

Undaunted by winter, a Colorado gamble prevails

Resort finds replacing bunker sand during cold weather less disruptive

By Mark Leslie

The hundreds of golf courses each year that replace their bunker sand — disturbing the turf, angering golfers and losing money along the way — may want to use another tactic.

Taking a pioneering chance, Keystone (Colo.) Resort officials decided to wait until the off-season and disturb the snow instead of the golfers on their Keystone Ranch Golf Course. It has turned the trick, and saved time and money.

"Our great concern was whether we would be able to clear snow and get equipment around without getting it stuck. That has ended up being of no concern at all," said Tom Bridle of Tectonic, Inc. in Longmont, which is providing the sand and two members of the three-man crew. "I take no credit. It was just a gamble that worked."

Keystone Ranch superintendent Steve Corneillier, who agreed to the winter work, said: "I had never thought about doing the job in the winter... But we have found that we're considerably ahead of our goal, and we've spent our money much more effi-



Two Keystone Resort maintenance crew members help a Tectonic backhoe operator clean out a bunker.

ciently this way. If we had done the work during the season, the equipment would sit idle too often waiting for golfers to play through."

Corneillier said he expects half the 70 sand bunkers will be restored this winter and half next winter.

"Our goal in the fall was to do 10 bunkers,"

he said. "I'd be thrilled if I could get that. Yet it started to snow in late October and never stopped. We had the second snowiest November ever in Colorado and we still did 24 bunkers by Thanksgiving."

Heavy late-November snows closed down the operation until January when Corneillier expected the crew to finish the last six bunkers on the front nine.

"Our original plan was to finish the front nine by July 4," he said.

Meanwhile, the heavy equipment hasn't caused any of the turf damage that normally occurs in this kind of work.

"Where we've packed snow down we've been able to make almost a rug of snow cover to protect the playing surface from trucks. We've been able to do it without a mark on the turf," Bridle said.

Added Corneillier: "When this kind of work is done in the spring, summer or fall you're going to have some kind of dam-

age. There's no way around it. But we found we were minimizing our damage with the snowpack. Plus we had the luxury of having no golfers. And, from a budget point of view, we're much more efficient operating in adverse weather than in the summertime."

The crews first worked in critical areas that will be very marshy in the springtime, Bridle said, and "as soon as we get a thaw in the springtime, we will go in and retrench those bunkers and put the drainage in."

He said if the snow clears by May 1, all drainage will be in by May 15.

He said Tectonic is trucking in the sand as needed, because with below zero-degree nights the sand would harden.

OFF-SEASON DECISION

Keystone Ranch, designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr., is rated one of the best resort courses in the country, and officials did not want to interrupt play.

The off-season work fulfilled that goal. Plus, Bridle said, "We felt we could make mistakes without aggravating anybody."

Yet mistakes never occurred. Indeed, Bridle said he would "absolutely" suggest to other clients that they restore their bunkers during the off-season.

"It has already proven successful," he said.

Corneillier, Keystone's superintendent the last 15 months, said other superintendents would have to evaluate their own circumstances, but for Keystone Ranch, "I'm convinced this was the best way for us to go."

"We have a lot of snowcover. When we get spring runoff our course gets very soft; and we had a lot of rain last summer. I kept looking at the course this fall and wondering how we would get heavy equipment around without tearing it up. If the ground wasn't firm, there would not be a good way.

"This worked. We know we're going to do some reseeding and resodding, but a lot less than we would have otherwise."

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