



Q & A with Sean Tully

By **BRIAN NETTZ, CGCS**

Sean, it's a pretty well known fact that many of today's older golf courses eliminated bunkers during WWII in an effort to reduce expenses and labor. If there were reductions to be had in this era, when would you estimate that bunkers moved from strictly a hazard to an item with a greater expectation level?

Bunkers are a hot topic for most golf course superintendents! Nothing like making a hazard play more fair or having all of the bunkers uniform in depth and moisture content on a daily basis! Bunker maintenance shifted shortly after WWII when more attention was paid to reducing bunker maintenance. Bunkers were made easier to play from and maintain and in doing so bunkers have lost a lot of character. Bunkers have also become a huge labor item due to the drive for consistent conditions. It hasn't always been that way, a noted course back east during the 1930s would rake their bunkers by pulling a bunch of tree limbs behind a tractor through the bunker. The shift towards consistent and fair conditions is probably drawn straight from the PGA Tour where this idea has been persistent for the last 10-15 years.

Technology and its implementation into golf today is a concern for nearly every course, and especially so for the older designs. Was there a similar concern earlier in golf with regards to better club construction, new ball types and so forth? Have you seen any evidence to suggest that concerns were raised around the turn of the century on these issues?

Golfers have always been on the lookout for ways to improve their game and golf balls have always been the one aspect of the game that has seen the most change over the years. At the same time the game has evolved along with the ball with golf course design and course set-up having to make adjustments for these changes. Take for instance the old gutta percha golf balls were very unforgiving and a long drive was well under 200 yards for everyone except the best golfers of the day. Golf balls would later shift to rubber filled balls and some of the first issues with distance and traditional golf came to light. The issues with the new rubber balls were played out just as much in the newspapers and magazines of the day as they were on the golf course!

Early club faces were smooth and over time they started to get scoring on their faces with a dot punch and later much more elaborate designs to help grab the ball and impart spin. It is easy to see by today's standards that people will go to any length to improve their game. For example, in the mid 1920s a golf Pro was trying to make a club that could hit the ball further and in doing so he ended up with a rather unique and deadly golf club. The Pro made a metal shaft that held a liquid and as the swing was made, inertia forced the liquid to the club head and the club head speed would be greater. In theory, this makes a lot of sense, but when they used mercury they ran into a number of problems!

The golf ball held the biggest issue with certain proponents of the game. The early change from gutta percha to Haskell balls forced most golf clubs to add length to their courses. This happened again throughout the 1920s as older courses had to be lengthened to challenge golfers using newer golf balls and clubs. Some of these courses



were less than 10 years old and were already too short by the new standards set by the latest batch of golf balls brought to market. At this same time some efforts were being pursued to standardize the golf ball. There were some earlier attempts at standardization, but it wasn't until 1921 that there was a standard set by the USGA and R&A. There has been some disagreements on what the standards should be and for a number of years there was two different sized balls

being used. There is still some ongoing discussions on limiting the golf ball or having another set of rules for the professionals, but they don't seem to gather much consensus.

With regards to technology, do you feel that new technologies such as longer flight balls, straighter flight balls, and better clubs make the game more enjoyable for the "bread and butter" of the golf business (the 25 handicap golfer)? Do you feel that these things will help sustain golf or do you feel that they remove from the game?

Technology always has some unforeseen issue/s that carries with it. Yes, golfers have at their advantage equipment that will allow them to hit the ball further and straighter than ever before, but have we seen collective handicap go down, or more people playing the game? Not really. Golfers need to be concerned less about distance and more concerned with shots around the green and putting if they want to improve. So, my opinion would be no on technology improving ones game. Practice and playing to your strengths can go a lot further than the newest club that could add "insert number" yards to your drives.

With technology comes a higher price to just about everything otherwise it doesn't justify its existence. How many new drivers need to come out each year saying they can improve ones game and cost "x" dollars more. I can still remember the last new club that I bought, an old Taylor Made Bubble shaft driver way back in 1997! I'm old school as most will probably already know, my bag as I look at it now has an old Hogan Speed Slot persimmon "2" wood that I use off of the tee and the fairway. An old set of Hogan blades that includes a liron that is not in my bag for show and my dad's old sand wedge that has seen too many bunkers! I know that I am in the minority when it comes to golf clubs and new technology. I will occasionally play golf with my set of hickory clubs and have more fun playing with them then I do with modern clubs. For me the technology takes away from the game and places a greater emphasis on equipment. Learn more about your swing and build off of that first instead of looking for easy answers with the latest improvements touted in golf magazines.

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Based on attitudes towards technological inputs in today's game, do you feel that golf should embrace these items to attract more players? Is golf too attached to its traditions? Does this attachment put golf's business and marketing plans at a disadvantage to its overall survival, or is this current downswing in players just another ebb in the flow of golf historically?

Golf doesn't need to embrace technology to win over golfers! They need to play a fun game that they can play with friends and family in a timely fashion and is affordable! We are growing the game in the wrong direction--bigger golf courses that are being built today just add to the cost of maintaining golf courses and that expense comes right back to the golfer. If anything we have gotten away from the traditions that made golf what it was. Make golf available for everyone and try to keep the costs to the golfer at a decent amount. Using less water for firmer conditions and grow less grass to help reduce costs are some quick answers for Superintendents on our end of the spectrum. Change the culture around the game. Not that easy to do, but my first target would be golf carts. More golfers walking would lead to those same golfers enjoying the game later in life. Walking and golfing go hand in hand and has shown health benefits. Too many younger people take carts and don't fully engage themselves, others or the golf course proper as they play a round of golf. So much has changed in our society in how we view family time. Raising our children for most younger families that have less time to devote 3-5 hours makes playing a round of golf a lower priority. Historically there has been some ebb and flows in players. Golf grew too fast for a demand that was either overinflated or a "build it and they will come" mentality that helped to over saturate the market. Better courses that favor a solid design, good conditions, and a walker friendly course are just the tip of the iceberg on what can be done to bring golfers back to the course.

How do you feel current golf initiatives are working to attract the future golfer? Compared to other sports such as soccer and football which only require a ball and some open space, do you feel that golf is prohibitively expensive considering the cost of clubs, lessons, green fees?

I have been "playing it forward" for a long time and I hope the recent push on this idea can make an impact on changing peoples opinions on the course they are playing. Harder isn't a way to judge how good something is, I prefer enjoyment over a score of 90 or 100 any day! Cost is probably one of the biggest issues that I see as I start to introduce my girls into golf. Where do I find the time in our busy schedules to get them up to the course and play. I have the benefit of being in the industry so my initial costs are considerably lower than someone without the connections we have. I can see how hard it is for a player new to the game. I would focus on families that already have a member(s) playing and work on ways to include the other family members and work on building the game into their future generations. Golf can win people over when given the chance to play in its many settings and with people that enjoy a round and others company. Just have fun-- play some match play golf, or better yet--- play some golf following the old stymie rules that will add some fun with your playing partners on the greens!

Tell me what brought you into this industry and how your passion for its history came about. What do you tell your daughter about your job and what you do everyday?

My first job was working on a golf course where my dad learned the game and was a local golfer of note. He qualified for a PGA event as an amateur and golf was a way of life for him. My first lesson was with the retired golf pro that also gave my dad his lessons when he started out, so I already had an appreciation for the game from very early on. While getting my lessons the Pro told me stories of his playing golf with his four brothers and Sam Snead back in West Virginia and I just fell in love with the lore of golf! Working on the golf course I knew that I loved the feel of the course that was built in 1928. That is except for two holes that were totally out of character with the rest of the course. After talking with the old Pro who had also been the Superintendent of the course I found out that the two holes had been remodeled with the hopes that the course would modernize the remainder of the course. Didn't understand that then and I still don't understand it now! The older holes were the best on the course!

My girls love coming up to the course and comment on things that often surprise me. They often tour the course and I show them what we are doing and maybe even hand them a shovel and move some plugs during aerification. They absolutely loved going to the USOpen at The Olympic Club and were both devastated to learn that they would not be going to another one until 2019! My proudest moment was driving through Oregon well over 500 miles from home and my youngest daughter who was three at the time, sees a golf course and says to everyone in the car, "There's Papa's golf course!" Without skipping a beat, my oldest daughter, who was 7 at the time, says, "That isn't Papa's course, those bunkers look nothing like his bunkers." Brought me to tears.

Tell me about your funniest "oh crap" moment on the golf course.

Watching as a fellow employee got hit in the head by a golf ball while mowing rough with a pull behind mower. Ball knocked him out cold and the tractor kept going and finally got stuck in a bunker. Felt so helpless trying to get to him and not get myself hurt too!

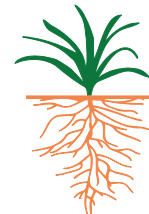
What is your favorite golf course?

Meadow Club. Fun course to play and love the way the course ties into the ground without calling too much attention to itself. Setting doesn't hurt either.

What do you want for Christmas?

Trying to squeeze in a round of golf at Bandon at Old MacDonald for all of the template holes. The closest I will get to playing National Golf Links for some time to come!

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