



Golf course maintenance budgets get bigger because of bunker maintenance boom

and Dollars

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Golf course superintendents say they can't be faulted for grumbling about the expensive chore that has become bunker maintenance. Bunkers are where golf balls go to die, after all. Why then should they be maintained to play firm and easy? And why do they have to look so darn pretty?

If golfers aren't complaining about green speed, they're complaining about imperfect lies in bunkers, says Dale Caldwell, superintendent of the Minneapolis (Minn.) Golf Club.

"They don't understand that bunkers are hazards," Caldwell adds.

Jason Straka, a senior golf course design associate for Hurdzan/Fry Design in Columbus, Ohio, says many golf courses are spending as much on bunker construction and upkeep as they are on greens.

"I'd say that's probably accurate with us," says Dennis Bowsher, superintendent of The Ohio State University Golf Club in Columbus, noting that many of today's golfers demand "flawless" bunkers.

Bowsher joined Ohio State last year after the club's Alister MacKenzie-designed Scarlet Course underwent a \$4.2-million renovation

directed by Jack Nicklaus. The course's bunkers received much attention as part of the restoration and now require more handwork because of their maintenance-intensive design.

Alas, golf course maintenance budgets are getting bigger because of an increase in bunker maintenance. And while Straka says it's a crazy trend, there's not much anybody can do about it.

It's the We-Want-That-At-Our-Course Syndrome at work again. Well-traveled golfers see perfectly maintained bunkers at other courses and decide they want the same at their clubs back home.

"It's hard to reverse that trend," Straka says. "[It's the same with] the distance issue, with Pro V1 golf balls and 460cc titanium drivers. I'm not going to be the person to tell golfers that they can't use that equipment anymore."

And superintendents surely aren't going to tell golfers that they can't have finely edged and firm bunkers either.

But as long as golfers are willing to pay for what they want, Caldwell is fine with fulfilling their requests. He told the club's members it would cost about \$1 million to restore the course's bunkers to their liking at the Minneapolis Golf Club. The members said "fine."

That's not to say the course's bunkers didn't need attention. The previous sand in the bunkers had become contaminated with soil that eroded into it after heavy rains. The

bunkers are being reshaped and will be filled with some of the best sand on the market from the Chardon, Ohio-based Best Sand Corp., Caldwell says.

Even before the bunker renovation, which began in mid-August, Caldwell says maintenance costs for bunkers at the Minneapolis Golf Club have soared the past decade. Caldwell has had a \$13,000 line item in his golf course maintenance budget for bunker repair and renovation for several years.

"It's mostly for adding sand in the bunkers," he says, noting that he and his staff monitor closely the sand's depth.

So meticulous

Bunkers didn't receive nearly the attention 10 years ago as they do now. Their maintenance requirements have increased steadily since. Caldwell's staff has gone from raking bunkers with a machine to raking them by hand.

Bowsher, who's in his 20th year as a superintendent, says he never thought he would spend so much of his maintenance budget on bunkers, especially labor.

"When we prep them for tournaments, there's a lot of meticulous work that goes in to make them consistent," he says.

After the Scarlet course's restoration, Bowsher had to hire 10 additional employees on his staff because of the increased maintenance caused by renovation of the 65 bunkers, many of which were transformed with high faces to make them appear "dramatic."

"On a given day, we're sending eight to 10 guys out [to work on the bunkers]," Bowsher says.

It's not just the bunkers themselves that require more maintenance, Bowsher says. It's an entire bunker complex. The turf around steep bunker faces is often on steep slopes as well and must be hand-mowed and hand-trimmed. And then the grass clippings often must be blown out of the bunkers.

"It all adds up," Bowsher says.

It all adds up faster, though, for golf courses that can't afford to throw a lot of money at bunkers. Straka visited a facility recently that had been hit hard by poor economics, which was evident on the golf course maintenance crew that had shrunk from 14 members to six

members in a year. But that didn't mean that golfers' expectations for excellent conditions had shrunk, Straka points out.

"How are you supposed to maintain your bunkers the way you did last year with half of your staff?" he asks.

Not every superintendent can increase his or her budget for the betterment of
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Sand Dollars



At The Ohio State University, the Scarlet Course's bunkers received much attention as part of a \$4.2 million renovation.

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bunkers. In his previous job as superintendent of Virginia Oaks Golf Club in Gainesville, Va., Bowsher says he struggled with upping the budget for bunker maintenance because he couldn't do it at the expense of other important tasks.

Caldwell says he has never had to rob Peter to pay Paul to spend more on bunker maintenance. He simply tells members "that it will cost this if you want this." He tells them money must be added to the budget to com-

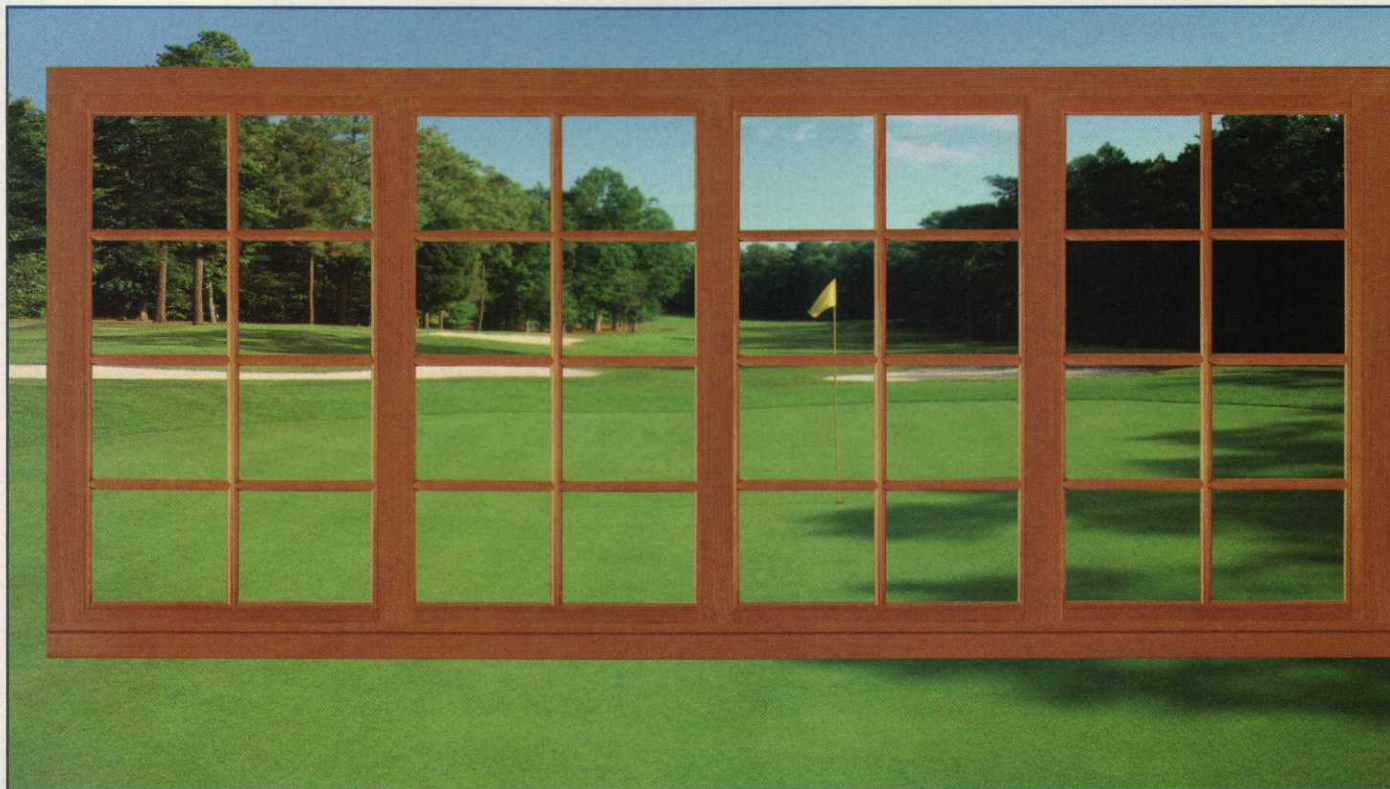
plete the task, or something must be trimmed from the budget to create money. And it's always something not expendable that Caldwell tells them he'll have to cut.

"You tell them something they don't want to lose, and then they're more likely to raise the budget," he says. "That's the politics of the deal."

Spending more money on bunker maintenance upfront can help reduce it later. Straka says recent technology, such as bunker lining, has helped to combat increased bunker maintenance. While courses might spend more to build or renovate bunkers by implementing the technology, those courses are spending less in the long run to maintain the bunkers because of the benefits associated with the bunker lining.

Brian Flynn, the marketing manager for IV-GOLF, says it has taken several years for bunker renovation products, which are proven to control damage and erosion caused by washouts, to catch on with superintendents.

PHOTO BY: LARRY AYLRARD



But he's not surprised. "The golf industry is a slow-moving industry," says Flynn, whose company manufactures Sandtrapper, a bunker lining that features a polymer technology. "[The product] pays for itself in the long haul," he says.

Bowsher says bunkers linings were installed at the Scarlet course as part of its renovation. While there's still a lot of maintenance to be done in and around the bunkers, it doesn't include having to repair washed-out sand after a heavy rain thanks to the bunker liners.

Straka says problems arise when owners and/or architects decide to build artistic-looking bunkers with high faces of flashing sand, but they don't build them with bunker linings.

"They don't spend the money up-front," Straka says.

After a few heavy rains, the sand washes out, and the bunker's bottom begins to erode and contaminate the sand. Then the bunker looks like a melted chocolate sundae and golfers begin to gripe.

The future

Flynn understands why superintendents gripe about increased maintenance (and money) for bunkers.

"So what if there is soil or rocks in a bunker," Flynn says. "So what if the grass is growing over the edge of the bunker."

But Flynn says the trend among some owners and architects is to build dramatic golf courses, which include dramatic bunkers, and he has no problem with that.

"You're always going to have a variety," Flynn says. "That's why there's impressionist art, modern art and post-modern art."

So bunker maintenance will continue to take a chunk out of superintendents' maintenance budgets. But what's important now is to not let it become even more of a two-headed monster, Straka says. If costs are \$3 now for a square foot of bunker maintenance, they should not be allowed to rise to \$6 a square foot in five years.

"We need to keep it more at the status quo," Straka says. ■

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