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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**



A course holds more interest throughout time if some bunkers intimidate through size or depth. Photo: John Walsh

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MARK WOODWARD?

Hiring a c.e.o. attracts attention. The GCSAA's recent search for its next c.e.o. was no exception. Due to the unexpected length of time it took to name Steve Mona's replacement, speculation about his successor grew sizably. No name was mentioned consistently as the likely next c.e.o.

However, surprisingly, well before the name of the next c.e.o. was announced, speculation had coalesced around one central theme – because the GCSAA was perceived to be at a significant crossroads within its long, noble history, the almost universal hope (not expectation) of the members and industry leaders watching was that the next c.e.o. would be a person with the requisite experience and vision to bring much-needed change to the present GCSAA culture.

Accordingly, when Mark Woodward was announced as the new c.e.o. earlier this year, this sizable awaiting audience was quick to respond because it knew what it wanted and suspected it wasn't likely to get it. Consequently, a wave of respectful disappointment spread quickly throughout that segment of the membership ranks paying attention.

It's important to note this seemingly negative response to this hiring isn't a personal matter because Woodward is respected by his peers as a person, for his career path and for his extensive knowledge of GCSAA affairs and the operating world of the golf course superintendent. But, is he the right man at this time for the GCSAA? Many think not basically because it appears Woodward would offer little support for the core change the GCSAA now requires.

Identifying what this core change should entail isn't new business because these cards have been in play for several years now – without drawing effective response. The fundamental point is an increasing number of GCSAA members are finding it more difficult to support an associationwide culture that consistently ignores member

welfare and subverts members' rights.

To support this premise, I cite the following factual association history:

- No GCSAA board has addressed the pressing, but still readily resolvable, industry practice that generally denies members access to the security of written contracts. (Read my May 2008 GCI column.)
- Politically motivated chapters consistently commandeer the individual voting opportunities of their members.
- GCSAA boards claim they act transparently yet refuse to publish their meeting

Members ... have the opportunity to regain control of their association by insisting their chapters identify member needs ...

minutes to confirm this assertion.

- Board policy deliberately denies the membership access to board members' voting records but then allows these same board members to run for reelection without disclosing their prior voting records while on the board.
- Vice presidents run unopposed for reelection, which ensures they can't be held accountable for their actions.
- The association bylaws allow GCSAA boards to operate with impunity, without the possibility of being held accountable for their actions.

To ensure new thinking doesn't penetrate board policy-making, the association bylaws have been prepared to deny the membership any input to the board nominating process. It seems members exist to pay dues and GIS education fees, then stay out of the way to allow board and staff agendas to predominate. Remind anyone of an early American theme, i.e., taxation

without representation?

Then, there's the mysterious concept of the Board Policy Oversight Task Group, which appears to be a device that provides GCSAA boards with cover when their actions are questioned. GCSAA boards appoint the members to the BPOTG and designate a recent GCSAA past president to serve as BPOTG chairman – hardly an objective evaluation team. Then, when pressure on a board arises, the BPOTG referees the issues without having final decision-making authority.

It's difficult to imagine Woodward becoming a champion for change within GCSAA circles when:

- As the 2004 association president, he comfortably accepted the present GCSAA political culture.
- When acting as 2006 chairman, the BPOTG continued to support this same culture.
- When recently interviewed by GCM magazine, he was quoted as saying, "I have great confidence in this working structure because I've functioned in similar environments ..."

Odds are Woodward will continue to support present GCSAA board priorities and policies. But, it would be wrong to prejudice the man. Remember that Harry Truman was a politician who assumed an important office once with less expected of him than from a young boy scout. But, the office grew the man, and Truman now is respected as one of this country's most effective presidents. So too, this opportunity presents itself invitingly to Woodward.

While waiting to see what direction Woodward turns, members are reminded they always have the opportunity to regain control of their association by insisting their chapters identify member needs and support member rights, and then deliver this message loud and clear to GCSAA boards. For starters, chapters might consider requiring GCSAA board members running for reelection to disclose their prior voting records while on the board to remain eligible to receive chapter member votes. **GCI**



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Jack Brennan founded Paladin Golf Marketing in Plant City, Fla., to assist golf course owners and managers with successful marketing. He can be reached at jackbrennan@tampabay.rr.com.

A TALE OF TWO OWNERS

An industry friend tells me repeatedly we need to eliminate 3,000 courses, or add 1,000, for our industry to get back to a healthy equilibrium of supply and demand. What he means is the supply of courses in the U.S. is oversaturated, and if we maintain this current supply, we need to add at least 1,000 new courses that are player friendly to attract more people into the golfing ranks.

From a marketing viewpoint, course owners need to better recognize what type of courses and facilities fit profitably into their local markets if they want to improve their businesses. For example, not all markets will support an upscale facility just because a developer wants to add a substantial premium to his lots.

Two cases in point: One is the story of a developer, and the other is about a wannabe golf course owner. The market is an upper Midwest major metropolitan area. The existing course owner, the developer, is 45 minutes north of the major metropolitan area; the wannabe course owner is focused on a market 45 minutes south. The markets are similar demographically.

In the first case, the developer became involved with golf course ownership because of a desirable land purchase that provided him an opportunity to sell land and develop homes. Though the course operations didn't cover all his debt, land sales and home development did.

Ten years ago, the property across the street from the developer's became available, and the developer, who's not a golfer, created a partnership with others interested in owning the proposed on-site golf course, which was planned as a regulation 18-hole course that would complement an existing executive course.

After financing was secured, the party interested in owning and operating the course backed out of its commitment. Believing developing a new golf course couldn't be that difficult, the developer moved forward with the business plan and

built the golf course as he began to develop the property.

As anyone who's been through this stage knows, myriad setbacks can occur during the course construction and land development: permit problems, land mitigation, reduced demand levels, drainage, wetlands and other unexpected expenses the golf course might not be able to support. Some of these problems were endured, but the course wasn't generating revenue anywhere near business-plan expectations after seven years.

... course owners need to better recognize what type of course and facility fits profitably into their local markets.



Worse yet, the market revealed relatively high consumer demand for this type of golf course. The problem wasn't the product, it was that the developer didn't know what expectations to have of the market, and he didn't have a proactive marketing plan to increase revenue.

Frustrated, the developer decided he needed to refinance or sell the club. He hired someone to conduct a feasibility study, and that person hired a consultant to conduct a marketing assessment of the club's market. The developer spent a pretty penny to learn his course was underperforming in his market by almost 20,000 rounds compared to similar courses. What shape might he have been in if he'd conducted these studies 10 years ago?

Now, the other tale. The wannabe golf course owner, who is a golfer but not savvy about golf course operations, couldn't

shake a dream he'd had for years: owning a unique golf course. So, he called a consultant two years ago to discuss the practicality of his idea, and the consultant shared the cold realities of the current golf market.

The consultant confided that while he'd be lucky to get several thousand rounds from his unique facility offering, he could expect significant public relations and significant marketing exposure from it. Therefore, viewed from a marketing standpoint, the idea had merit, and the cost of implementation wasn't prohibitive. Most importantly, the consultant told him he had to match his proposed golf course

to a market at a price point the market would bear to cover debt, at least by the third year. The consultant recommended the wannabe owner talk to other feasibility consultants, course managers and architects, and pick their brains, too.

In just two years, the wannabe course owner hasn't lost his dream of golf course ownership but is able to look at opportunities and evaluate the potential success relative to probable debt. To date, his investment in consultants is less than half of the existing course owners' investment in preparing his course for refinancing or sale.

So, what's to learn from these two examples? Invest your time and energy in knowing your optimal market positioning and what your market expectations can be before you build or buy. Doing so reduces the surprise factor of golf course ownership tenfold. **GCI**



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Demand potential of any golf course is strongly related to the number of playable days. Based on the information received from Golf Benchmark Survey participants in 2007, golf courses in Southeast Mediterranean Europe, Great Britain and Ireland, and the Middle East have almost year-round playability, whereas courses in Central, Northern and Eastern Europe had between 235 and 300 playable days in 2006.

A good benchmark indicator of demand is the average number of rounds per playable day. Eighteen-hole golf courses in the Middle East and South Africa recorded the highest average number of rounds per playable day – 117 and 96, respectively – while Eastern European courses recorded the fewest rounds per playable day – 38.

Looking at top performing locations, Dubai has the highest number of rounds per playable day (121), followed by Finland and Sweden (120 and 96, respectively). Despite the fewer playable days in Northern Europe, longer daylight hours during the summer months enable increased playability in these countries.

Eighteen-hole golf courses in the Middle East recorded the highest average number of total rounds played (almost 42,000 rounds). Golf courses in South Africa recorded about 20 percent fewer rounds, yet the country still is well above the averages of other surveyed regions in Europe.

Source: KMPG's Golf Benchmark Survey 2007

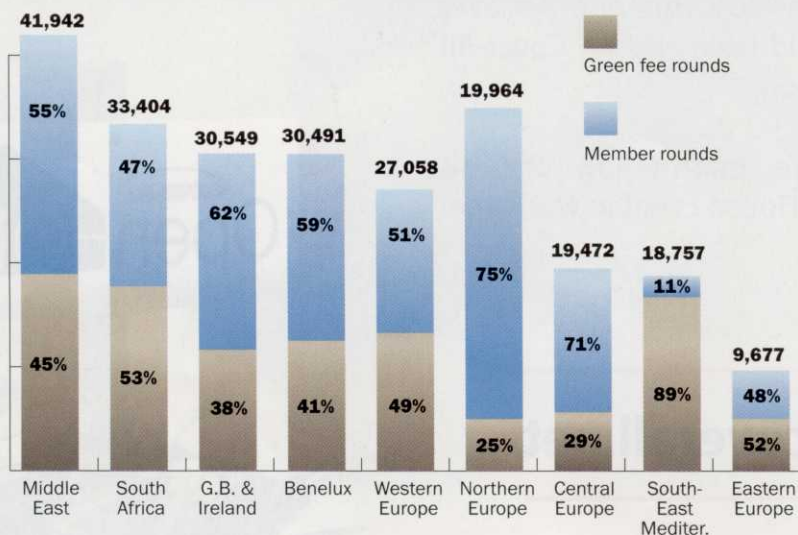
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Average number of declared playable days by region



Average number of rounds played on 18-hole courses by region



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ALL-INCLUSIVE

— The industry pursues diversity initiatives —

By Margaret Hepp

The route to Clearview Golf Club is as steeped in American history as the course itself. U.S. 30, known as the Lincoln Highway, is the oldest paved transcontinental highway in the country. Built in 1913, it runs right through the heart of East Canton, Ohio. Pass Jim's Auto and Truck Repair Shop, pass a little diner called Patty's Place and you've nearly reached the historic landmark, 1 mile straight ahead, tucked neatly into a valley off the throughway. A narrow gravel road leads down to the heart of the course, where an American flag is rooted beside a bronze sign: Ohio Historical Landmark, Clearview Golf Club, 1946. "Putting the fair in fairway."

Clearview has created its own rich history – American tradition at its proudest and best. William Powell, who opened the course in 1946, served in World War II as a U.S. Army tech sergeant. Daughter Renee is an award-winning LPGA pro who recently received an honorary doctorate of laws from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. And son Larry, who's worked on the golf course from age eight, has more than 30 years experience as a superintendent.

"We used to maintain the golf course without a lot of equipment," Larry Powell says. "Without

all the bells and whistles, it comes down to timing and respect for nature. People think they can control and somehow change nature. They can't."

It's a paradox that part of our country's history is rooted in strict separatism – of race, of class, of territory. But while you can't change nature, you can change a nation, and America was established to provide new opportunities for freedom and prosperity.

In a flat market, the golf industry is clamoring for just such a change. William Powell introduced a novel golf course to East Canton, one that would provide an experience for any and all golfers and would distance the game from the prejudice he experienced as a participant. In so doing, he created an unprecedented leadership opportunity for himself – officially, he's the first black American to open a golf course in the U.S. – and his children.

"Renee and I were privileged," Larry Powell says. "We were brought into an opportunity our parents provided."

An accounting and business management student at Walsh University in Ohio, Larry Powell acquired all his golf course expertise through practice.

"You can get education anywhere," he says. "I'm constantly learning. But it's harder to learn by osmosis. Basically, superintendents come from schools. We have to get diverse students into turfgrass study programs."

While the GCSAA has reached out to minorities in the industry recently, the percentage of nonwhite, nonmale superintendents in the association still hovers around 3 percent – 142 of 14,604 members are female and 374 are American Indian/Native American/Alaskan, Asian, Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino, according to the GCSAA. The nation and the industry are evolving, but hard work and success are deeply embedded in the history of American golf, and this remains constant as diversity in the nation and the industry is broadened.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER

It's been three months since Gary Myers, CGCS, began accepting applications for a new management addition to the golf course staff at Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Fla. He has more than enough candidates to choose from, but he's waiting to begin the interview process.

So what's the hold up? When it comes to

