

Golf in its Most Economical Form

Sand greens — or “browns” as they are otherwise known — offer a fun golfing experience at bargain prices, yet they are enjoyed by only a small portion of the golfing community.

BY TY McCLELLAN



Sand greens are circular with a hole permanently located in the center. Some are extremely small at 15 feet across while others are as large as 50 feet in diameter.

Water, money, and time threaten modern-day golf. Not so for sand-green courses. They have \$5 green fees to play all day, fast pace of play, no irrigation, and greens that don't have a blade of grass on them — just oiled sand. Welcome to the world of sand-green golf.

Once widespread in the early 1900s, sand-green courses still are fairly common in several states in the Midwestern U.S. Despite this, many golfers have never heard of them, let alone played one. In fact, many



The greens at Pinehurst Resort and Country Club (Pinehurst, N.C.) were sand until the mid-1930s. Pictured is Bobby Jones putting on the fifth hole of Course No. 2 in March 1935. (Photo courtesy of the Tufts Archives)



With approximately 20 sand-green courses in Kansas — the most of any U.S. state — there is a sand-green golf division sanctioned by the Kansas State High School Activities Association and 17 high schools compete for a state championship each May. (Photo courtesy of John Paul Newport/Wall Street Journal)

notable golf facilities in the U.S. began with sand greens only to later convert to grass greens. In a way, playing sand greens offers a look back to the origins of golf in the U.S. and other parts of the world before automatic irrigation, highly technical equipment, and new improved turfgrass varieties. Fittingly, sand-green golf has been described as “1950s golf at 1950s prices” (*Golf World*, 2004).

Think sand-green golf is simply pasture golf? While occasionally true, sand-green courses — just like

courses with grass greens — vary considerably in quality. Conditions also can vary widely due to time of year and regional site conditions. Some sand-green courses have rolling terrain in open environments with few trees and little separation between holes — sort of links style, if you will. Others have water features — e.g., creeks, ponds, and lakes — with plenty of trees. For example, at the nine-hole, sand-green Glasco Country Club in rural Kansas, there are a variety of par 3s, 4s, and 5s, a tree-lined creek that comes into

play on eight of the nine holes, and two dogleg par 4s (one left and one right). Some sand greens are flush with the ground; others are slightly elevated above grade. Sand greens generally are flat, but some have a little slope, so players must still read the green and play some break, usually a few inches.

HISTORY

Sand-green golf courses are believed to have originated in the eastern U.S. during the late 1800s before many could afford to maintain turfgrass.



Sand-green golf courses usually host multiple tournaments and special events throughout the year, like this two-man scramble at Glasco Country Club in Kansas. Players from miles around made the drive to participate.

Many notable golf facilities began with sand greens only to convert to grass greens, given improvements in irrigation technology and better strains of turfgrasses in the early to mid-1900s. There was a big movement of sand-green courses to small Midwestern towns during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Most remained until the 1960s, when Farmers Home Administration loans provided funding for digging wells and installing pipe to support grass greens.

HOW MANY ARE THERE?

There are an estimated 80 to 100 sand-green courses in the United States and dozens more worldwide. Very few have websites, so they are difficult to find and document.

WHERE ARE THEY?

While there aren't nearly as many as there used to be, the largest concentration of sand-green courses in the U.S. is in the Great Plains (the states of Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota), where there are a dozen or more in each state. Sand-green courses are usually nine-hole courses (although there are a few six-hole courses) located in rural settings and small towns.

A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE

From tee to green, sand-green golf is not all that different from regular golf with grass greens. The obvious difference is that greens are made of sand, not grass. Naturally, there is an entirely different process when playing into sand greens, putting on sand greens, and player maintenance on sand greens.

Sand greens generally are flat and measure anywhere from 15 to 50 feet in diameter. Holes are permanently situated in the center of each green. Tools of the game include a drag bar and rake positioned on every green. While there are no ball marks to repair, players do have to "drag" a smooth path to putt their ball to the hole and rake the green when finished.

To maintain an efficient pace of play, often one drag path is shared by all players. Players simply measure the distance from the hole to their ball and

DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know that some of the greatest threats to the game of golf don't apply to sand-green courses?

Water: Sand-green courses are not irrigated and rely on natural rainfall.

Time: Pace of play on sand-green courses is very fast. Nine-hole rounds can usually be played in just over an hour.

Affordability: Sand-green courses are inexpensive to play. Green fees usually are around \$5 for all-day play and \$75 for annual individual memberships.

Accessibility: Sand-green courses are convenient to play and easily fit into your schedule. There are no tee times or lengthy waits to play. Just arrive and tee it up.

Growing the Game: Sand-green courses are not intimidating to new players because they offer a low-pressure atmosphere at an affordable price.

Player Retention: Sand-green courses generally are dry and firm, which helps shorter hitters remain competitive.

Sense of Community: Care of the course is accomplished largely through volunteer efforts in the community. This brings everyone together and promotes pride in the course.

Recreation and Sport: Sand-green golf is about camaraderie and competition. There are no unreasonable expectations for perfectly manicured turf, green speeds, expensive clubhouses, or amenities.

then move it to the corresponding distance along the path. Putting begins with the player farthest from the hole going first. The path is dragged after each putt to ensure a smooth putting surface for the next player.

To avoid the constant need to remove sand from the hole and to make sure the flagstick remains vertical, an insert is used within the hole liner. The insert must be in place when dragging so that it catches sand. The insert is removed before putting and emptied of sand before replacing it into the hole to hold the flagstick for the next group.

Sand greens are not measured for green speed, and there is little interest among players, but speeds are

much slower than grass greens and generally less than five feet using a USGA Stimp meter. Although sand greens are not fast, they putt better than one might imagine. Because greens are relatively small and putting is straightforward, three-putting usually can be avoided.

Sand-green courses generally are not irrigated, so green surrounds, fairways, tees, and roughs are as lush green or dormant brown as Mother Nature dictates. Time of year and seasonal changes have a big impact on course conditions, more so than with irrigated courses that play more consistently throughout the year. When rainfall is plentiful during the growing season, the turf canopy is dense and

STEPS FOR PLAYING A SAND GREEN



The “art of the drag” is shown here as a golfer prepares a three-foot-wide putting path on a sand green. The speed of a putt can depend on the pressure applied during the smoothing process and direction of the drag.



Next, empty sand from the hole by removing the insert within the hole liner.



After completing a hole, the hole insert and flagstick are replaced. The green is raked in a circular pattern — beginning nearest the hole and working outward — in preparation for the next players.



Putt.



Although sand-green courses aren't irrigated, teeing grounds may be temporarily watered with portable lawn sprinklers during a drought or when establishing a new stand of turf.

may resemble turf conditions at irrigated courses. However, during stretches of dry weather, fairways and other playing surfaces can become very firm and turf may thin in areas. It is not surprising that sand-green courses can be somewhat rugged in the absence of irrigation, so local rules often allow the ball to be played up through the green, using the clubhead to reposition the ball.

Generally, golf on grass-green courses in the U.S. is an aerial game where irrigation limits ball roll — not so for sand-green courses. Firm and fast conditions place a premium on the ground game on sand-green courses. It's not so much where the ball lands but where it ends up. As such, most players favor low-trajectory ball flights and bump-and-run chip shots that allow better control of the stopping point of the ball nearest the hole. When playing into sand greens, distance control is critical because out-of-bounds or a hazard may lurk only a few yards behind the putting surface.



At Glasco Country Club in Glasco, Kansas, green fees for guests are collected on the honor system. Simply pay your green fee using the lockbox at the clubhouse and take your bag tag for all the golf you can play in a day.

Usually, the smart play is to hit short of the green and allow the ball to run to the green. When it comes to chips and shorter pitch shots, players can be much more aggressive because sand greens are flat and the ball quickly comes to rest.

Clubhouses simply are functional buildings for hosting golf events and meetings and include other basics like tables, soda machine, refrigerator, and bulletin boards for displaying course photos, scoring records, tournament schedules, and other important information.

There are no tee times, and green fees typically are collected on the honor system. Simply deposit your green fee — usually a daily rate of around \$5 — using the lockbox at the clubhouse or first tee and take your

bag tag for the day. Next, enjoy a golfing experience in the most basic form and casual setting you can imagine.

Needless to say, sand-green courses are low-budget operations with fun, relaxing, and unintimidating atmospheres. The world of sand-green golf is about camaraderie and competition, not perfectly manicured turf, green speed, expensive clubhouses, or amenities.

COURSE CARE

Greens: Sand selection for greens is important and will be different from one course to the next. Some sand sources are fine-textured and others are coarser. Some sands pack together better and are naturally firmer, whereas others remain softer. Finished

masonry sands usually work well. Sand depth can vary, which affects playability, especially when chipping onto greens. Generally, greens with freshly added sand are softer, but they will become firmer as the sand settles. Usually, additional sand is applied every year or two.

When it comes to preparing sand greens for play, biodegradable vegetable oils — e.g., corn oil, soybean oil, etc. — are used to condition the sand so that putts roll smooth and true. Oil also combats weeds and helps reduce sand erosion from high winds. Usually, oil is applied annually to sand greens.

Tees: Teeing grounds are constructed so that they are level and often slightly elevated for the purposes of surface drainage. Occasionally, teeing grounds are simply placed



Sand-green courses are not intimidating to new players because they offer a low-pressure atmosphere with plenty of space to learn the game.

where flat ground is well suited for tee markers. Teeing grounds may be temporarily watered with portable lawn sprinklers during drought conditions or when establishing a new stand of turf. Most courses utilize just two sets of tee markers: front and back.

Fairways: Fairways are typically buffalograss, bermudagrass, or any combination of turfgrasses that survive on natural rainfall. Regular mowing and broadleaf weed control typically summarize fairway maintenance. During times of active turf growth, fairways may be mowed about once a week. Some courses have large, roller-type aerators; otherwise, soil cultivation is rare. Soil compaction can be an issue, but because courses generally are dry and firm, there is less need for aeration compared to irrigated courses.

Bunkers: Most sand-green courses do not have bunkers. Some, like Glasco Country Club in Kansas, utilize grassy swales to add challenge and interest to the game.

Trees: Some courses have more trees than others. Trees continue to grow and require periodic trimming or removal for the purposes of safety, playability, and turf health.

Cart Paths: Some courses have cart paths (usually gravel or crushed stone) around tees and greens, although many do not.

Cart Traffic: Given good surface drainage and the absence of irrigation, sand-green courses generally handle motorized cart traffic well because they often are drier than other courses. Nonetheless, wear patterns can and do develop in high-traffic areas, usually around tees. Ropes and signage sometimes are needed to protect injured turf from further damage. Cart restrictions around greens are not always posted,

but it is generally understood that carts stay five yards away from greens to protect turf and maintain playability around the greens.

Maintenance: Sand-green courses usually don't have a superintendent or a large equipment fleet. An individual usually mows the course and takes care of any other frequent maintenance. As compensation, this person may be paid by the golf facility, receive complimentary membership, or both. Any remaining maintenance tasks typically are accomplished with volunteer effort from golfers.

Special Projects and Renovations: Large special projects and renovations generally are accomplished with volunteer effort from golfers, many of whom are farmers. This means chainsaws, spraying equipment, tractors, trucks, etc. are readily available when large projects become necessary. Sand-green courses are usually not fertilized, and herbicides often are just applied once or twice annually to control broadleaf weeds. Occasionally, green contours will change with time and must be restored, usually as a result of turfgrass encroachment or heavy rains.

Equipment: Sand-green golf facilities usually have a large gang mower, a tractor with smooth tires to pull the large gang mower, and a push mower. Some also have a drum or roller-type aerator and riding lawn-mower. Equipment is neither new nor state of the art. Many facilities make use of equipment that neighboring grass-green courses no longer want. Any remaining equipment needed for maintenance and projects often is supplied by the golfers themselves.

Governance and Committees: Political or government structure is common at sand-green facilities.

Elections take place among the membership. Generally there is a president, board of directors, and tournament chairman.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, golf is still the game of choice for many rural areas in the Midwest, and sand-green courses are an important reason why. Sand-green courses have allowed many to play the game of golf in locations where it otherwise would not have been possible.

Economic and environmental threats to mainstream golf apply at a lesser extent to sand-green golf. Sure, sand greens offer a slightly different version of golf, but it is fun and still encompasses strategy. While it may not be for everyone, those with an open mind should give it a try, especially anyone who enjoys links golf, as sand-green courses have been likened to the dry, firm conditions and ground game that are associated with links golf. Consider a trip to Glasco, Kansas, where you will be greeted with Midwestern hospitality and a great sand-green golf experience, or contact your state golf association to find a sand-green course near you.

Remember, playing conditions on sand-green courses are very similar to the beginnings of golf in Scotland and perhaps are in line with where the game of golf is headed for some grass-green courses in the U.S. where water is, or soon could be, severely limited. Might there be areas other than the Heartland where sand-green courses make sense?

LITERATURE CITED

Down 'n' Dirty. 2004. *Golf World*. Oct. 8: p. 26.

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