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SHOULD BUNKERS BE FAIR?

A century ago, architect Charles Blair MacDonald declared the best way to prepare a bunker for play was to run a horse cavalry through it. Obviously, times and expectations have changed. Bunker rakes eventually became ubiquitous, and fried egg lies were largely eliminated. Modern golfers demand consistency, i.e., perfect lies and easy, predictable playing characteristics.

The PGA Tour has focused on perfecting bunkers for a while, and it's not uncommon to hear tour players cry "get in the bunker" because it often provides the best lie and easiest shot. (Old Tom Morris must roll in his grave every time.) This mentality has filtered down to the club level. Golfers expect a bunker shot to be as easy as one from the fairway.

I've been asked, "Shouldn't I be able to reach a par-5 green in two shots from the fairway bunker?" Because I have three college-age children, I've learned to answer "yes," knowing it's what they expect to hear – even if I don't believe it.

What's the architectural/strategic/hazard value of sand bunkers when they play as

easily as other shots? Why don't golfers lobby to cut down all trees that affect play or fill in ponds and lower the height of cut in the rough? Why should bunkers be so nonhazardous compared to other hazards under the Rules of Golf?

The emphasis on bunker perfection conceptually is wrong – and practically impossible. The need for skill and strategy is diminished if there's no penalty for any shot. Golf becomes easier but less interesting, even if players' scorecards look better. And it's ultimately impossible to achieve perfect fairness because higher standards lead only to higher expectations and maintenance expenses.

Bunkers should be raked and shouldn't be as difficult as the old Scottish bunkers. In Scotland, match play is common still, and punishing bunkers cost only a hole rather than a dozen strokes and the entire match. Deep bunkers turn an otherwise pleasant golf experience into extreme golf: They slow the pace of play, punish average golfers more than good ones and often lead to cautious play, which is as dull as easy play.

I strive to design reasonably fair bunkers, but I don't obsess about it. I build fairway bunkers that are shallower near the fairway and deeper toward the rough to proportionally penalize shots further off line. My fairway bunkers generally are shallow enough to allow a golfer to reach the green but deep enough to cause some doubt about clearing the lip. I make them deeper for shorter approach shots, using the depth-equals-club guideline (i.e., 6 feet deep for 6-iron shots). I make the front bunker slope less than club loft (i.e., less than 32

degrees for that 6 iron) for a reasonable chance of escape.

Theoretically, greenside bunkers should be deeper for shorter approach shots because they should demand more accuracy. However, most golfers prefer 3- to 5-foot-deep greenside bunkers that allow them to see the pin. Smaller greens with more contours make the shot proportionally more difficult, so bunkers should be about the same, or proportionally even more difficult, for shorter approach shots.

Bunker depth also might vary with target size. A huge green or wide fairway might feature one difficult hazard, but small greens and narrow fairways surrounded by hazards suggest most or all should be shallower because it's more difficult to avoid them. Each situation would inspire completely different types of play. Holes combining one difficult hazard with easier hazards, or mixing sand bunkers with other hazards, create strategy by making golfers think about where to miss.

Bunkers can serve other purposes that might affect design. They can serve as distance cues, aesthetic elements or targets, if they're shallow. Bunkers intended to fool distance perception must be larger to make things appear closer, and undersized to make them appear more distant. I usually limit, but don't avoid, large bunkers to reduce the number of difficult sand bunker recovery shots.

The above suggestions are good rules of thumb for fair bunker design. But while recoverability is important, design consistency truly isn't. A course holds more interest throughout time if some bunkers intimidate through size or depth. That often happens naturally in design as architects fit bunkers in different slopes, letting a bunker's depth fall where it may. Good golfers will learn to avoid them, and others should be challenged with a lesser penalty.

Predictable recovery makes for predictable and dull design. I hate to hear complaints that a bunker is different from the others. Variety is the spice of life, and bunkers are designed differently for good reasons. **GCI**



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