

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO CONSISTENT BUNKERS

Follow the rules and you can achieve consistency, but are you sure you want to?

by CHRIS HARTWIGER

BUNKERS are one of the most popular topics discussed during Green Section Turf Advisory Visits. These hazards, as defined in The Rules of Golf, are often criticized for being too hard, too soft, too wet, or contaminated with sediment. Bunker discussions almost always end with the familiar refrain: “All we want are consistent bunkers!” For those of you who share in this desire, I have good news for you. It can be done.

Having been down the long, winding road to bunker consistency with golfers before, the first step is to weed out a few of the pretenders from those who are ready to get down to business. This short survey will do the trick:

How would you rate bunker consistency at your golf course:

1. The bunkers are fine just the way they are.

2. The bunkers are not consistent, but I am not willing to pay any money out of my own pocket to improve them.

3. The bunkers are not consistent and I am willing to pay up to \$500 to improve them.

4. The bunkers are not consistent and I am ready to pay whatever it takes to improve them.

For those of you who selected 1, 2, or 3, you have permission to stop reading and go directly to the “Turf Twisters” on the back of this issue. For those of you who selected 4, read on.

For years golf course superintendents have tried to maintain all the bunkers with the same riding machine or hand raking technique. In the quest for consistency, this approach was doomed to fail because of the many factors that influence bunker performance. The shape of the subgrade, the runoff of surface water, the spacing of the drain lines, the amount of irrigation coverage,

and the position of the bunkers in relation to the prevailing wind are a few of the factors that make each bunker unique. The same maintenance program does not produce consistent bunkers.

The first step in our quest for consistency is complete reconstruction. Purchase the best sand in your area and use the most technologically advanced construction technique. Here is where things get a little sticky. If we really want consistent bunkers, it is imperative to make each bunker the same size and shape. After all, it would be inconsistent to have a sloped subgrade on one bunker and a flat bottom on another. Come to think of it, this will make construction even easier.

The next step does require me to break a little bad news to you. If we want consistent bunkers, and we do, we had better go ahead and make each green identical to avoid any inconsistencies in the way the shot should be played. For example, a bunker shot to a green sloping away from the player is going to perform differently than a shot to a green sloping toward the player. This would represent inconsistency.

Hang in there – the last two changes are almost painless. Every approach shot on par 3s, par 4s, and par 5s should be the same length. Change the length of the holes as needed to meet this requirement. Although our sand is perfect, I have a feeling that a ball hit high with a pitching wedge into a bunker will have a different lie than the lie of a ball in the bunker hit with a low screaming 3 iron. Again, different lies would result in inconsistent bunkers.

Finally, we must do something about the variety of sand wedges that are available. Some sand wedges are great for firm sand, while others are better for

softer sand. If we want consistency in our bunkers, we cannot stand for different equipment. Each club can specify which wedge their players must use. To offer a little variety, maybe a different wedge could be specified for different days of the week.

There you have it – consistent bunkers. Although I have offered great recommendations, I hope no one follows them. Now I will tell you why. (Caution: The next few statements may infuriate some of you.) First, most people who complain about the bunkers being inconsistent are really saying that they are not getting the ball up and down as frequently as they think they should. Second, who ever said bunkers are supposed to be consistent? Every bunker is different and, therefore, bunkers are inherently inconsistent.

If you do not take anything else from this article, remember that golf is a game of inconsistencies. A player must make adjustments for yardage, the lie of the ball, the direction and speed of the wind, the slope of the putting green, and on and on and on. What is consistent about playing the game? Nothing. And that is precisely why it is fun to try to get that little ball into the hole in as few strokes as possible.

If the bunkers at your golf course frustrate the daylights out of you, take a lesson from a golf professional. Become a better course manager and avoid them. But above all else, do not allow the condition of a hazard to take the fun out of the game.

CHRIS HARTWIGER shares innovative ideas as agronomist for the USGA Green Section Southeast Region, based in Birmingham, Alabama.