

The Bunkers Down Under

Fortune took me to Australia last month for the Presidents Cup and a chance to finally see golf as they do it Down Under. And I bring you good news.

Australian golfers have many of the same peccadillos as American golfers: They like rough, trees, expensive clubhouse re-dos and for their courses to punish every bad shot without concern for playability. But that's about where the similarities end.

Because even with their affinity for difficulty and manly shot values, Aussie golfers are light years ahead of American golfers when it comes to common sense bunker maintenance. Whether by fortune or accident, they do not treat the bunker as an almightly cathedral requiring perfect sand, constant grooming and video-game aesthetics.

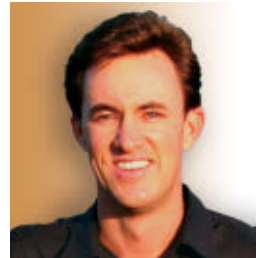
Now, some who watched the Presidents Cup or the Australian Open might quibble with this assertion, citing the tightly clipped edges of bunkers cutting right into greens and giving Aussie golf a distinct flair. However, with an arid climate and overall mentality of not making grass so green, their turf grows slower, making the lip maintenance a minor issue. Especially since crews have so much time freed up from the daily, almost neurotic sand primping demanded by Americans.

First of all, there's the way they rake sand. The floors are raked almost daily at most of the better clubs, every few days at the public courses. Not much different than us, right?

Think again. With sand-based golf

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BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



at most places, the bunker floors are shaped out of native soil and packed in nicely. No liners and minimal drainage. So even though bunker faces are steep, there is no obsession with stacking the bunker walls with two to three inches of sand to hide the native soil, even though aesthetically this look sticks out and to some of us weirdos, adds a roughness and patina to the bunkering that is... beautiful. Instead, the area raked regularly in bunkers is perhaps 50 percent of the total bunker square footage, with only occasional touch-ups of the faces and that's usually done with a broom.

I was there during their springtime and got to see 20 courses, including several after heavy rains. In America, the horror of washed out faces and uneven lies has golfers expecting maintenance staffers to be out after the final drop has fallen from the sky to cover up the horrors of erosion and rain no matter how absurd it may seem for bunkers to be perfect so soon after a weather event.

Several Aussie superintendents were nice enough to discuss their practices and when asked how they get away with so rarely raking sand or leaving faces with nothing more than a dusting

of the tan stuff, they merely shrugged.

When I probed a bit more, they didn't throw their American colleagues under the bus or even question why we do things the way we do. But instead, they just said this is what golfers in Australia know and most are just fine with a rustic approach to bunkers. In fact, they insist on the face maintenance because with so little sand, balls nearly always finish in the bottom of bunkers on the flatter floors. And I've yet to meet a golfer who longs for buried lies in bunker faces, American or otherwise.

Re-educating the American golfing public to understand just how much expense and manpower is wasted on bunker maintenance is probably impossible at this point, but if we could just get one major championship or high profile event to show the earth can revolve on its axis with only a dusting of sand on faces and merely raking a portion of bunker floors, we could be just like the Aussies. And that would be a very good thing.

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