

In and Out of House

Two classically designed golf courses take drastically different approaches to bunker restorations – and both vastly improved their layouts

BY SHANE SHARP

Let's face it: Bunkers aren't the most romantic element on golf courses. But when it comes to golf course maintenance, bunkers are just as important as their sexier cousins, the greens and fairways. Think about the visual appeal of a well-designed course — standing on the tee box, you gaze out on a sea of stark white, finely sculpted bunkers that appear to hover along the horizon like a surreal painting.

Sure, bunkers may not make or break a golf course, but well-crafted bunkers with crisp lines and proper drainage can be the difference between a good and a great layout. Midland Hills CC in Roseville, Minn., and

Problem

Bunkers worn down by weather and play need to be restored.

Solution

Two courses take radically different paths. One completed the renovation in-house over two years, while the other hired an outside contractor to get it done as quickly as possible.

Crystal Downs CC in Frankfort, Mich., are two classically designed golf courses that used two drastically different approaches to restore their bunkers to their original form and vastly improve their layouts.

The problems

Scott Austin, certified superintendent of Midland Hills, is the first to admit that maintaining Seth Raynor-designed bunkers is no easy task. Severe slopes and complex contouring not only make mowing a challenge, but they also intensify the impact of erosion and gravity.

Midland Hills opened in 1919, and basically remained untouched until Austin and the membership decided it was time for a change. By the late 1990s, every bunker on the course was worn from the effects of time and weathered by the elements. Bunkers weren't draining properly, their clay tiles had been plugged up or broken, and their original lines had long since receded into the landscape.

Mike Morris is the certified superintendent at Crystal Downs, a classic Perry Maxwell and Alister MacKenzie-designed layout

with about 80 bunkers. Because Maxwell and MacKenzie favored less severe bunkers, Morris' task was somewhat less daunting.

The sand in the bunkers needed to be replaced, but Morris and his staff decided it would be the ideal time to restore the bunkers to their original form. Since the bunkers fit the topography of the land, Morris and his staff determined that a bunker restoration project would require minimal construction.

The solutions

For Austin and his staff, there was never an ounce of hesitation — Midland Hills would outsource the bunker restoration project to a contractor. According to Austin, time was of the essence, and money was no object.

"At our club, we just needed to get them done," Austin says. "We didn't have the equipment, time and skills available to do it in a reasonable amount of time."

Austin hired the Hartmen Co., a golf course remodeling firm based in Victoria, Minn. Austin knew Hartmen had experience in restoring Raynor courses, and that it featured one of the best shapers in the business in

Tom West. Before getting underway, Austin and West went to visit a number of other Raynor layouts throughout the Midwest to collect data that would help them with the project.

"It took three days, and we walked each course and took photographs," Austin says. "We saw what the style was. At the Chicago GC, the bunkers haven't even been touched since the course was built. It was like going back in time."

Time, however, was not something Austin had to waste. With nearly \$400,000 to spend on the project, his club's membership wanted the project done fast and done right. West used old aerial photographs of the golf course to gain an understanding of the original bunker design. The project got underway in late April 2000 and was completed by late July.

Morris faced a different problem. Financial constraints meant the bunker restoration was either going to be done in-house or not at all. Moreover, Morris said the membership did not want any significant disruptions in play, so the project would have to be approached one

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Bunkers are as important to golf course maintenance as their sexier cousins, greens and fairways.

MIKE KLEMM

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bunker at a time over a two-year period.

Morris and his staff also used old aerial photographs to study the original bunkers. But they hit pay dirt when one of the members gave them old home movies of the entire course soon after it opened in 1929.

"We had movies of every hole from

tee to green," Morris says. "I felt we had good enough documentation that we could do it."

Morris and his staff began the project in the fall of 1997 and finished in the spring of 1999. According to Morris, the Crystal Downs greens committee never considered hiring a contractor. It was agreed the project was straightfor-

ward enough to complete in-house, cost-prohibitive to outsource and that no contractor would find the project's two-year labor schedule acceptable.

"Another key element that allowed us to do it in-house is that we didn't have a lot of construction to do," Morris says. "We just dug out the old bunkers and reshaped them. We didn't purchase new sod, and we didn't have much sod stapling."

The outcomes

"The reaction from the members was incredible," Austin says of his completed project. "They were excited and thrilled that [the bunkers] were back to their original form."

Austin admits the Midland Hills approach is not a reality for most golf courses. Essentially, Austin had a blank check and was instructed to hire a big-name contractor to complete the work in the most accurate, expedient fashion.

"Money was not an issue, and Hartmen is not cheap," he says. "[But] I will go out on a limb and say it's the best [remodeling firm] in the business."

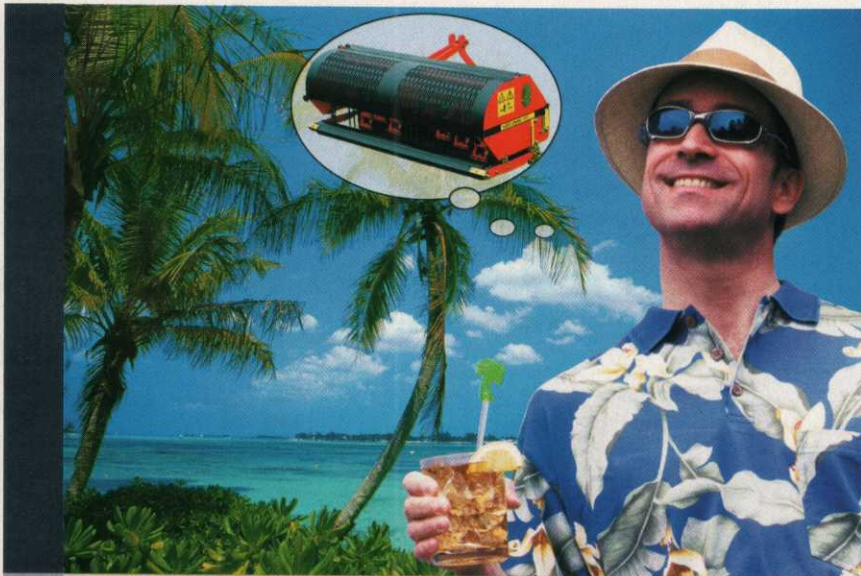
Because they elected to do the project themselves, Morris said his crew and the club's members were subject to more of the pros and cons of bunker restoration. Since he wasn't afforded any additional staff, workers had to split time between their regular duties and revamping the bunkers.

"Some of our seasonal maintenance practices were neglected for a couple years, like tree trimming, brush removal and aeration," Morris says.

However, one unforeseen benefit arose from the project, one that Morris said is hard to put a price on.

"Doing the project ourselves really empowered our staff members with the sense they had accomplished something," he says. "We have a display in our lunchroom that shows the before and after, and our crew takes a lot of pride in that." ■

Sharp is a free-lance writer from Charlotte, N.C.



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