

An Appeal for the Return of Golf Course Etiquette

Being a good player does not make you a good golfer.

BY JAMES FRANCIS MOORE



Too many players have become poor golfers as a result of forgetting the basic courtesies of the game.

For the purpose of this article, consider the following definitions of good players and good golfers. Good players have low handicaps, usually hit the ball a mile, and occasionally post very low scores. Good golfers fill divots, repair ball marks, and practice good etiquette each and every time they are on the course. Anyone who has ever worked in golf course maintenance will verify that, unfortunately, the two terms are not mutually inclusive. In fact, good players often are the least likely to be considerate of the games of lesser mortals.

This is not to say that all good players are bad golfers. In fact, practicing good etiquette on the course seems to be slipping across the board, regardless of handicap. And the timing could not be worse. All but the wealthiest courses are finding it harder to make a profit these days, with large cost increases in fuel, fertilizer, and labor. Since labor almost always represents the largest budget item, it typically is the first to be targeted when budget reductions are necessary.

When forced to choose, most courses with reduced available labor place a higher priority on agronomic necessities than the niceties of completing tasks that good golfers normally do for themselves. Unless we can somehow encourage players to become better golfers, the overall quality of many courses will decline rapidly during tough economic times.

For those who wish to become better golfers, here are the ways you can help your course the most.

FILLING DIVOTS

Golfers often ask if they should replace their divots, fill them with whatever has been provided in the divot buckets, or just leave them for the crew. The best option is to fill the divot with the material provided by the maintenance staff. Typically, this is straight sand, although occasionally a sand/seed mixture is used by courses using cool-season turfgrasses. Replacing a divot is the second-best option, assuming the divot is

deep enough to include a significant amount of soil. Without the soil, the divot quickly dries out and is pulled back out of the ground during the next mowing.

Do — Fill divot holes with the material provided by the maintenance staff.

Don't — Overfill the hole, which results in a sand mound that can dull or damage the mowing units.

BALL MARKS

Few aspects of etiquette generate more discussion than the fixing of ball marks (at least now that most courses no longer allow spiked shoes), and even superintendents disagree on the best method of ball mark repair. The inability to agree on a single best method stems from the fact that ball marks are not all the same. On soft greens, a shot that descends from a very steep angle produces a deep, almost circular ball mark. On the same green, a shot that comes in low and hard will produce an elongated tearing of the green, and it often removes a plug of grass and soil. Ball marks on soft greens take time to repair properly. Compacted soil needs to be lifted gently, and the raised sides of the ball mark need to be gently pushed back toward the center. The elongated mark needs to be kneaded back together by pushing in from the sides, stretching the turf rather than tearing it. Replacing removed turf seldom accomplishes much, so it is best to leave it out.

In contrast, very firm greens can resist ball marks so well that they can be hard to find at all. On such greens the marks will be slight indentations that require a minimum of effort to repair. These marks can be repaired with a very slight lifting to restore smoothness.

Do — Restore surface smoothness by gently pushing from the sides and, in some cases, gently lifting the compressed area.

Don't — Aggressively twist (as is so often done by pros on national television), which does more harm than good.

BUNKERS

Among the first rules of etiquette taught to young players are to rake the bunker smooth of footprints and repair divots after a shot. Unfortunately, either through laziness or disdain, many players refuse to extend this courtesy to their fellow golfers. Shoving sand around with your foot or a clubhead is no substitute for raking.

However, for those who are willing to rake, it is important to do the job correctly. Avoid pulling sand down the bunker face when raking. Doing so results in very shallow sand on the face, leading to exposed soil, which is easily eroded. Also, many bunkers are constructed with liners or lining material installed on the slopes to reduce the problems of sand erosion. These liners should always be covered with at least 2 to 3 inches of sand.

It is equally important to avoid pulling sand out of the bunker and onto the adjacent turf. Piles of sand around the bunker edges can cause serious damage to mowing equipment. Sand raked out of the bunker will also result in a poorly defined bunker edge, making it difficult to determine whether the ball is in or out of the hazard.

Although most players are concerned only with how the ball got into the bunker and how they are going to get it out, good golfers know that it is important to consider how to get themselves in and out of the bunker as well. Climbing in and out of the steep side of a bunker can cause significant damage to liners and the sod on the bunker face. Entry and exit should always be from the low side.

Do — Push sand up the bunker face and enter and exit from the low side of the bunker.

Don't — Climb out of the high side of the bunker, which causes damage to liners and grass faces.

CARTS

Nothing causes more damage to golf courses than the improper use of golf carts. Superintendents expend many labor hours repairing this damage and trying to prevent it in the first place. The problems are many, and most could easily be prevented with common sense. One of the most common is players driving their carts on the banks of tees and the banks and approaches of greens. Driving too close to the greens is particularly troublesome, since the wear and tear on the turf in this area directly affects playing quality. These areas are frequently irrigated and therefore more susceptible to damage. Ropes, signs, and painted lines are all too frequently ignored by players who are too lazy to walk from the path to the green.



Your mother probably taught you to clean up after yourself. The same lessons apply to the golf course.



Overfilling a divot can cause damage to mowing equipment. Be sure to smooth the divot mix with your foot.



Standing in the exact same spot for extended putting practice can cause real damage to a putting green on a hot day.

Unthinking cart drivers frequently pull two wheels off the path, presumably to make room for other carts to pass. Since they invariably do this next to greens and tees, it is no coincidence that ruts are commonplace in these areas immediately adjacent to the path. Although this is a great practice if you have a flat on the highway, it is unnecessary on the golf course. Seldom will someone need to pass a parked cart. Should a marshal, drink cart, or maintenance vehicle need to get by, they can easily pull off the path and around the parked cart.

Do — Avoid wet areas, stay off green and tee banks, and follow all directional signs, ropes, and lines.

Don't — Pull half off the path, as it is unnecessary and causes damage to high-visibility areas.

ROPES

Ropes are a necessary evil on every course that receives heavy play. No superintendent enjoys putting ropes up. They are constant maintenance headaches. Unfortunately, they are the most effective means of directing cart traffic and protecting areas of the course that are prone to damage.

Many golfers step on the ropes rather than over them — presumably in an effort not to trip. Unfortunately, this practice pulls out the stakes that the ropes are attached to, leaving the rope lying on the ground. Someone on the maintenance staff then needs to fix the stakes and retighten the rope. Superintendents can help avoid this problem by installing ropes closer to the ground, making them easier for golfers to step over. Installing rope approximately 6 inches high deters most carts and reduces the



Climbing into a bunker from the high side can cause severe damage to bunker liners and the grass face.

likelihood of tripping. Ropes also should be installed with gaps for walkers pulling carts.

Do — Pay attention to ropes and the areas they are intended to protect.

Don't — Step on a rope — step over it.

SMALL THINGS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

There are many other small things golfers can do to help their course play and look better, and in the process free up the maintenance staff for more essential work.

- Picking up broken tees helps prevent damage to costly mower reels.
- Not overfilling trash containers prevents trash from blowing across the course.
- Replacing a sign or rope stake that has been knocked down keeps the course looking neat and helps prevent damage.
- If an irrigation system leak is spotted, let a maintenance staff worker know about it so it can be fixed before turf damage occurs from traffic through the area.
- Lose the herd mentality when driving your cart — avoid following the same path of the carts before you.
- Avoid taking divots on your practice swings.
- Chip to the chipping green — not the practice putting green.
- When practicing putting, avoid standing in one place for extended periods — doing so can cause damage to the green.
- Put bunker rakes where the superintendent has directed them to be placed.

CONCLUSION

Part of the inspiration for this article stems from a group of men with whom I am fortunate enough to play golf regularly. Not only are these men good players, they are outstanding golfers. It is a real pleasure to watch them work their way around the course during a round. They don't just avoid damaging the course; they improve it in the process of enjoying their round! They leave the course better than they found it. And contrary to what you might think, none of this results in slow play. Imagine your course receiving 30,000 rounds per year from golfers like these fellows.

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