



Year OF THE Weird

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A BIZARRE
CONFLUENCE OF EVENTS
MADE LIFE VERY
INTERESTING FOR THOSE
IN THE GOLF INDUSTRY

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

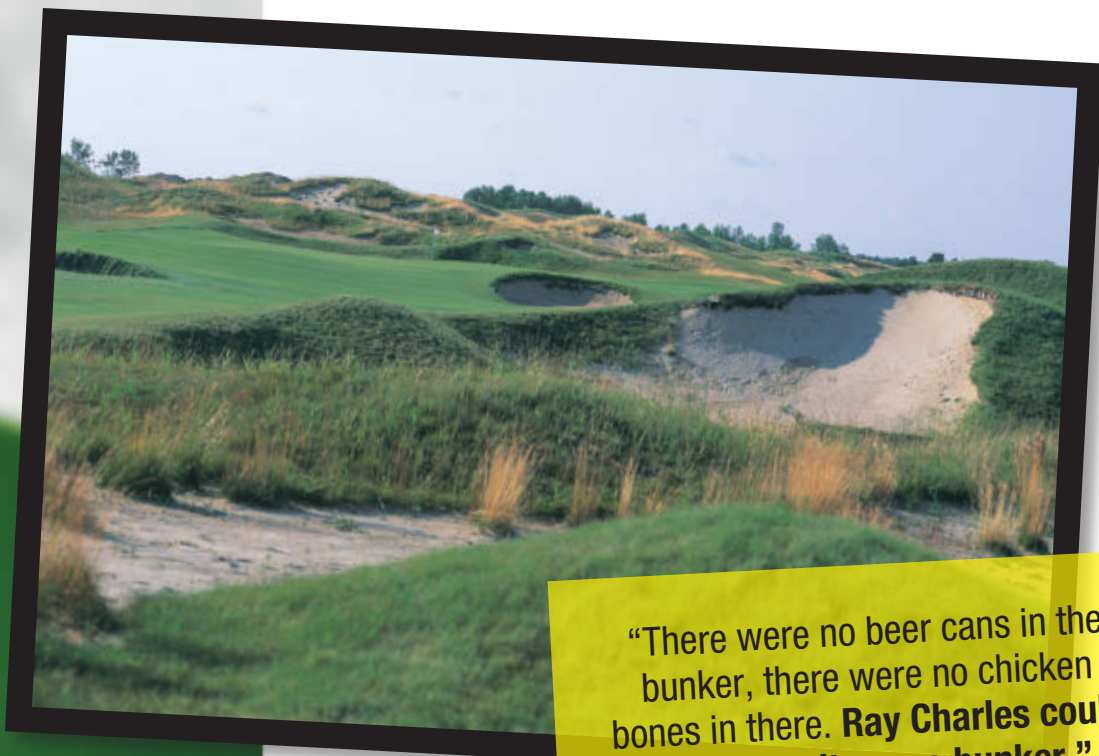


PHOTO BY: MIKE KLEMM

“There were no beer cans in the bunker, there were no chicken bones in there. Ray Charles could have seen it was a bunker.”

— PETE DYE

What's the good thing about the golf industry in 2010? Things can't much worse in 2011!

It was another wacky and weird year, but an air of peculiarity was almost inevitable when the sport's most visible personality opened the season in hiding, only to be later found at a sex rehab center in Mississippi. But as rough as things were for Tiger Woods, a bizarre confluence of events made life even more challenging for those in the golf industry.

A long, nasty summer was the defining moment of 2010 for most in the golf course industry. (Unless you're an out-of-work golf architect. More on that in a moment.) At least superintendents could take comfort in widespread media coverage of the tough growing conditions in some parts of the country. Even the Wall Street Journal's highly visible Saturday golf column took up the cause.

“Grass does have a mechanism to cool itself,” wrote John Paul Newport in the WSJ. “It's called evapotranspiration and is analogous to perspiration. The roots draw up water from the soil and it evaporates through the plant's leaves, dissipating heat. But when greens are scalped to a quarter-inch, an eighth of an inch and even shorter, the leaf surface available for transpiration declines.”

Even the Golf Channel's weepy-when-talk-turns-to-Tiger commentator Charlie Rymer chimed in.

“Golfers need to appreciate healthy turf more than greens that roll 14 on the Stimpmeter,” he said. “Not only does this take pressure off the golf course owner, but it also helps with pace of play.”

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— CHARLIE RYMER,
THE GOLF CHANNEL

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The loss of greens at several high-profile courses was juxtaposed against United States Golf Association President Jim Hyler's noble push for more brown turf through less water. His message, while reported on by several outlets and no doubt appreciated by legions of golf course managers hoping to convince golfers of the benefits of reduced-water usage, was not aided by player feedback at the USGA's crown jewel, the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach Golf Links.

Despite vowing to have slightly slower greens this time around, the USGA pushed Pebble to the brink. While the greens' health was not compromised, moisture levels plummeted and the inconsistent *Poa annua* greens drove players batty. Several complained and, other than winner Graeme McDowell, most players left with renewed hostility toward the USGA.



“The U.S. Open is not about cosmetics,” wrote the USGA's California-based agronomist Pat Gross after the event. “It's about providing a challenging and rigorous test to identify the best player. Producing a cosmetically attractive golf course would have been the easy task: a little more water, a touch of fertilizer and we would have had green, pretty putting greens and soft conditions, but that was not the goal.”

The USGA's rocky U.S. Open was quickly forgotten as the R&A struggled



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The USGA and Mike Davis, the organization's senior director of rules and competitions, made the news as much as their tournaments.

with greens too fast for windy weather at St. Andrews, a mini-debacle that caused the suspension of play. But the R&A's rocky Open Championship was even more quickly forgotten when Dustin Johnson came to the final hole of the PGA Championship at Whistling Straits in

Sheboygan, Wis. Johnson drove in a bunker crowded with fans, didn't realize he was in a hazard and grounded his club. He was penalized and missed out on a playoff won by Martin Kaymer, but the fallout was not pretty for the PGA of America and Whistling Straits.

"I was standing right there," Whis-

ting Straits architect Pete Dye said a few weeks later. "When he hit the ball in the bunker, the referee walked up to him and said, 'Do you need anything?' and Dustin said, 'No, I'm good.' There were no beer cans in the bunker, there were no chicken bones in there. Ray Charles could have seen it was a bunker."

ESPN.com's Rick Reilly disagreed.

"Let me ask you this: How was Johnson even supposed to know he was in a bunker? He's played golf most of his 26 years and never before has he come upon a bunker where a dozen people were standing in it with him. Has it ever happened to you? If Whistling Straits is so intent on playing a slab of trampled sand as a bunker, doesn't it owe it to the players to maintain it like one? Why didn't it have ropes around them if it was expecting players to have to play out of them with such tenderness?"

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2010 in Review

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Amazingly, weeks after the event, the PGA still had no answer for a problem that will rear its head again in 2015 when the championship returns to Whistling Straits.

"Do you mark 900 of them not as bunkers and 300 as bunkers?" asked PGA President Jim Remy. "How do you ever mark them?"

Apparently, the concept of playing them "through the green" is just too much to handle. But it won't change what happened to Johnson, who came out the winner with his matter of fact comments and lack of pretense.

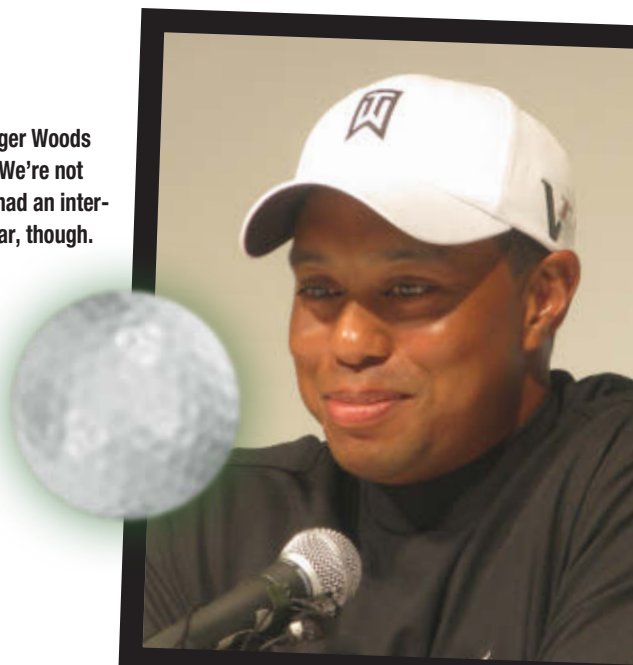
"Rules are rules," he said. "Obviously, I know the rules very well. I just never thought I was in a bunker, or I would have never grounded my club. Maybe walking up to the ball, if all those people hadn't been there, maybe I would have recognized it as a sand trap. I knew there weren't any waste bunkers. But all the bunkers on the course had a darkish color to the sand. This was white dirt."

Craziness of another kind continued just a few weeks later at the U.S. Amateur, where the USGA fell a little too in love with firm, brown and fast, and lost control of Chambers Bay Golf Course in University Place, Wash. A few weeks after the event, superintendent Dave Wienecke defended himself for the state of his course.

"When (the USGA's) Mike (Davis) told me not to water at all, then I got a little concerned," Wienecke says. "The irrigation system had been turned off for nearly a week already at that point, but we had been hand-watering the greens. I was worried that drying them out any more might cause a problem. I thought the course might become unfair because good shots would not be rewarded, and I was worried we might lose some hole locations."

That's what happened during Monday afternoon's first

Why is Tiger Woods smiling? We're not sure. He had an interesting year, though.





qualifying round, when players averaged 79 and the USGA admitted things got out of hand. For Tuesday's round, water was applied and

Wienecke even had to devise a special way to cut cups.

"We watered the area around where the new hole was to be cut fairly heavily just to stop the ground from crumbling and breaking up," he says. "Then we filled the new hole with water."

As rough as things were on the course for the USGA, the vaunted groove rule change designed to return more skill and slow down the distance race had almost no impact. It did, however, produce an epic PGA Tour spat when Phil Mickelson put a non-conforming PING wedge in his bag for the San Diego tour stop, as he was allowed to do under PING's early 1990s settlement with the USGA. Fellow player Scott McCarron branded him a cheater, and Tim Finchem had to broker a high-profile peace agreement during the Northern Trust Open.

Architects had the worst year, as most saw little in the way of new work as banks cut off funding for new courses. After years of bankrolling splashy projects, the lenders finally said enough is enough.

"The two reasons golf courses fail is that almost no one does basic demographic research, and developers and lenders get starry-eyed by the name of the designer," says Jerry P. Sager, First National of America director, a financial holding company that (used to) loan money to golf course owners.

"We are just not building very many new golf courses because the banks won't loan any money to make that happen," Rees Jones told CNBC. "The golf industry was not included as part of the national stimulus package, but just about everyone else was."

Architects did lash out at the governing bodies for not doing something about the ball, surprising the R&A with a high-profile letter on the eve of the Open Championship. The signees, including Mike Hurdzan, Dana Fry, David Kidd and Donald Steel, made the connection between the distance chase, sustainability and slow play.

"The greater length that the ball travels has created a demand for longer golf courses," the group wrote. "The increased acreage required for new golf courses has amplified the environmental impact of golf course construction and maintenance, with greater inputs of fuel, fertilizers, pesticides and water required."

Even Tiger Woods, who back in January couldn't be located, spoke out in his own way.

"The guys are hitting it a long way," Woods said in Boston during the Deutsche Bank Championship. "For instance, (at the Barclay's at Ridgewood Country Club), No. 8 is a par 3 down the hill, playing 207 the last day, and I hit 7-iron. I don't ever hit 7-iron that far. Then I watched Dustin Johnson hit 9-iron. It's just ... I can understand them wanting to obviously pull the game back a little bit." ■

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