

ON COURSE

bunker down

The game of golf has spread from the linksland of Scotland to nearly every point on the globe. Modern construction techniques and equipment have made it possible to build a golf course almost anywhere, and yet almost every layout in the world shares something with those first courses—the bunker. The bunker is the original hazard, having appeared among the dunes as natural hollows and blowouts where windblown sand collected. Sculpted by the hand of nature, they captivated, tormented and enthralled the earliest golfers, and as the art of golf course design emerged to help spread the game beyond the linksland, the man-made bunker became an architectural fixture and remains today the quintessential strategic hazard.

Sand bunkers play many roles in modern design, always challenging the golfer's nerve and skill in a timeless equation of risk and reward. Some obscure the view or distort the perception of the golfer, introducing doubt and calling for faith and trust beyond the first glance. Others demand a heroic shot or carry. And still others are mere shadows of their windblown ancestors, serving only to enhance the view of residential lots or provide a token penalty for a wayward shot. It's common to hear TV announcers explain that a Tour pro would rather be in a well-maintained bunker than in the high grass surrounding the green. Fortunately, modern architects have rediscovered the strategic, psychological and aesthetic value of golf's oldest obstacle.



The importance of bunkers to course design cannot be disputed. Pits such as St. Andrews' Hell Bunker tempt, unnerve and reward like no other obstacle in golf.

One of the first lessons an American visiting Scotland must learn is to give up the notion of fairness as it relates to bunker placement. For years after World War II, American architects moved bunkers out of the way. Play that used to go over or around strategically shaped and placed bunkers began to be dictated between bunkers almost always placed at the outside margins of the fairway. A trip to any of the great links courses provides a sharp and shocking contrast. On these historic layouts, pot bunkers may reside in the center of the fairway or be scattered

about randomly in landing areas. How can this be fair? The answer is that natural layouts didn't adhere to a down-the-middle approach. In order to adapt to shifting winds, turf conditions and other elements, the original golfers learned to play to the edges, to control their distances, to pick a "line of charm" that might change from hour to hour or day to day. There's little strategic value in bombing the ball straight down the center of the fairway. The bunkers posed strategic considerations and tempted the golfer to seek an advantage by playing in their direction.



At this year's U.S. Open, Pinehurst #2 received well-deserved praise as a demanding test. Its difficult greens challenged the best players in the world to consider every angle of approach. But what of the cavernous sand bunkers that Donald Ross had so meticulously placed at the elbows, on the rises and in the dips of his masterpiece design? In order to toughen the old girl up, the USGA characteristically narrowed the fairways of Pinehurst #2 to ribbon width. During the telecast, blimp shots showed wonderful, strategic bunkers languishing 10 to 20 yards outside the fairway line. Imagine if the golfers had been able to seek advantages by playing toward these hazards in order to gain a more direct line or favorable angle. These are the bold and creative decisions and executions that truly identify the best golfers in the world. As Ross himself said, "bunkers should be placed in such locations as to make all classes of players think." Go to Pinehurst yourself, and you'll see what Ross meant. Unfortunately, the world's best were denied this aspect of his strategic challenge.

By contrast, the 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black showcased one of the game's great strategic bunkers. At the long, par-4 5th hole, architect A.W. Tillinghast served up a tantalizing tee shot by placing the tee well above a fairway set at a left-to-right diagonal. The hole greatly favors a drive down the extreme right side of the fairway, as that opens up a shorter and clearer approach to an elevated plateau green. Tillinghast, however, wouldn't let the golfer off so easily. The carry bunker that he created is one of golf's best. It's set on an angle to the fairway, allowing players to select how much they would choose to bite off. Sensing that better players wouldn't fear a simple sand pit, Tillinghast added islands, ragged edges and noses to heighten the psychological challenge. Now, a misfire doesn't necessarily take you out of the hole, but it introduces a variety of factors. A conservative

play to the left of the bunker results in a much more difficult approach. A perfect combination!

Think of the world's most famous bunkers. Some are vast expanses of wasteland—Hell's Half-Acre at Pine Valley—that demand a heroic carry and offer no alternative route. Others are small but mighty. The Road Hole Bunker at Saint Andrews has ruined more good rounds perhaps than any other bunker in golf. Its power lies not only in its steep, sod-faced wall, but also in how it brings other obstacles—the road and the stone wall beyond—into play for those who seek to avoid it. Still others—the bunker in the middle of the 6th green at Riviera, for example—take an ordinary hole and transform it into a thrilling strategic test.

The high point of bunker design may well have come at Oakmont Country Club, outside of Pittsburgh. Designed by Henry and William Fownes, with assistance from Emil Loeffler, Oakmont boasted more than 350 bunkers at one time. Not content with the challenges they posed, the designers commissioned a special rake that didn't smooth the sand, but furrowed it. Over time, Oakmont has softened its penal stance, but the famed Church Pew bunker—a massive pit interrupted by a series of three-foot-high islands down the center—remains one of the most recognizable and lethal bunkers in the game.

Bunkers come in all shapes and sizes, but the one thing all great ones share is memorability. John Low, a course architecture critic, wrote in the early 1900s that "bunkers, if they be good bunkers, and bunkers of strong character, refuse to be disregarded and insist on asserting themselves; they do not mind being avoided, but they refuse to be ignored." Amen.

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