In his analysis, GCI's Bob Lohmann questions whether simplifying golf adds value and suggests that bunkers may hold the real key.

By Bob Lohmann

Many of us course design types are recently back from Chattanooga, Tenn., site of the 2012 American Society of Golf Course Architects annual meeting. There’s a lot of fraternizing that goes on at these events, but there’s a good amount of strategizing about where the game is going, too. Big picture stuff.

Everyone’s hearts are in the right place, I’m certain of that. But I’m quite amazed these days by how architects and other “guardians of the game” view that big picture stuff.

My old friend, the architect Gary Panks, spoke for me at one point when he warned that all these efforts to play faster and get more golfers on/off the course will, if we’re not careful, destroy some really good golf holes.

Earlier this year, I wrote about this in light of the Tee It Forward initiative – a good idea for adapting full-sized holes to young and otherwise novice players. But it’s a tough task to carry this through an 18-hole routing, accommodating senior and women players, without effectively addressing the design of all 18 holes. You have to Design It Forward in order to Tee It Forward, and we have to ask ourselves: Is this initiative worth undertaking that expense? Is it worth risking the alienation of regular customers who appreciate the hole as is?

The way we think about bunkers today is indicative of where these discussions are taking the golf business, perhaps against our better judgment. When we aren’t talking about eliminating bunkers – to save money and make golf holes more “playable” (read: boring) – we’re talking about ways to make them more expensive via new liners and premier sand products.

One extreme feels like a shortcut. The other feels like we’re throwing money at something in the name of “excellence.” Neither gets at the heart the matter, in my view.

Let me frame the larger issue another way – a way superintendents will understand, because they think in these terms all day, every day – way more than architects do incidentally: Do these measures and initiatives add value? If so, for how many golfers do they add value?

If we want to attract new golf-
What happens when these novices develop into intermediate players – won’t they go elsewhere? I have to laugh when I hear people reminisce about the crappy old munis they played manticize those courses, those memories - but they wouldn’t be caught dead playing those courses. How many add value? In key spots, that could add even more. With the resources available, we must maximize the value we provide to golfers because it’s the value of that golfing experience – not ease, not speed of play – that hooks new players and continually engages regular players. GCIs are not ease, not speed of play – that hooks new players and continually engages regular players.

**HARMONY/BALANCE.** Bunkers help to achieve visual balance and establish scale and proportion, which contributes to the visual harmony of a hole. In other words, they make things look pleasing. In some cases, they can even be placed to make things look intentionally unpleasing (harder than they are) or to affect depth perception (camouflage).

Think about all the trees on your golf course. How much value do they add to the golf experience? They can certainly evoke pleasantness, but maybe a handful of trees have the sort of comprehensive impact mentioned above. The rest are either inconsequential or actively eliminate value – shot values, but also agronomic value when you consider how trees compete with turf for soil nutrition and sunlight.

Now think about your bunkers. How many add value? In a variety of circumstances, I’m betting they all do. And I’m betting most superintendents could think of a half dozen more, in key spots, that could add even more.

My point here isn’t that we should go on a bunker-building binge. My point is, we need to assess our golf courses based on the value each feature provides. It’s a cost-benefit analysis in one way.

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