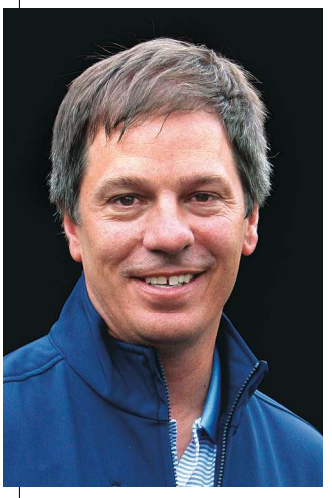


Shifting Sands

Consulting Report, Part III: Bunkers

Some readers may have wondered how I could write two whole columns on consulting work without addressing the single most talked-about feature of a golf course: the bunkers. Even non-golfers recognize a course by the presence of bunkers – otherwise, they'd have to rely on looking for plaid pants.

Bunkers are the one part of a golf course even the average golfer is happy to discuss. The tilt of a green is a subtle difference, and tree removal is politically sensitive, but every golfer feels free to suggest the addition or removal of certain bunkers that give him or her pause. Even so, much of the conversation is spoken in code; no one wants to admit they're campaigning for the removal of a feature that causes them particular trouble, so they suggest removing a bunker that "isn't in play for anyone." Whenever I hear those words on consulting visits, I've trained myself to ask if the speaker really hasn't ever gone in that bunker – and as often as not they'll admit they topped a ball into it last year, and their embarrassment is still palpable.

Bunkers are the architect's easiest tool for making his presence known. Golfers can't tell for sure what contours may be man-made or natural, but everyone knows that if there's a bunker, the architect must have made a decision to put it there. There are almost as many reasons for bunkers as there are stars in the sky—architects have just as many conflicting reasons for installing bunkers as club members do for wanting to move them—but most can be divided into five classes:

1. To Penalize a Bad Shot

The classic reason in a golfer's mind for building a bunker is the only really bad reason to build one. A bad shot is its own penalty, so a bunker off to the side of the fairway where you wouldn't try to go, or a bunch of bunkers surrounding a green, are a waste of effort. Plenty of bad shots will end up in good bunkers, placed for better reasons.

2. To Force a Decision

This is the essence of strategic design: offering the golfer a chance to carry a bunker, or play close to it, to gain an advantage for the next shot. A cross bunker or two pinching bunkers, not normally seen as "strategic," might still make the golfer choose between smashing away and laying up. And even a bunker far beyond driving distance, on the approach or beside the green, can cause the smart player to adjust his line from the tee.

3. As an Aiming Point

Modern designers often place bunkers in the distance as an aiming point for the tee shot. This was never done in the old days, so it strikes a discordant note when such a bunker is added to an old course.

4. Because They Look Good

The shape and size of bunkers is largely an aesthetic consideration, and so is the question of whether to place a bunker or not. I've noticed over the years that prominent clubs tend to influence the aesthetics of their neighbors; bunkers in Westchester County have evolved to look like those at Winged Foot, while in the Hamptons recently, the bunkers at Atlantic and The Bridge have been re-done to look more like those at Sebonack and Friar's Head.

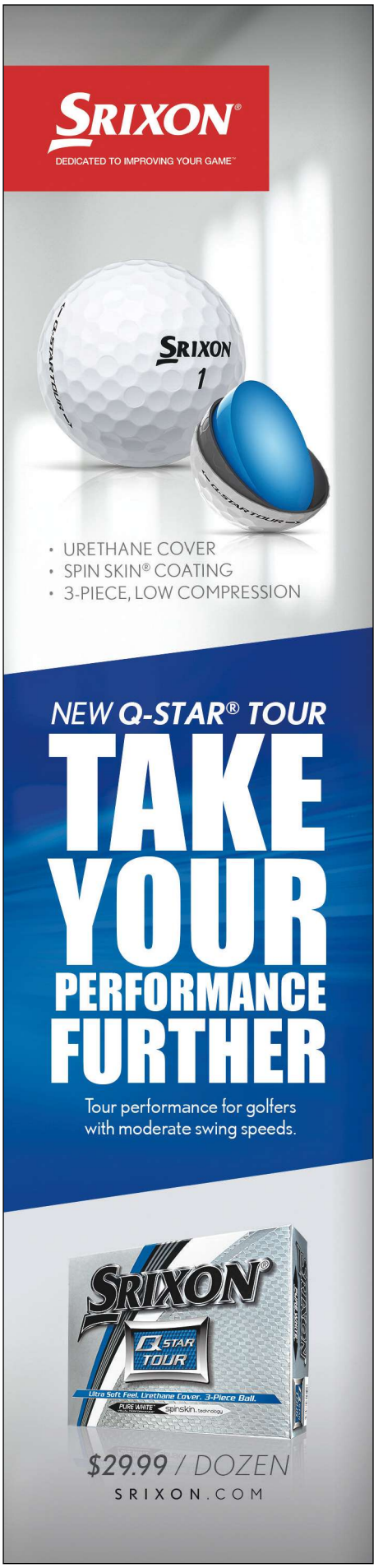
Some architects "plant bunkers in threes," like trees, to avoid formal lines and look more natural, or to force a multiple-choice decision. Modern courses tend to have larger and more elaborate bunkers, because new sites are more open and bigger bunkers seem to fit the visual scale of the property, but these are getting very expensive with new sand and lining techniques. Sometimes bunkers are used to visually break up a long line, or to act as a buffer between short grass and native plants. Some club members object to spending the money to maintain a bunker that doesn't factor into how a hole is played, but if the bunker is really seldom-used, then it shouldn't cost much to maintain it.

5. To Save You From Something Worse

Sometimes a bunker is placed as a buffer to save you from getting into worse trouble, like going down a slope or into a water hazard. My feeling is generally to let the natural hazard rule, but there are places where having a bunker to stop the ball's progress will save time and potential lost balls.

Because there is so much discussion of bunkers amongst club members, they are the feature of the course that has been most conspicuously changed over the years by green committees. Each had their own excuses for change – from the introduction of the steel shaft [or Big Bertha] to the low score returned by a visiting Tour pro. At the same time, many bunkers on older courses have been removed, because the modern sentiment that bunkers should only be placed where they interfere with good players clashes with the design styles of Macdonald, Tillinghast, and Travis. Top-shot bunkers and bunkers to separate holes (before trees grew to replace them) have gone the way of the dodo.

Today's impetus for change is maintenance and playability. Sand gets contaminated with silt and clay when rain washes soil from the bunker face down into the cavity, and greenside bunkers in high-play areas



get thin as players excavate some of the sand onto the face of the bunker with each attempt at recovery. Thirty years ago, greenskeepers would simply add more sand into the bunkers to fix such problems, which is why some bunkers became much shallower over time. Nowadays, though, the green committee is likely to call in an architect to ask for advice, and million-dollar bunker renovations have become remarkably common.

Before embarking on a master plan for a bunker renovation, an architect must take the temperature of the members to understand their goals. Are they trying to restore the work of the course's famous designer, to beef up the challenge so they can host big tournaments, or to reduce the maintenance costs for the club? In truth, most memberships are similar in their desires—they want it all—but the history of the club and course plays a big role in helping the architect find the best way forward.

True restoration of a club's original bunker scheme is very possible in the Met Area, thanks to the wealth of aerial photos dating to the mid-1920's, when many of our famous courses were brand new. Some question why a club would restore bunkers to their original positions when low-handicap players can hit the ball so much farther than in 1925 – but that's also sort of the point, as more of today's members are able to engage with features designed for Bobby Jones and the bigger hitters among his contemporaries.

Renovating the course by moving tees back or bunkers forward is usually favored by better players, although the code phrase they use to frame it is "restoring the intent" of what the original architect created. The problem with this approach is that bunkers—and the very routing of the course—are designed around topographic features in the landing areas. Moving a bunker from the face of an abrupt rise to the back side of it causes all sorts of problems for visibility and style.

Redesign—as in totally re-thinking where the bunkers should be—is much more rare in today's world than it should be. At least that would be about strategy and design intent, and it might lead to a reduction in the number of bunkers and their maintenance cost. If an architect had to justify the rationale for every bunker on the course, there'd be fewer of them.

Instead, the focus of many bunker renovations is "playability." The sharp rise in the cost of bunker renovations is mostly due to two factors – installing expensive liners to keep the sand from becoming contaminated (which is more effective in some soils than others), and bringing in a more expensive sand from far away because it reduces the incidence of fried-egg and other difficult lies.

And yet the same committeemen who instigated the effort to make bunkers more playable will often lament that their course is becoming too easy, and wonder aloud about making the bunkers deeper as part of the same project! To me, deepening bunkers is a bridge too far. Deep bunkers are far more problematic for high-handicap golfers than for low-handicappers, and I've seen bunkers that are so deep that seniors have trouble just trying to climb out of them. If you are restoring the original depths of bunkers on a Seth Raynor or Charles Banks design, that's one thing, but making bunkers deeper at a normal country club is a sure-fire way to guarantee you'll need another renovation a couple of years down the road.

(The decisions we make about the depth of particular bunkers are a matter of judgment or style, or sometimes something beyond. When I first started consulting work at Garden City Golf Club, I couldn't understand why some fairway bunkers were very deep— offering no chance to reach the green—and others shallower. When we started to dig new bunkers there, I found out the answer very quickly: The gravelly subsoil underneath the topsoil was much harder to grow grass in, so most of the pot bunkers were dug down only to the depth of the gravel (which varies across the site), so the excavated soil could be spread in adjacent areas of the fairway. The depth of the bunkers had nothing to do with decisions about playability at all, because Walter Travis hadn't stayed around to watch them be dug.)

In the final analysis, a lot of the "architectural" work in a bunker renovation comes down to aesthetics. There's nothing wrong with trying to make your club's bunkers look as good as they can, but ultimately such work has about as much impact on the quality of the course as getting a new haircut has on one's quality of life – it doesn't take long before it's taken for granted, and a new stylist has other ideas. Most clubs should think twice about signing up for a million-dollar haircut. ■