

Digging Away at the Links of Carillon Golf Club

For the past three seasons Superintendent Mark Thibault and his staff have been performing a master bunker renovation at The Links at Carillon Golf Club in Plainfield. The 27-hole golf complex had 79 large bunkers, most with high flashing, contaminated sand, and little or no drainage.

In his original design, Golf Course Architect Greg Martin strategically placed the bunkers with the concept of needing large bunkers to offset the lack of trees and houses. Over the past 15 years, the once open farmland of Plainfield has been developed with a retirement community and hundreds of trees have been installed.

Visually, the large bunkers were no longer needed and the increasing bunker maintenance cost has become a nightmare. Daily maintenance requires three trap rakes for three to four hours each. With the rising cost of fuel and labor coupled with the poor playing conditions, a bunker renovation was needed.

Thibault proposed an in-house renovation plan using skid loaders, dump trucks, shovels and only the core maintenance staff. After much discussion with the owners and the director of golf, the decision was made to begin bunker renovation during the off-season months. This would allow minimal interference during the peak golf season and normal golf course maintenance to be performed. If this plan was to succeed, it had to be cost effective without sacrificing current conditions.

In order to control cost and maximize this opportunity Thibault decided to first reuse the original bunker mix to expand other tee surfaces on the par 3 holes and to renovate the first tee on the white course. Scott also decided to harvest out-of-play bluegrass rough for sod. The sod, in turn, would be used on the newly created slopes around the expanded tees. The areas vacant of turf in the rough would then be converted to a links style fescue mix, and further increase savings of labor and mowing on the property.

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Bunkers on the Blue Course No 6 Green ready for sand.



Laying out the bunkers on the White Course, No 6 Green.



Bunker complex completed on the Blue Course adjacent to the 7th Fairway.



Changing the shape of the bunkering around the 8th Green on the Blue Course.

The last resource Thibault tapped, was contacting local developments for clay and topsoil. Luckily, in the fall of 2003, a chain restaurant was starting construction across from the entrance to Carillon Drive. By working with the contractor, Thibault was able to obtain 3,000 cubic yards of black topsoil delivered on-site for a very minimal cost to the club.

The Links at Carillon still needed to find a large source of clay in order to maximize the topsoil as a top layer and not fill. Thibault contacted another local developer requesting to remove a large amount of clay from a nearby site. The developer was happy to allow Thibault to remove the clay for free instead of paying a contractor to do so.

In addition, Thibault decided to reuse old greens covers to line the bottom of the newly shaped flat-bottom bunkers to aid in slowing future contamination. The only major cost to the Links at Carillon would be the new sand and labor.

Before the renovation began, Thibault decided on one style for the bunker design based on a couple of keys principles. He picked a flat-bottom style to eliminate the need to push sand after a heavy rain and to help prevent sand from blowing out of the bunker. Overall downsizing was the key to eliminating labor, but also every slope was designed to be easily cut with a rotary motor and minimize handwork.

Working with the Director of Golf, Jim Long, Thibault was given the freedom to design each bunker and express a little of his artistic ability in golf course architecture. Thibault recalled on past experiences as Assistant Superintendent during the construction of Seven Bridges Golf Club in 1990 along with some bunker renovation projects at Ruffled Feathers Golf Club to aid in the design process.

Over the past three months, the good weather has allowed Thibault and his staff to really “dig in” and currently there are eight to ten bunkers under renovation. Some bunkers have been eliminated and others downsized, but in most cases one large bunker is now two or three smaller flat-bottom bunkers.

It is difficult to figure the labor hours saved to date, and over the long run many dollars will be saved. Flooded bunkers will no longer have to be pumped, there will be a large reduction in the maintenance of the sand surfaces, hand mowing around bunker complexes will be nearly eliminated and the additional native habitats created in out of play areas will all contribute to cost savings. To date the project has been a complete success. Approaching the end of the third year in a very tedious process, Thibault and his hardworking staff are on pace to have approximately 50 percent of the bunkers completed.

—Scott White
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The Links of Carillon Golf Club



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