

Bunkers AND Bucks



Superintendents aim to reduce maintenance costs in sand hazards without causing a fuss

BY ANTHONY PIOPPi, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

There are only so many places where golf course superintendents can reduce their maintenance budgets in these tight economic times.

At affordable layouts, golfers' expectations may not be high. In the case of municipal courses, golfers realize local government officials control the purse strings so a decrease in the level of maintenance is somewhat understood.

For those who take care of upscale layouts, whether they are daily fee or private, the task is more difficult. Players have come to expect a certain level of maintenance, and any modification can be cause for concern.

A reduction in labor is most often the way superintendents save money. But when it comes to course maintenance, the areas where expenses can be reduced are few. For many, though, it turns out a significant reduction in bunker maintenance can save money but not increase complaints. Best of all, it can perhaps bring an end to such ludicrous practices as bleaching bunker sand.

At the private Black Creek Club in Chattanooga, Tenn., superintendent Scott Wicker maintains all of his roughly 80 bunkers with a mechanical rake rather than by hand. He said he realized the cost-saving change was possible thanks to a Nationwide Tour official. Wicker's course has hosted the Chattanooga Classic Presented by Black Creek for the last eight years (this year's event is Oct. 7-10). A few years ago, a Nationwide official told Wicker that mechanical raking produced an acceptable surface in his eyes. Wicker commends the Tour for taking that stance.

"I think they're getting back to basics," he says.

Wicker also reduced the frequency of bunker work on the privately owned Brian Silva design that opened in 2000. In an average week, the crew will rake sand three times.

"Otherwise, we expect golfers to rake them accordingly," Wicker said, adding that the club's owners back that stance and believe that members are responsible for a portion of the daily upkeep.

At Black Rock Country Club in Hingham, Mass., superintendent Chuck Welch has cut back on the regularity of his bunker raking and so far the members haven't picked up the slack as they should.

"They don't seem to like to rake them themselves," Welch

says. "You need to take care of your own golf course."

Part of the problem, he surmises, is that it's the first time most of the younger members have belonged to a club.

Welch cut five seasonal employees to work inside budget constraints and that has led to a reduction in not only how often the sand is maintained, but also the banks of the 109 bunkers. Rather than putting down chemicals in large applications, he switched to spot spraying.

The method John Davis uses to reduce the cost of taking care of his sand hazards involves workers taking on added responsibility. Davis, superintendent at the private Secession Golf Club, a mandatory walking course in Beaufort, S.C., had crew members whose morning assignment was greenside bunkers. He now has the four who walk mow greens take care of those same hazards, a necessity after his full-time staff was reduced by five.

While the greenside bunkers of the Bruce Devlin design

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PLAYERS HAVE COME TO EXPECT A CERTAIN LEVEL OF MAINTENANCE. ANY MODIFICATION CAN BE A CAUSE FOR CONCERN.

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are raked every day, the fairway bunkers get attention only when they need it. Often times, it's Davis or assistants who are the ones with their hands on those rakes.

Sometimes spending more can reduce costs down the road.

Randy Wahler, the certified golf course superintendent in his 30th year at Knollwood Club near Chicago, says the club recently completed a renovation of its 76 bunkers, many of which have high-flashed sand faces. Under the guidance of architect Keith Foster, the club installed bunker liners as part of the process. They also filled the bunkers with sand that compacts better than average bunker sand.

"We don't have to shovel sand back up after a major rain-fall," Wahler says of the improvements. "We put a little extra money in now to save a lot of money down the road."

Wahler has also been able to reduce hand-raking green-side bunkers to three times a week and fairway bunkers to once a week.

The Timbers Golf Club in Vassar, Mich., is a daily-fee layout with the cost to play about \$50. Large portions of those who tee it up are vacationers. As a result, superintendent

Tim Sheridan needs to produce a top-notch product every day even though his budget has been reduced in the last few years.

When the economy was better, Sheridan had eight full-time employees and four part-timers working 20 hours a week. Bunkers were maintained daily with a mechanical rake. All 41 sand hazards were hand edged biweekly.

"We had some really sharp-looking bunkers," Sheridan says.

Three years ago, with the economy slowing, Sheridan reduced edging to every three weeks. Now, with a crew of five full-timers and five part-timers, he's edging them about once a month and they are raked two or three days a week and touched up daily. Sheridan has also increased his use of growth regulators and wetting agents on the bunker surrounds to reduce the need to mow.

Sheridan says he has received no complaints from golfers, of which about 50 percent are regulars and the others vacationers. However, there have been gripes that work has not been done on bunkers that need to be renovated.

One other job that Sheridan had placed upon him was explaining to the two brothers who own his course how cutting back a budget can affect maintenance.

"I try to educate them that you can't just pick a number and say this is it because there are consequences to that," he says.

The lessons learned from reduced spending on course maintenance aren't just for golfers and owners, but also for superintendents. It appears, much to the surprise of many, that the level of daily course maintenance may have gone too far, well beyond what is required or desired.

In Chattanooga, Wicker has found the results of his cutbacks on bunker maintenance to be ironic.

"The more we did to them, the more we heard about them," Wicker says. "The less we do, the less we hear about them."

For Davis, perfect bunkers are a deviation from the intent of their role. Now, with less attention, bunkers are more in line with how they should be.

"They always want them perfect," Davis said of his members. "But they're hazards." ■

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