



John Walsh
Editor

TIME ON THE BEACH

Whining about bunker quality is a time-honored tradition. Many golf course superintendents say they deal with more complaints about bunkers than anything else, including putting greens. That's because bunkers are hazards, and golfers don't like to be in areas where they don't have control of what happens next.

The real bunker issue isn't pleasing all golfers, which can't be done anyway; instead, it's determining how hazardous bunkers should be. Money, equipment, weather and golfers' skills effect bunkers' degree of difficulty. Superintendents should take the lead on the issue by sitting down with owners and green chairmen to establish bunker standards. Setting standards can reduce complaints and keep more golfers happy. Check out the list of eight bunker questions on page 30, and use them as a guide to help determine bunker standards at your facility.

Golfers need to realize the financial limitations of bunkers, and superintendents should explain this to them. Money usually can solve any bunker-maintenance issue, but for most, there's not enough of it to be the answer. Understanding various bunker designs and purposes, and golfers themselves, are the keys to eliminating confusion about bunker maintenance. All those involved should know bunker-maintenance intensity and cost increase proportionally as a bunker shot's degree of difficulty decreases.

Superintendents should educate club members about bunkers and explain that they can't take all the hazardous elements out of bunkers, but they don't have to go to the extreme of telling them not to hit balls in the bunkers in the first place.

One can't discuss bunkers without talking about consistency. It's the goal of well-maintained bunkers. There are many bunker elements superintendents should check to improve consistency: packing and smoothing methods, raking and grooming methods, edging, drainage, liners, sand depth, moisture content and furrows or lack thereof. For example, once a month, superintendents can make sure depth is consistent, which usually involves hand-raking. Also, they can experiment with different rake attachments to meet golfers' needs, but let golfers know that no rake attachment will produce the same pattern because of different moisture levels in the bunkers and the natural elements that prevent bunkers from being the same.

Some superintendents recommend sampling and testing sand every two years to stay ahead of any developing problems such as silt. Sand should be checked for infiltration rate, calcareousness, color (which isn't important agronomically), particle size and penetrometer value. Everything considered, playing quality is paramount.

Skill level also perpetuates the perception of bunker inconsistency. Low-handicap golfers are driving bunkers' smooth conditions because they tend to see a tight lie and consistency, and high-handicap players tend to fear a tight lie because they think they're going to screw up the shot. High-handicap players usually don't care about bunker conditions because they tend to fear the shot no matter what.

The bottom line is that golf isn't fair. Donald Ross once said there's no such thing as a misplaced bunker and it's the job of the golfer not to hit it there. That's not quite the message superintendents want to give golfers – even though many of them would like to – but the more superintendents spearhead the bunker discussion, the better off they'll be.

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