benefit Kosovo's tourism according to Ardian Hasanaj, who co-founded Be In Kosovo, a Kosovo tourism company.

Hasanaj said tourism isn't nearly as beneficial to Kosovo's economy as it is to other countries in Europe, especially in the west. Other than skiers in the nearby mountains, Kosovo continues to struggle to attract visitors.

"The news only shows the bad things," Hasanaj said. "Kosovo has always been seen as a place of struggle even though it is more safe here than many other places. No one wants to come to the place they see on TV."

Therefore, Hasanaj believes tourism companies need to develop a stable tourism infrastructure by highlighting Kosovo's natural positive features. Hasanaj thinks golf just doesn't fall into such priorities.

"If we highlight Kosovo's history, its beautiful landscapes, its food, and its motivation towards positive post-war development, Kosovo will sell itself," Hasanaj said.

He doesn't foresee any Kosovo tourism companies working to bring in golf courses in order to help tourism, but Hasanaj is sure that having golf included as one of many excursions in tourism packages can't hurt.

Though they said golf has an extremely low presence in this area of the world, Zylfiu, Sejdiu, Weir, Vullnet and Hasanaj agree there is room for the relaxing sport in Kosovo.

Just ask the young students walking through Prishtina– they are always looking for something new to do. Whether it's paintball, horseback riding or go-cart racing, the novelty factor plays a role in this reforming country, according to Zylfiu.

"I know about Prishtina Golf, but I have never played before because no one else really does," English major at the University of Prishtina Shpresa Veseli said. "My friends and I would love to try it sometime."

And others like her said they feel the same way. Some Kosovars are interested in what Prishtina Golf has offered the past few years. The holes may just be 10-meter representations of the real thing, but they also represent the community Zylfiu is working tirelessly to build and the potential of something bigger– literally.

For now Zylfiu plans to continue his work both at Prishtina Golf and to establish a larger presence of golf in Kosovo. He said that he hopes one day Sejdiu can not only line up his shots towards 400 meters of thick green grass and imposing plush trees in Kosovo, but to do so 15 minutes from his home in Prishtina.

(Connor Moriarty is a reporting intern at KosovaLive this summer in collaboration with Miami University in the United States)



Blerim Sejdiu practicing at the only place he can



Me and Lavdim Zylfiu