

Life on Linksland

Nature rules at Bandon Dunes and Pacific Dunes, where superintendents face an ongoing battle with the elements

STORY AND PHOTOS

BY ANDREW PENNER

In 1936, the town of Bandon, Ore., burned to the ground. Fourteen people died and only 16 buildings were left standing. The fire, which ripped through the tinder-dry vegetation along the coast and attacked the town with incredible speed and force, was fueled by an invasive plant known as gorse.

Today, gorse is still a problem in Bandon, and especially so if you happen to be one of the two superintendents at the famed Bandon Dunes Golf Resort, home to America's finest links courses. But for superintendents Ken Nice of Pacific Dunes and Troy Russell of Bandon Dunes, gorse is just one of numerous challenges to face in an ongoing battle with the elements.

In the summer of 1999, just before ground was broken for Pacific Dunes — the incredible follow-up course to Bandon Dunes — another fire blazed through the area and actually scorched the site of the upcoming Tom Doak layout.

"Obviously, the fire in 1999 wasn't nearly as catastrophic as the 1936 blaze," says Pacific's laid-back superintendent Ken Nice. "But it was definitely a huge concern at the time. Flames reached 100 feet and we had to soak the holes on Bandon that were nearest the blaze to ensure they didn't get torched."

Interestingly, the fire actually did plenty of good when it came down to routing Doak's marvelous effort at the resort.

"The fire cleaned out the gorse and allowed us to see every contour that was hidden or disguised by vegetation," remembers Russell, who



initially hired Nice to work on Bandon Dunes back in 1999 before Nice was awarded the head job at Pacific in 2000. "The result was an opportunity to route a course with absolutely everything laid bare before us. Unquestionably, the fire allowed Doak to improve the route."

But for Nice and Russell, fire is not something they have to fight routinely. Gorse, however, definitely is. Their crews are in constant gorse control mode. Each of the two 20-man crews at Bandon Dunes are well-trained when it comes to spotting and destroying the invasive plants, which they need to be. Gorse grows quickly and unrelentingly.

"If we weren't on the stuff daily, it would be absolutely everywhere," Russell says.

The crews on both courses, which are split into teams of three or four with a section leader, will either yank the gorse out by hand if it's small

Troy Russell (left) of Bandon Dunes and Ken Nice of Pacific Dunes are the superintendents of America's finest links courses.

Continued on page 72



A steady 30 mph wind is the norm at Bandon Dunes Resort. During storms, winds can get up to 100 mph.

Continued from page 71

enough, dig it out or spot spray it with herbicide. In areas on the course where gorse is actually desired — for definition or as a hazard — it is sheared regularly.

Besides the constant battle with gorse, another daily concern at Bandon is the ever-present wind. In summer, the prevailing winds come from the north and in winter they do a 180-degree turn and howl out of the south. While a steady 30 mph wind in the afternoon is the norm, wind speeds can reach frightening levels when winter storms blow through. “On a typical year, we’ll have eight to 10 storms where winds reach 60 mph, and two major storms where winds can get to 100 mph,” Russell says.

For Nice and Russell, the wind presents a challenge in two major ways: shifting and blowing sand, and irrigating the golf course during the dry season.

Interestingly, the wind’s effect on the bunkering at Bandon varies from course to course. If you’ve been fortunate enough to play these courses, then you know that they are quite different in the way they play and are designed. Bandon Dunes, designed by David McKay Kidd, is longer, more open and features greens about one-third larger than Pacific’s (170,000 total square feet of greens on Bandon and 125,000 total square feet on Pacific). The bunkering is also different in nature. Bandon’s bunkers are small, deep, and sodded — fairly typical pot bunkers designed in the tradition of Glen Eagles in Scotland.

Pacific Dunes’ bunkering is much more dramatic (similar to Royal County Down in Ireland) with natural sand blowouts and ragged edges lined with beachgrass and gorse. The bunkers are constantly evolving. When the winds come, it’s the bunkering at Pacific Dunes that sees the most change.

“It would be pointless to continually dump sand back in the bunkers,” Nice says. “So for the most part, we let Mother Nature take its course. For us, it comes down to making the natural soils and sand in the bunkers playable regardless of what stays and what blows out.”

The crew at Pacific Dunes uses a bunker raking machine weekly to maintain a playable texture of what remains. Shovels and brooms are the tools of choice when cleanup is needed on closely mowed areas of the course where too much sand has accumulated. Other than that, bunkers are raked by hand to keep uniformity. Or in the case of the exceptional 13th hole on Pacific Dunes, which features a massive, wind-sculpted dune on the right side, they are left completely untouched.

The climate in Bandon, which is divided into two distinct periods, is like clockwork. High pressure, clear skies and almost no rain is the norm from June through September. The course receives upwards of 60 inches of rain from October through May. For Nice and Russell, this means the watering program in the four dry months is vital to healthy turf, and it poses a challenge.

Continued on page 74



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Continued from page 72

In summer, Bandon's prevailing winds come out of the north — always. And in July and August, when the wind never stops, the situation becomes extremely tricky. "We've got to be really careful in the summer, or we'll have 'hot spots' all over the place," Nice says.

For Nice and Russell, it often comes down to hand-watering areas that just don't get coverage because of wind. They are also experimenting with low-angle nozzles.

Another reason why the turf remains tight and thin is the widespread use of fescues for greens, fairways and tees, which is standard for links golf. A unique combination of fescue and Colonial bentgrass was used on both courses. The low-fertility approach (it takes divots up to four months to grow back) means mowers aren't as busy as most typical North American courses. A rigorous vertidrainage program ensures that the turf stays healthy.

The greens, although mowed at nearly one-quarter inch throughout the year, keep a quicker-than-you-think pace and require more top-dressing applications to keep thatch at a minimum and to control *Poa annua*.

"The Pacific Northwest is a perfect environment for *Poa*," Nice says. "Right now on Pacific Dunes, we're winning the battle with it, but we remove it off the greens constantly."

The greens on Bandon, which are five years older, do contain some *Poa*.

People knowledgeable about links golf are aware of the fact that soft, lush, highly fertile turf just isn't part of the equation. Tight, thin, dry turf is what links golf is all about. For Nice

and Russell, this is a blessing in disguise.

"It takes some of the pressure off, but there's a fine line," Nice says. "We want the rough to be thin, dry, alive and playable, but we also need some fertility on the fairways. Many North American golfers aren't always familiar, used to or appreciative of the type of conditions we're trying to achieve. But unquestionably, this is the closest thing to 'the old world' as you'll find in the United States."

Many courses adopt the "links" label because they happen to be located near big bodies of water and because their designers included the ground game as a way to play the courses. But the clincher at Bandon Dunes Resort is the true links conditioning.

"Not just firm and fast, but hard and fast," Russell says. "We practice agronomy the old-fashioned way — few inputs, plenty of top-dressing and compost. Our nirvana is sustainable agronomy, and while we may never quite achieve it, that's our aim."

Walking down the eighth hole on Bandon, the wind hammering him head on, Russell stops 50 yards from the green by his ball. He looks down at a super-tight fairway full of thin, colorless areas. It's bumpy, appears burnt in spots and is probably running 10 or 11 on the Stimpmeter.

"A perfect fairway," he exclaims with a smile. Then he reaches into his bag, pulls out his putter and calmly strokes it to 10 feet. "Too bad not everyone sees it that way," he says. ■

Penner is a free-lance writer from Calgary, Alberta.