

The Sand Trap

And you thought bunker maintenance was a headache before the PGA Championship boondoggle? Think again!

I'm sure those of you not busy keeping your own bunkers up to today's absurd standards might have been wondering long before the Dustin Johnson disaster marred an otherwise entertaining PGA Championship. In case you missed it, Johnson was penalized two shots for grounding his club in a "bunker," which knocked him out of a PGA playoff. But Johnson thought he was hitting off a dirt patch, not a maintained bunker.

My question: How can bunkers inside the ropes be prepared one way, and sandy pits outside the ropes maintained another way — and all under the umbrella of a bunker?

Actually, most of us didn't wonder because we just assumed the stuff outside the ropes was played as through the green. Not until Johnson sprayed his tee shot right, only to find himself surrounded by hordes of fans with almost no official or marshal support, did the issue come up. And, boy, did it come up.

But the PGA had every warning of this happening for several years, starting in 2004 when Stuart Appleby took four penalty shots for a similar infraction. So this time around, the guys charged with selling America protein bars and Pinnacles made sure to post a "Supplementary Rules" notice on the locker-room mirror, figuring all of the tour's preening types wouldn't miss it.

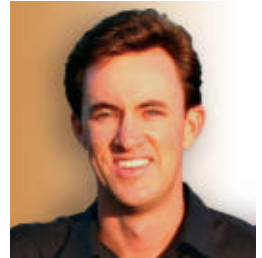
The PGA also sent out five walking rules officials Sunday to help the leaders. But when it came time for the official to

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GOLF, AS IT SHOULD HAVE

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



prevent such a debacle, he was busy trying to keep the crowd from trampling Johnson, who claimed he didn't know he was in a bunker. Neither did on-course reporter David Feherty, since the bunker was teeming with fans and its edges were hard to see.

Afterwards, most media ripped Johnson for not reading the rules sheet. But plenty of blame was cast on the PGA, Whistling Straits architect Pete Dye and the voluminous excess the rules of golf have become. But this is also about what bunkers have become and where they will go. And what does this episode mean for the most overthought, over-prepared and most ridiculous element of modern-day maintenance?

Things could go two ways post-PGA. Whistling Straits may go in and get a hard count on the number of these sandy pits it has, order drainage and fresh sand for all, and set a horrific example by treating them all the same. And then during major tournament play, each bunker could be raked daily thanks to help from the local National Guard. And officials could rope off sand pits during the 2015 PGA Championship to keep kids from playing and building sand castles in them, as one writer noted they were doing during this year's tournament.

Naturally, what happened at

Whistling Straits has set off alarm bells throughout golf, as it should have. Here we have a course trying to maintain as many as 1,200 bunkers to comply with the bloated rules of golf — all because of the ridiculous notion that a bunker needs to offer a reasonable lie.

A more attractive solution for the next tournament held at Whistling Straits is to go in a direction that Dye needs to endorse. Take away the rakes! Also, clean up the main, in-play bunkers Sunday before the tournament and then tell players, "Fellas, you're on your own. You can ground your clubs, and kids you can build castles."

We know this wouldn't only resolve the issue of what's a bunker and what's a through-the-green pit at Whistling Straits, but, more selfishly for the golf maintenance industry, it would be a high-profile example for golfers, showing that daily unraked bunkers is far from a bad thing. In fact, it's as it should be both to restore hazards to their rightful places, and bunker budgets to within reason.

It's just a shame we'd have to wait until 2015 for progress in the War On Bunkers.

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