

BUNKERS: HAZARDS OR HAVENS?

Have golfers become too spoiled
by excessive bunker maintenance?

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The unnecessary quest for perfect playing conditions in bunkers will always require a considerable amount of time and labor. The cost of excessive maintenance in hazards ultimately is passed on to golfers.

Hazard — the very word suggests danger, risk, and a place to avoid. In the 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. Nowhere in the Rules does it state or even suggest that playing conditions within bunkers must be firm, uniform, and consistent from hazard to hazard.

The design, location, and number of bunkers on any particular golf hole factor significantly into the course rating, but the playing conditions within bunkers have minimal influence on the slope or rating. However, a provision is available to adjust a course rating for any extraordinary concerns found in bunkers, such as exceedingly soft sand.

The perception among an increasing number of golfers, regardless of their level of skill, is that sand conditions within bunkers must be firm, uniform, and as near perfection as possible. Firm playing conditions in one bunker and somewhat softer sand in another is deemed unfair. If most golfers had their way, they would be granted relief when an errant 9-iron approach shot results in a partially embedded, fried-egg lie. As a result, some courses are putting nearly as much time and labor into conditioning sand in bunkers every day as they spend grooming the putting surfaces. The quest for bunker perfection occurs at private and public facilities, and the costs are ultimately passed on to the golfer.

Perhaps the golfers’ perceptions of what sort of penalty to expect in a bunker are influenced by what they see on TV every weekend. Highly skilled professionals can often be heard whispering “get in the bunker” as an errant shot misses the target. These athletes, who play golf for a living and routinely practice recovery shots from a variety of lies in bunkers, find little difficulty getting up and down from the sand in intensively maintained hazards. Needless to say, they spend a great deal of time honing their bunker skills. In contrast, the average golfer spends plenty of time with a driver on a practice tee, but rarely practices bunker shots.

From the USGA’s point of view, what are considered unacceptable or unfair playing conditions within a bunker? First, the margin of the bunker must be clearly defined to determine whether or not the ball lies in the hazard. Bunker margins that are obscured by overzealous bunker raking, which displaces sand out of the hazard, or



Left: Poor construction or design can lead to serious drainage problems after wet weather and results in more of a penalty than necessary.

Below: Bunker margins must be clearly defined so that the Rules of Golf can be applied to determine whether the ball is in or out of the hazard. However, they are hazards and do not need to play consistently.

weed encroachment are a Rules dilemma just waiting to happen. The ability to ground a club, to remove a loose impediment, and other Rules options available to a player depend on whether the ball lies inside or outside of the hazard.

Second, common sense dictates that there should be enough sand in the bunker to prevent golfers from injuring themselves when they attempt a recovery shot. As a general rule of thumb, the Green Section recommends approximately 4 to 6 inches of sand at the base of a bunker and 2 to 4 inches of sand across sloped bunker faces. Keep in mind that these are guidelines, not Rules, to provide a reasonable balance of drainage and stability for most bunker sands.

Third, bunkers should be maintained in a manner that minimizes the potential for a ball to completely bury in the sand. The pace of play can't help but slow when balls disappear into the face of a hazard.

You will find that the Rules of Golf are fair, but not overly sympathetic to golfers' misfortunes when they hit errant shots into a bunker. Etiquette dictates that *before leaving a bunker, a player should carefully fill up and smooth over all holes and footprints made by him*. However, should you have to drop in a bunker to, for example, obtain relief from casual water, and the ball happens to plug into the sand, you have no option to drop again without penalty (Decision 33-8/28). If your ball becomes completely embedded into the sand to the point where it cannot be seen, you are permitted to probe, rake, or use other means to find the ball. However, if the ball is uncovered or moved, it must be replaced and covered so that



only a part of the ball is visible (Rule 12-1). In essence, you are required to play the ball as it lies in the hazard, with fewer options for relief without penalty compared to the options available when the ball lies *through the green*.

Perhaps our *grip it and rip it* attitude toward golf in the United States is partly to blame for unreasonable expectations for perfect playing conditions within a bunker. Hit the ball as hard as you can and forget about strategy. Visit a classic links course in Scotland and you will find the locals have no problem playing sideways or backwards from a bunker. Similarly, they don't even consider declaring a ball unplayable in a bunker and taking a penalty stroke just to obtain an opportunity to exit the hazard and perhaps advance the ball. You won't find too many Scots grousing about soft sand or hard sand from Hell Bunker at the Old Course at St. Andrews. They seem to understand that luck, good and bad, is an integral part of the game.

In his famous book *The Spirit of St. Andrews*, Alister Mackenzie stated, "Many poor golf courses are made in an endeavor to eliminate the element of luck." Uniform, ultra-firm conditions in every hazard, in effect, remove an element of luck from the game. This is not meant to imply that bunkers

should never be raked or that every stray shot into a bunker should result in the same penalty as a shot into a water hazard. However, the delicate equilibrium between a penalty and the ability to recover from an errant shot has been upset when anything but a perfect lie in the sand is deemed unacceptable. It is better to accept a good lie in a bunker as good luck and a difficult lie as bad luck than to debate what is fair and unfair on an area of the course that was designed to be avoided in the first place.

The bottom line is that bunkers are indeed hazards, not havens. A considerable amount of time and effort is wasted at many courses in the futile endeavor to provide the same conditions in every bunker. Shade, drainage, irrigation coverage, bunker design, and a myriad of other factors vary throughout the course and influence the playability of bunkers. Instead of complaining about bad luck in the sand, take a lesson or two and practice. After all, it was Gary Player who said, "The more I practice, the luckier I get."

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Who says that bunkers have to be perfect?

