



## A Matter Of Respect

By Chris Hartwiger and Patrick O'Brien, agronomists, Southeast Region

July 29, 2009

What do David Duval and Patrick O'Brien have in common? They both were faced with a plugged and unplayable lie in a bunker during the final round of a major championship. For David, the setting was the U.S. Open at Bethpage. For Patrick, it was the Brunswick Invitational. How should these situations be interpreted? Are these golfers the victim of the wrong sand, poor maintenance, or substandard design? Or are bad lies part of the game? These questions are brought up regularly on USGA Turfgrass Advisory Service visits. We have encountered course officials and golfers who at one time or another have eagerly argued each of the scenarios above. This regional update will sort out some facts, state our position, and provide some information to answer this question.

### What is a Bunker?

According to the USGA Rules of Golf, a *bunker* "is a [hazard](#) consisting of a prepared area of ground, often a hollow, from which turf or soil has been removed and replaced with sand or the like."

Although this definition is straightforward, golfers sometimes are confused with regard to the definition of a hazard. We have been told many times by golfers and course officials that in a properly maintained hazard, in this case a bunker, there would never be any plugged lies. In fact, we are told that every time a ball enters this hazard, the lie should be consistent.

Let's begin to sort out these claims by going straight to the dictionary and see the first two definitions of hazard.

Hazard [**haz**-erd] - *noun*

1. an unavoidable danger or risk, even though often foreseeable.

2. something causing unavoidable danger, peril, risk, or difficulty.

Overall, it appears this hazard in golf is not a happy place to be.

### **Does design influence playability?**

Yes, it is generally accepted that flat bottom bunkers wash out less frequently and severely. Maintaining a firm surface is easier in a flat bottom bunker.

However, difficult lies are possible in flat bottom bunkers in the areas where the grass and sand meet. Bunkers with flashed faces will wash out more frequently, but balls are more likely to roll to a low spot away from the edge. Any time sand washes out and must be replaced with fresh sand, it will be softer than sand that has not been washed out.

### **Does the type of sand impact playability?**

Yes, sand impacts playability; however, there is no sand that will satisfy all the people all of the time. There is no bunker sand that comes with a guarantee of no bad lies.

### **Does maintenance affect playability?**

Yes, although there is a misconception among many golfers that bunkers can be "consistent", nothing could be further from the truth. Bunkers are influenced by sun, rain, position in relation to the sun, degree to which they wash in a rain, how golfers enter and exit, etc. This implies that the bunkers can be *maintained* in a consistent fashion by using the same method to groom all of them, but the outcome of golf shots hit into a bunker can vary not only from bunker to bunker, but even from within the same bunker.

### **The Bottom Line**

David Duval and Patrick O'Brien sure got bad breaks. Unfortunately, the buck must stop with them. The Rules of Golf provided a solution for their difficulties, as unpalatable as that may have been. They were not the victim of bad design, bad maintenance, or the wrong type of sand. They both were playing an outdoor game that requires all of us to play the course as we find it. Bunkers were never intended to be targets for golf shots, nor are there any promises as to what type

of lie will result. In fact, the Rules of Golf declare that they are hazards, and we now know that hazards are generally associated with risk, peril, or danger. We continue to advocate that no matter how we manipulate maintenance practices, sand types, and designs, there will continue to be good lies in bunkers and bad ones, too.

Source: Patrick O'Brien (770-229-8125 or [patobrien@usga.org](mailto:patobrien@usga.org)) and Chris Hartwiger (205-444-5079 or [chartwiger@usga.org](mailto:chartwiger@usga.org)).

**Southeast Region Agronomists:**

John H. Foy, regional director – [jfoy@usga.org](mailto:jfoy@usga.org)

Patrick M O'Brien, agronomist – [patobrien@usga.org](mailto:patobrien@usga.org)

Todd Lowe, agronomist – [tlowe@usga.org](mailto:tlowe@usga.org)

[Information on the USGA's Course Consulting Service](#)

[Contact the Green Section Staff](#)