

The Miser's Makeover

Golf rounds are down across the country, which means less revenue from dues and green fees. A course makeover with the goal of streamlining maintenance operations can help keep struggling facilities afloat during a difficult economy.

By Bob Vavrek



Most golfers in the United States have developed unrealistic expectations for nothing less-than-perfect playing conditions in a sand bunker. The cost of bunker maintenance at some high-end courses equals or exceeds the cost of putting green maintenance.

Golf and golf courses are struggling with the fact that rounds played in the United States have decreased during seven of the past nine years. When rounds are down, revenue is down, and when revenues are down, there is less money available for turf maintenance operations. It is no surprise that most superintendents have received mandates to squeeze every possible penny from tight budgets.

At some point, doing more with less will affect the level of course conditioning, yet keeping the golfer satisfied is essential when courses are competing for green fees and membership dues. Hard times require golf facilities to think outside of the box if

they want to be one of the last courses standing when the game begins to recover. One option to consider is to develop an architectural master plan designed to reduce maintenance costs. This is a departure from traditional course renovations that typically make the course more challenging, by adding bunkers, water features, or additional yardage.

BUNKERS

American golfers have developed an unreasonable expectation for nothing less than a perfect lie in a bunker and equally unreasonable demands for absolute consistency of playing conditions between bunkers. Bunkers are hazards to be

avoided, yet many mid-to-high-end courses in the United States spend as much or more money to maintain bunkers than their putting greens.

The quest for perfect bunkers is a time-consuming endeavor that requires a considerable amount of labor and equipment. Bunkers that accommodate a significant amount of play typically is raked three to four times a week and are touched up on the off days during periods of peak play. Some styles of bunkers require hand raking, which further increases the cost of maintenance. Bunkers are completely edged once or twice a year, and the perimeters need to be trimmed with a string trimmer or similar tools every week or so when the grass is growing vigorously.

Sand needs to be added to bunkers as often as once a year, especially in sites prone to wind erosion. The depth of the sand should be monitored throughout the season and redistributed as needed. Washouts associated with heavy rainfall events require many hours of unscheduled maintenance. Controlling weeds and grass encroachment is a constant battle, and removing debris, such as samaras, acorns, leaves and twigs from adjacent trees is a daily task during the fall.

Bunkers need to be completely renovated every 10 to 20 years; a major project that generally requires total sand removal/replacement, drainage maintenance and the reestablishment of original bunker perimeters. The total cost of providing golfers “perfect” bunkers during a span of 20 years would definitely be an eye-opener for any golf facility.

Maintaining an excessive number of purely visual bunkers or bunkers that never come into play is a luxury few courses can afford these days. Considering the high cost of bunker maintenance, eliminating unnecessary bunkers from the layout can pay big dividends. Hard times necessitate hard choices when it comes to determining what is an “unnecessary” bunker. The value of some bunkers that are candidates for removal are hotly debated. Consequently, the input of an experienced architect is invaluable when undertaking changes that affect how the course is intended to be played. On the other hand, there are examples where bunker removal is the obvious choice.

For example, many old courses have found it necessary to alter fairway contours or



Converting this sand bunker into a grassy hollow makes sense, but simply replacing sand with grass will not address the inherent drainage problem in this site. Installing drainage in grassy hollows is no less important than ensuring adequate drainage in bunkers.

route holes, due to utility work, adjacent land development, etc. Fairways are moved, but often the old fairway bunkers are left behind, and unfortunately most golf courses continue to maintain these orphan bunkers every season. Leveling these hazards is a no brainer.

There may be sites on the course where a grassy swale or mounding would be just as effective as a high maintenance bunker. A

good example is the deep, narrow “catch” bunker that might be found behind a green in a site where a ball hit just over the putting surface would likely carom into big trouble. The trouble could be water, woods, out of bounds, a parking area, tennis courts, adjacent property, or anywhere making a recovery shot would be difficult, if not impossible, if not for the bunker.



Think outside the box to save maintenance costs. Can a grassy swale serve a similar, but less expensive alternative to a sand bunker? Be sure to construct grassy hollows to accommodate efficient mowing operations. A high maintenance grass bunker in place of a sand bunker is no bargain.

A well-designed “catch” bunker is the perfect safety net in the appropriate setting. It keeps a slightly errant shot close to the green and helps maintain the pace of play. However, this type of bunker is overused, and sometimes they are employed on holes where there is plenty of room for recovery behind the green. Here, a few gently sloping mounds or a grassy swale likely would be a low maintenance substitute for a narrow sand bunker. In addition, a few well-constructed mounds behind a green can provide the bonus of satisfying the obsession that some golfers have for a visual backdrop to a putting green complex.

Mounding may not be as intimidating or as visually attractive as deep, severe bunkering, but they still provide a serviceable architectural feature at a bargain price. You may need to consider non-traditional uses of mounds when trimming maintenance costs as a high

priority. For example, mounding could be an economical alternative to trees or bunkers to define and protect the angle of a dogleg hole.

Mounding needs to be constructed and positioned properly to be an effective substitute for bunkers. Slopes need to be steep enough to challenge golfers and still possess a subtle grade that accommodates efficient mowing equipment. It makes little sense to replace a bunker that requires hand raking with a severe mound that must be mowed by hand.

Grassy depressions also can be an economical substitute for bunkers in the right setting. Again, care needs to be taken during the construction of a grassy hollow to ensure accessibility to mowers. Depressions hold water, so be sure to install adequate drainage. Wet turf can be slippery, so grassy hollows need to be designed with safe entry and exit points.

Trees in close proximity to bunkers often create an unnecessary double hazard. Seeds, leaves and other debris from nearby trees increase the cost of bunker maintenance. Where double hazards exist near greens, the shade, root competition and restricted air movement associated with trees can be detrimental to turf quality on the putting surfaces and surrounds. Eliminating these problem trees can improve growing conditions and mowing efficiency. In addition, removing double hazards often improve the playability and appearance of the course.

FAIRWAYS

Reducing fairway acreage can help the bottom line of courses that struggle for survival. Fairway turf requires more mowing, water, and inputs of plant protectants versus roughs. Many courses maintain an excessive amount of fairway turf on par 3 holes, and sometimes fairways on par 4 and 5 holes begin just a few yards off the teeing area. A closely mowed run-up

area between bunkers to a par 3 green helps maintain the pace of play, but expansive fairway surfaces for a 150 yard hole is unnecessary.

Architects generally agree that golfers from the mid-level set of tees should carry a minimum of 50-75 yards of rough to reach fairway turf. In general, eliminating some of the initial yardage of rough off the tee has less impact on the playability of the course as compared to the more controversial practice of decreasing fairway width. The concerns of seniors and other golfers who have a limited ability to carry 75 yards of rough can be addressed by providing them a well-positioned set of forward tees.

As mentioned above, architectural advice is strongly recommended whenever significant changes to the course are being considered. Some changes are obvious and others require the trained eye of a professional. Often golfers are hesitant to make changes to the home course, much in the same manner that people have difficulty throwing away junk from the basement or attic. Occasionally, some form of intervention is required to make positive, cost effective changes to an old course.

The course modifications discussed here may not save enough labor to make further deep cuts to a budget with no fat left to trim. However, reducing the number of bunkers and decreasing fairway acreage can provide more resources to maintain an acceptable level of conditioning for the rest of the course.

Bob Vavrek makes Turf Advisory Service visits to Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota providing recommendations to help squeeze every penny from your maintenance budget.



Unnecessary double hazards of trees and bunkers are a common sight on old golf courses. Bunker maintenance is costly enough without the added expense of cleaning leaves, twigs, seeds and other debris from the sand each day. Why pay to maintain two hazards when one will suffice?