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30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Top Russian Golfer Could Emerge Soon, Says British Pro

By The Moscow Times

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Russia and the former Soviet Union have produced world and Olympic champions in virtually every sport over the last century but no Russian has ever made an impact at the top level in golf.

There were no golf clubs in Russia under the Communists with the first 18-hole course built in the Moscow suburbs in 1994.

While the world's biggest country is not exactly undergoing a golfing revolution, the sport is growing with new nine and 18-hole courses opening every year and some see Russia as a potential breeding ground for a future top talent.

Jon Marlor, who comes from Leeds in northern England, joined the professional ranks when he was 16 and after a decent career at the lower levels of the game turned his hand to teaching and coaching in Florida and New York.

The 42-year-old is now the professional at the Golf & Country Club in Rostov-on-Don, in the southwest of European Russia, which opened earlier this year and believes the country is close to producing its first elite-level player.

"I believe that within a couple of years a top Russian could get on to the higher ranks of the PGA tour," he told Reuters when a group of international reporters on a tour of Russia's World Cup football venues visited his club. "They have produced so many great sportsmen and women in so many sports.

"They have the facilities, the discipline and the character. All it really needs is one player to really spark the flame. Where was golf in Spain before Seve (Ballesteros), one of the greatest golfers ever. Look at what Bernhard Langer did in Germany— they really blew the game open in those countries. I believe the same could happen here."

Golf in Russia is still in its infancy, not only because of adverse natural conditions and the relatively small number of golf courses, but also because it never took root alongside other sports in the Soviet era and has been slow to progress since the fall of communism.

Currently former world number one tennis player Yevgeny Kafelnikov has established himself as Russia's top golfer, though he has yet to make a single cut after competing in more than 20 career events on the European Tour and its satellite Challenge Tour.

Kafelnikov, 41, is ranked 1,613th in the world — as low as the rankings go — along with several of his compatriots.

The most successful women's golfer in Russia is 29-year-old Maria Balikoeva, who is currently ranked 71st in the 2015 Ladies European Tour (LET) order of merit.

Balikoeva, the first Russian to become a fulltime member of the LET, has recorded several top-10s on the Tour with career-best ties for fourth at the 2014 Turkish Airlines Ladies Open and also at the 2013 HONMA Pilsen Golf Masters.

Eastern Europe

Tour events in eastern Europe are few and far between but Ireland's Padraig Harrington, a triple major winner, told Reuters earlier this year that he felt Russia could make the same sort of impact on the game as China, which hosts four events on the 2014-2015 European Tour.

"As far as I am concerned, it will help in driving the game forward," said Harrington. "Russia, surely, is an untapped market in golf. You only have to look at how far China has progressed ... given that this year was the 10th anniversary of the Volvo China Open being on the European Tour calendar."

Oksana Reznikova, the Don club's director admits that it is an expensive sport for most ordinary Russians.
Her club, a nine-hole course which could be expanded to 18 later, has only 14 registered members, although hundreds come to play there.

"The annual fee is 210,000 roubles ($3,648), and the initial payment to join is several million

rubles which is quite expensive — but you have unlimited access to these fantastic facilities," she said.

"When we had an open day recently there were more than 300 people who turned up, and many have come back. They aren't members but the interest is growing," she added.

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