

In Vogue: Bunker Renovation

A current trend in the Chicago area is the renovation of golf courses. Whether it is the entire course or only certain aspects, bunkers are usually where it starts.

The consistency and playability of a bunker have become major topics with today's players. Bunkers deteriorate over time with the contamination of native soil from heavy rains, allowing the washouts and fried-egg lies, resulting in poor drainage and the breakdown of sand particles, requiring the constant edging to keep a clean look.



A sand bunker that has inadequate drainage. Notice the different colors of sand from years of contamination.

Tour players want every bunker on the course to play exactly the same and to a point they do. Clubs are spending a tremendous amount of money on these hazards by incorporating expensive sands that are only available from certain portions of the country. The angle and size of the sand particles are the two qualities that determine drainage, penetrometer value and firmness. From there, it is at the discretion of the course to determine what other needs they may have out of their sand, such as color, chemical reaction and overall quality of play. We have heard it many times that Tour players would rather play out of a bunker than from the rough because the sand has these fine specifications. However, in the end no bunker will be exactly like the other. Irrigation, angle of the sun, time of direct sunlight received, bunker design and depth all contribute to the different playing qualities of the sand.

With the incredible television coverage we are seeing every weekend, more and more people are hearing their favorite Tour player's comment about bunkers. They hear talk about the sand's playability; is it too firm or too soft? The misconception is that there is too much sand in the bunker when the reality is, new sand is always going to be softer than older sand. The particles have not had time to settle due to rain, irrigation, raking or the freezing and thawing effects of winter. This will create more fried-egg lies in the beginning followed by complaints from the golfers. The other misconception is that there is not enough sand in the bunker because the sand is always wet and firm. In most cases the bunker has plenty of sand; it is drainage and contamination that cause the bunker to become firm.


Bunkers, like all the other features a golf course has to offer, are an investment. However, they are nowhere near the most important investment a club has. Labor costs for maintaining these hazards are reaching new heights. They are

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being raked six to seven days a week, the edges are being trimmed with pin-point detail, and if they have poor drainage, countless hours are spent pumping them out after only minor rainfall amounts. Add all this time and energy up over the course of a year, and you get a substantial number. Most courses are going to live with the costs because they have no other choice. Long-range plans may include bunker renovations over a period of years. This offers the membership the ability still to play during the summer with only minor disruptions. Other plans include total renovation by shutting down the course and refurbishing everything at once.

Retaining the integrity of the course during renovation is a concern that many facilities face. Trying to reestablish what the original architect had planned can be a daunting challenge. If the club does not have accurate historical photos or drawings, then the idea becomes even more difficult. Perhaps the course has been altered so many times over the years by adding or renovating bunkers without the help of a certified architect, or the overzealous act of planting trees, that changing certain features is not enough. Entire holes may need to be changed to better suit the existing landscape available on the property. With the help of a certified architect, a more fitting look can be created and give the golfer an opportunity to play a new and exciting hole.

When it comes to renovation, the concern over bunkers is just scratching the surface. A superintendent and his/her greens chairperson, committee and membership, with the help of a certified architect, have many issues to discuss that are not

mentioned. Overall, proper planning and research are the foundation to creating a successful renovation. A club will face many challenges when considering bunkers and renovation. What works for one will usually not work for another. 

Reference

The Golden Age of Golf Design.
Geoff Shackelford



A crew member furrowing the bunker at Oakmont in preparation for the 1925 U.S. Open deemed too penal by Bobby Jones.



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