

Is Golfer Etiquette a Thing of the Past?

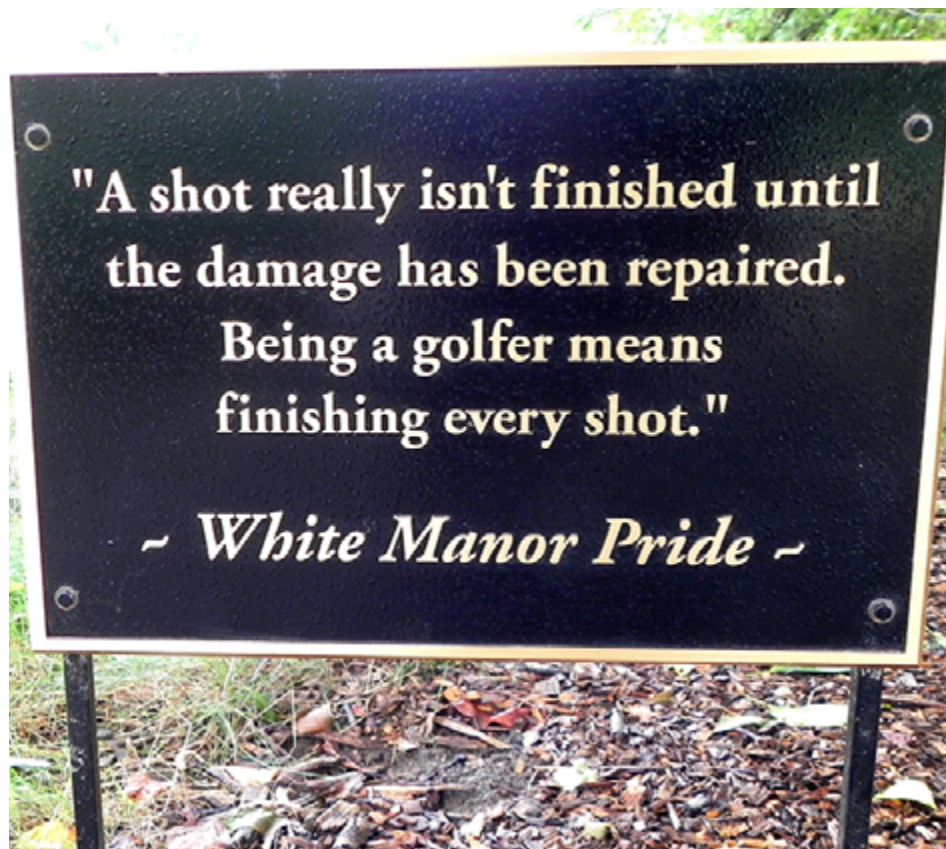
Superintendents and course officials are discouraged by the lack of course care by golfers.

BY DARIN S. BEVARD

Many of the questions posed during Course Consultation Service visits are similar from one golf facility to the next. *Why must we aerate so much? How can we make our bunkers better? When will the rough stop growing so fast, and why can't we just mow it lower?* These common questions come up year after year; however, recently, there has been a new trend on visits. There is the perception that golfers' responsibility in caring for the golf course is being ignored. To be fair, this is not new (see [Are You Kind to Your Course?](#) and [An Appeal for the Return of Golf Course Etiquette](#)), but many believe the problem is getting worse. This has led many to question how members/golfers can be encouraged to obey cart rules, repair ball marks, replace divots, etc. Tour almost any golf course, and you will find unranked bunkers, unrepaired ball marks, and cart damage in areas where signs clearly prohibit cart traffic.

Why has this issue become more common? Several different theories exist. One belief is that golfers see the care of the golf course as someone else's responsibility. In other words, golfers have already paid to play, so it's not up to them to help care for the course. Another thought is that many golfers now take up the game later in life and have not been taught some of the traditions of the game. These traditions include the courtesy of cleaning up after one's self on the golf course, e.g., divots, ball marks, and bunkers, and preserving playing conditions for others by following cart restrictions in sensitive areas. For whatever reason, care of the golf course no longer seems to be a focus of many players.

Most golfers try to adhere to the Rules of Golf, and this is critical since the Rules are really the backbone of



Positive signs that remind golfers to repair damage to the golf course often are more effective than curt demands.

the game. The first section in the Rules of Golf is etiquette. Important aspects of golf, such as the spirit of the game and safety, are covered. Care of the course is also covered in the etiquette section. Raking bunkers, fixing divots and ball marks, and adhering to the posted rules for golf carts are discussed. The basic tenet of the etiquette section in the Rules of Golf is that by following some simple guidelines, the enjoyment of the game can be maximized for everyone. Etiquette is an important part of golf, but it is not mandated. Thus, we come back to the question, "How can we get the golfers to do a better job of caring for the golf course?" The most important thing is to clearly define what is expected and why.

DIVOTS

Confusion over the repair of divots is often a reason they are not properly addressed by golfers. Generally, if the divot remains intact, it should be replaced in the interest of playability. If the replaced divot does not survive, it can be addressed at a later date by the maintenance staff. There is no hard and fast rule for divot replacement, but a good rule of thumb may be if you can pick up the divot, you should replace it. If you have to collect the pieces of a divot, other repair options should be employed, usually including filling the divot hole with sand or a sand-based mixture provided by the golf facility.

Fairway divots are generally a bigger problem on creeping bentgrass fair-



Large divots that can easily be picked up should be retrieved and replaced in the interest of playability. In many cases, divots will re-root and survive, eliminating the need for other repair strategies.



Ball marks are often the most noticeable blemishes on a putting green, and lack of repair is not a new issue. This is one area where golfer etiquette has a big impact on the appearance and playability of putting greens.

ways. With creeping bentgrass, divots are often larger and subsequently take longer to heal. During the heat of the summer, and because bentgrass is a cool-season species, fairway divot holes heal very, very slowly. Not surprisingly, golfers notice a lot of divot holes come midsummer, and they should do their best to help with divot repair.

Golfers may spend time in different regions of the country at different times of the year. If no clear direction is provided for divot repair on a particular golf course, the golfer may assume that the method used to address divots on the bermudagrass golf course played while overwintering in Florida is the method that should be used on a creeping bentgrass golf course in Pennsylvania the rest of the year.

The golf course superintendent should work with the proper points of contact at the golf facility to clearly communicate the desired method for divot repair and why the method is preferred. This will vary depending on turfgrass species in fairways, labor, resources, and possibly other factors such as time of year.

For more information, please see the article [Fairway Divot Repair](#) and video [Divot Repair Etiquette](#).

BALL MARKS

The most important playing surfaces on any golf course are the greens. In the current era of putting green management, ball marks often are the most noticeable blemishes on greens, and they create a lot of conversation.

I do not feel that golfers are repairing ball marks any less (or any more) over time. Golfers generally make the effort to repair ball marks, although a gentle reminder about the importance of repair is good practice. When greens are firm, golfers have greater difficulty finding their ball marks because the ball often comes to rest far away from the point of impact on the green. When greens are softer, ball marks are more severe but easier to find. Remember that even a properly repaired ball mark created under soft conditions may leave a damaged spot for several days that negatively impacts appearance and playability.



Directional signs for golf carts are not meant to inconvenience golfers. Rather, they are placed to preserve playability and prevent cart damage in sensitive areas.

For more information, please see the video [How to Repair Ball Marks](#).

BUNKER CARE

There is no point in spending a lot of time on golfers' care of bunkers. This issue is cut and dry. When playing from a bunker, one should rake the bunker to restore its condition. This includes disruption from the bunker shot as well as any footprints that were left in the bunker during the process. For most of us, hitting out of a bunker is difficult enough without having the challenge compounded by poor conditions or rutted surfaces created by those playing in front of us.

From the maintenance side of the discussion, a reasonable number of rakes should be supplied around each bunker. Golfers may become frustrated if they have to search for a bunker rake or walk a long distance to retrieve a rake. When this happens, golfers' thoughts then become, "If they really want me to rake the bunker, they should have made it easier for me to find the rake!" It's a fair point, so be sure to provide enough rakes for golfers to do their part.

For more information, please see the video [Bunker Etiquette](#).

CART RESTRICTIONS

Some rules for golf carts, such as keeping carts a reasonable distance

from tees and greens, are common sense, but observance of golf cart restrictions is one of the biggest problems golf facilities face. Many times, golfers do not understand the reason for restrictions, and we often do a poor job of educating them. When heavy rain occurs, golfers understand the need for cart restrictions. However, there are many reasons other than wet conditions — such as drought, herbicide application, and excessive heat, just to name a few — why carts may be restricted on a given day.

Golfers need to be educated about why cart restrictions are needed. Whether it is "carts on paths" for the day or restrictions from certain areas of the golf course, the primary purpose of cart management strategies is to protect turf and playing areas from wear. Superintendents do not restrict carts because they enjoy the controversy it causes. Rather, they do it to protect turfgrass health and playability of the course. Under adverse conditions, the damage that golf carts can do in a single day may take several days or even weeks to recover. The short-term inconvenience of cart restrictions can lead to better long-term playability.

For more information, please see the video [Golf Cart and Pull Cart Etiquette](#).



CONCLUSION

It is impossible to say exactly why course care etiquette has declined, but this is not a new issue. It is unlikely that one solution will solve the problem, but education needs to be part of the process. Education can help golfers understand why they may be inconvenienced by cart restrictions or how replacing their divot can really help the golf course. Furthermore, education requires more than simply telling golfers to obey cart restrictions or repair a ball mark. Providing specific directions and the rationale behind them will clarify your expectations and their responsibilities. The reasons are common sense to those of us in the turf maintenance industry, but not to the average golfer. There will always

be unraked bunkers, unrepaired ball marks and divots, and complaints about cart restrictions. This does not mean that we do not keep trying to make golfers more aware of their impacts on the golf course through education. We are in the information age, and we do not want to do something because we are told. No, we want to know why we should do something. The reasons are important to us. Educated with the right information, we are all more likely to do the right thing. Golfer etiquette is no different.

The importance of caring for the golf course needs to be stressed to the average golfer. Don't be confused: This is not a plea to help the maintenance staff or make the superintendent's job easier. Their job is to prepare

the golf course for daily play. It is the obligation of golfers to understand their responsibility to one another and to the golf course during a round of golf. That perfect lie that you had in the bunker? Make sure you recreate it for golfers playing behind you. Shouldn't golfers that play behind you enjoy the same conditions as you? If everyone followed through with proper golfer etiquette, we'd all enjoy better golfing experiences. With that said, here's to leaving the golf course in as good condition as you found it — or better!

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Impacts of pull carts on turf quality are often ignored, but concentrated pull cart traffic can cause wear problems. Golfers should be aware of their responsibility for care of the course and keep pull carts off important playing areas such as tees.