Designs on Golf

■ ARCHITECTURE

Time to Put Bite Back Into Bunkers

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

The annual Wisconsin Turf Symposium takes place this month and features the USGA's Tom Meeks, architect Ron Forse, Landscape Unlimited's Bill Kubley and several prominent superintendents participating in a timely discussion on the most ironic of all hazards — the bunker. It's ironic because the bunker's once paramount role as a thought-provoking hazard is dead.

The golf pros and single-digit players have won the battle of the bunker. They've declared that the bunker must be fair above all else. When in sand, they must have good shots at all times, they say. Average golfers concurred because who can ever forget that awful "fried egg" that cost them a match in the Watts Gunn Flight of the Mayflower Cup?

Thus, the superintendent must do everything in his power to take the danger out of the sand, wasting countless manhours primping sand and ultimately rendering the bunker irrelevant as a hazard. How did the bunker change into a paradoxical joke?

The answer lies deep in the rough. The mentality in tournament golf is that rough is essential to "defending" a golf course, and we all know that everyday committees worship what they see on television. So as the rough became more prevalent, the bunker developed into a more appealing place for a ball to come to rest.

Throw in the 60-degree wedge, and the bunker becomes even more toothless. Either way, the superintendent is pressured by his clients and self-important tournament competitors to convert these hazards into areas as attractive as fairways or risk losing his job. What nonsense.

The role of the bunker hit an epic low when PGA Championship announcer David Feherty gasped that Tiger Woods and Bob May both drew terrible lies on the 10th hole at Valhalla CC simply because the bottom of the sand was not flat. But Feherty stated this even after Gary McCord had just rambled on for the previous five minutes how "we'll watch the players aim for the 10th hole's front bunker to have the best chance to get up and down for birdie."

Instead of being a place to stay away from, the PGA's coddling setup made that bunker the

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best place from which to make a birdie. The Jack Nicklaus-designed hazard went from a place to avoid to the primary lay-up area on a par 5.

Like most others today, that particular bunker's role was altered mainly by nasty rough around the green. To compensate for the severity of the rough, the course setup gurus order that the bunkers be raked in a way that promotes "fair" golf to compensate for the penal nature of the tall grass.

Of course, we don't need to go restore Oakmont's homemade furrowing rakes because that discourages any kind of recovery. But the governing bodies can stop placing an emphasis on rough and start subtly returning some risk to the bunker. They can do that by making the sand fluffy enough to cause a player to think twice about hitting into a bunker, but reasonable enough that a talented golfer can occasionally pull off a skillful recovery should he end up in the sand.

Sure, I'd love to see a PGA Tour event played on a fast, roughless course where the bunkers are nasty. Perhaps the bunkers could be raked Wednesday afternoon, but never touched again during play unless there's a harsh storm. Take away the rakes, and let the players take care of the sand for four days. Keep the grass short in the immediate surrounds to turn bunkers into sensitive areas that must be avoided.

Some prominent golf organization must stop letting players dictate setup and start such a trends. Maybe it'll be a European tour event or a silly season event, or maybe Tiger will say this is how hazards should be and the trend will begin.

But someone has to return some teeth to the bunker. Otherwise, the sporting spirit of golf will be lost. And how un-American would that be?

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