Bunker maintenance in mind

Some golf course superintendents have asked me about my thoughts about how individual bunker design relates to maintenance. Well, I’ve been thinking about bunkers a lot lately, given the golf economy’s downturn and the rising standards expected of bunker maintenance.

Bunker maintenance requires time and money, particularly when you think about how golfers expect bunkers to be perfect playing surfaces. During the past 40 years, I’ve seen the quality of greens progress from bumpy to perfect, tees maintained to former green standards, fairways maintained to former tee standards, and roughs maintained to former fairway standards. Now the focus is shifting to make bunkers better, if not perfect, playing surfaces. The goal seems to be that they’re groomed to make bunker shots just as difficult as fairway shots.

But to me, a lower standard of bunker maintenance would save money and restore integrity and meaning to bunkers. It would be a cheaper, easier way to make a course more challenging, in contrast to the expense of earthmoving, grading, irrigation, cart path construction and subsequent maintenance required to extend tees for more length.

The standard, preferred course of action seems to be to spend more on bunker construction and maintenance. Bunkers always have been considered more expensive to maintain than turf, although in the old days, raking them three times a week versus mowing rough three times a week shouldn’t have cost substantially more. Nowadays, higher bunker standards require daily hand-raking and edging and weekly leaf/clipping blowing. Some courses deep-rake bunkers to loosen sand and weekly leaf/clipping blowing. Some courses deep-rake bunkers to loosen sand, while a shot missing the green by 5 feet often plugs in sloping sand, while a liner or every five to seven years with a liner. Perhaps some of that rebuilding is because of rising golfer expectations as much as it is contaminated sand, which might still play acceptably long after it’s lost its color from contamination.

Changing style

Architects are focused on bunker design and placement to enhance play, but I’ve changed philosophies of bunker style to accommodate new expectations – and budget realities – to reduce bunker maintenance.

One way is to reduce the number of bunkers. Given that few sites have the natural sandy soil, it’s hard to justify bunkers as natural design elements. Architects probably have overemphasized the use of steep-sloped cape-and-bay-style bunkers, morphing them into visually dramatic and artistic elements that can be a signature design. Many golf architects prefer the look of cape-and-bay-style bunkers with sloped sand. Fabric bunkers liners are supposed to make these more practical, but they don’t eliminate sand washing completely.

I’ve flattened my cape-and-bay-style bunkers, reducing maximum slope from 25 percent to 12 percent, which usually allows them to hold up in moderate rains. However, attaining the same visibility as the equivalent of choker and gravel curving takes more time, travel time of utility vehicles is greatly reduced.

Generally, superintendents prefer flat sand bunkers with steep grass banks. They accept the regular schedule of bunker-hand maintenance – or look the other way as employees push the limits of riding mowers – more than the unpredictability of sand shoveling.

In this instance, players side with superintendents. In a cape-and-bay-style bunker, a shot missing the green by 5 feet often plugs in sloping sand, while a 10-foot miss finds flat sand and a better lie. In flat-bottom bunkers, the 5-foot miss deflects off the grass bank and lands lightly in the flat bottom, giving all misses better lies.

Bunkers are placed and shaped at the discretion of the architect. If money is a factor, it makes sense to use discretion to build bunkers that are more easily maintained. If I do, my bunker designs will be more challenging during the next recession, as has happened to so many bunkers during times when money is tight. GCN