

Bunkers: Can Your Golf Course Afford Them?

Due to the high cost of maintaining them, bunkers are an obvious place to look for ways to save money.

BY JIM MOORE



If you are looking to save maintenance dollars in a tight economy, look no further than the nearest bunker.

Should the predictions prove true that the economic challenges already facing the golf industry will continue to worsen, most courses will have to implement steps to reduce labor costs. Buying cheaper fertilizer and using generic pest control products can save some money and are worth consideration, but the “800-pound gorilla” in every maintenance budget is labor. Facilities that have to make big reductions in expenses are almost certainly going to have to reduce the number of hours spent on taking care of the course. The obvious step is to look for areas in which labor hours can be reduced without hurting the playing quality or long-term agronomic health of the course. Fortunately, most courses will not have to look very hard to find such areas — they are called “bunkers.”

Many top courses now maintain bunkers to a level that raises the question as to whether or not they are still hazards. The Rules of Golf may continue to define bunkers as hazards, but certainly they are not maintained as such, nor do they pose the challenge of their predecessors. The golfers’ incessant cries that the bunkers are *inconsistent* has been answered with bunkers in which every lie is exactly the same. No longer must the player make a decision about the type of bunker shot he must execute based on varying sand depth, sand moisture, or the makeup of the sand itself. Balls seldom remain on steep slopes and instead roll to the flat bunker floor. Fried-egg lies are considered *unfair* and a sign of poor maintenance.

As usual, the tour-stop courses seen on television set the standards for the



Bunker liners are not a cure-all. Unless a great deal of labor is expended to keep plenty of sand on the bunker face, the liner can become exposed and snagged by golfers. To prevent maintenance equipment from damaging the liner, labor-intensive hand-raking of bunkers is recommended when liners are used.

rest of the golfing world. The bunkers at these courses pose only slightly more challenge than the turf around the greens, with the players getting up and down from the bunkers an astonishing 48% of the time (<http://www.pgatour.com/r/stats>). On those courses that maintain high, tough rough around the greens, the player who misses the green can only hope the ball ends up in the “hazard.”

To achieve such consistency in bunkers, extraordinary amounts of labor must be utilized. Simple edging (necessary to define the margins of the hazard) and raking are not enough. Maintenance tasks now include packing the bunker faces, removing leaves, maintaining a specific depth of the sand on the bunker face, and even controlling the moisture of the sand. This type of maintenance regime requires hundreds of labor hours per week.

Even with such large outlays of labor, maintenance alone cannot provide the perfect lies that many golfers now demand from bunkers. Construction and sand selection must also be taken to new levels. Manufactured sand (sand that is crushed to create extreme angularity and thereby is less prone to soft lies) is typically twice the cost of the same sand before the

crushing process. And instead of using a local sand that requires minimal trucking expense, courses often pay extraordinary hauling fees to import sand from hundreds of miles away. Bunker construction can easily exceed \$4.00 per square foot (*USGA Green Section Record*, July–August 2008, “The Money Pit”).

During a telephone survey of 12 superintendents from top courses in the country, the superintendents at these courses revealed a painful fact — they are spending more of their available resources to care for their bunkers than they are for their greens. These courses averaged more than 200 labor hours per week to prepare the bunkers (during their golfing season). With total labor costs easily exceeding \$10 per hour, the math is straightforward.

The bottom line is that golfers demand and expect higher quality bunkers today than ever before in the history of the game. The irony is that bunkers are one of the few areas of the course in which golfers historically have played an active role in maintenance. Fixing ball marks, replacing divots, and raking the bunkers after play are simple tasks that can have a tremendously positive impact on the overall playing quality of every course. Unfortunately, most superintendents

testify that golf etiquette is at an all-time low (*USGA Green Section Record*, November–December 2008, “An Appeal for the Return of Golf Course Etiquette”).

The good news is that as the golf industry looks for ways to tighten our belts, we don’t have to look very hard or very far — simply to the nearest bunker. The combination of minimal bunker maintenance (monthly edging to define the margin and weekly raking to prevent weeds from taking hold) and golfer willingness to smooth the bunker after use can save many thousands of dollars in labor costs for all but the most minimally maintained courses.

Should minimal bunker maintenance become an economic necessity, there is a simple solution for golfers who feel they deserve a perfect lie in a hazard. Abandon the Rules of Golf and pick up the ball, pack and rack your lie in the bunker to your satisfaction, and replace the ball on your carefully prepared surface. My guess is that you won’t see your sand-save percentage improve in the slightest, but maybe it will reduce the whining.

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