

This story is taken from Sacbee / Sports

Bunkers or sand traps, they're a golfer's headache

Published Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2009

Damian Pascuzzo knows a thing or two about bunkers, having conceived thousands of them during more than 20 years as a golf course architect. When contemplating the wisdom of the small one in the middle of the sixth green at Riviera Country Club during this week's PGA Tour stop at the Northern Trust Open, consider his take on these sand-related topics.

They're called ...

"Bunkers," he said. His claim that the term "sand trap" does not appear in the Rules of Golf has been confirmed. Call them "kitty litter" or "the beach" at the risk of your reputation.

Purpose

Foremost, to be a hazard. "Players are attacking, and designers are defending," he said. They also provide visual balance and composition. "To be the yin to the yang of the fairway. You may say, 'My god, those aren't even in play.' That doesn't mean the designer didn't know what he was doing."

In the fairway

Pascuzzo likes the placement of bunkers to be strategic, not just penal. "I will tempt golfers by placing a bunker in a location where they may think they can carry it, and if they strike a good shot they can," he said. "It's a bit like dangling a carrot out there."

In the beginning

There are notions as to how bunkers started. On the links land of Scotland, sheep would find pockets to protect themselves from the wind. Grass would give way to wear, and the sand underneath would be revealed. "That's what I believe," he said. The other is, as golfers played, turf would wear out where balls would most often end up and be played, so grass would stop growing. That's why the earliest courses had bunkers in the middle of fairways.

Evolution

In the early 1980s, the American thought was: the harder the course, the better. So the use of bunkers went over the top. "Most modern designers are into thoughtful placement of bunkers," he said. "It's a reaction to having to make your customers happy and having repeat business."

Jack was right

In 2006, Jack Nicklaus, the Memorial Tournament host, initiated the use of rakes with thick tines that resulted in furrows in the Muirfield Village bunkers in Dublin, Ohio. The PGA Tour pros bristled, their ability to spin the ball compromised. Pascuzzo applauded the idea that restored a bunker as a hazard. "I thought that was perfectly legitimate," he said. "Watch a tour caddie rake a bunker, and they treat them like a Zen garden." If the idea is to identify the best players, penalize them for hitting into hazards. "A great move on Jack's part, even though the players weren't happy about it."

Elements

Types of sand are myriad. After the U.S. Open was first held at Pebble Beach in 1972, the course's white sand gleaned from Santa Cruz was the rage. That has cooled. "We're generally looking for a local sand with good playing characteristics," he said. A device called a penetrometer can be used to test particle size and how it will pack. "Personally, we get a sample of the sand and hit shots into and out of it. If we like it, we go with it."

Configuration

Local architects in the past were conservative with bunker styles. Bob Baldock, who designed El Macero and several courses in the area, always used ovals and always had a greenside bunker at 4 o'clock right and 8 o'clock left. "I like to experiment with all kinds of different shapes," Pascuzzo said. Puzzle-piece shapes are called "cape and bay," a term Robert Muir Graves coined and style Pascuzzo uses.

Depth

"If I'm trying to design for a broad range of average players, rarely do I like to get a bunker more than hip deep," he said.

European

Scotland and Ireland have no rules about recovery playability. "In America, we have to keep moving forward," he said. "We would get crucified for a bunker you had to play backward out of."


Economics

Bunkers with natural, as opposed to hard, edges are less expensive to maintain, as are bunkers shaped conservatively so they can be raked mechanically. Both are increasingly popular. "The reality is, we're doing more work with bunker and maintenance reduction," he said. "Courses are asking us to eliminate bunkers that are not strategically necessary and make the ones they keep less labor intensive."

Rake: In or out?

"In. I don't think a rake should prevent a ball from going in the hazard," he said. A club in La Quinta solved the dilemma by building an in-ground sleeve into which the rake goes handle first. "If I ever own a course, there won't be any rakes. Why are we repairing the surface of a hazard anyway? If I hit into a divot in the fairway, I have to play it as it lies. It seems philosophically inconsistent."

– Steve Pajak

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