

Nathan Crace's

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Much Ado About Something

By: Nathan Crace Date: December 20, 2007

Email from readers is a strange thing—almost cyclical. Sometimes you find yourself with many to read and other times wondering if the email link on the web site is broken. I can usually expect a spike after a column runs and the angry ones are typically the more fun to read. It never ceases to amaze me what some people will get bent out of shape over. Though I would never divulge names, two stand out to me as being the more interesting ones. The first was in reaction to my defending golf course superintendents when Callaway ran a series of commercials and print ads portraying them as dark and mysterious figures out to get golfers with tricky pin placements. It was simply a marketing plan to promote the company's line of Odyssey putters—and an effective one at that. I simply mentioned in that column that one superintendent I knew went so far as to throw away his Callaway irons and replaced them with a set of Cleveland irons after he took offense to the ads. As a result, I received an overtly childish email that rambled on about how I was over-reacting to the ad. The reader's words were so nasty and vitriolic that I cannot re-type them here because this is a family-friendly column, yet to him it was me who was over-reacting.

The other email was a very stern dressing down of me over a column I wrote about David Duval and his unprecedented fall from golf's stratosphere to the cellar as his game mysteriously went MIA after his British Open win. In the column, I pleaded with Duval to get things together and be the challenger to Tiger Woods that everyone wanted. Not that I didn't like Tiger, I just wanted to see some strong competition. While others were writing that Duval should have ditched the snow board and spent more time on the practice range, I simply stated that his life is his to live, but that we missed seeing him in contention because by all accounts he is a genuinely nice person and brimming with talent. His personal problems were no business of mine and I just wanted to see the Duval we saw the year before on the golf course again. However, one reader took offense (again I do not understand how) to my column and proceeded to inform me that it was Duval's personal battle with vertigo or some other balance disorder that caused the deterioration of his golf game and subsequent fall in the world rankings and that I should not make fun of someone's disability. Again, I never did anything even remotely akin to what I was being accused of doing. Nevertheless, it's good to get email because then I know you are reading.

I also have been getting requests to stop writing so much about the professional tours and more about matters dealing with golf course design, trends in the golf industry, etc. So as part of my New Year's resolution, I am going to focus more on these types of topics unless something happens in the golfing world that I feel merits coverage from my little soapbox. That being said, one topic that invariably comes up in conversations I have with golfers is bunkers. The how, why, where, and what ifs of bunkering and my take on the whole thing.

As the generally accepted historical account goes, bunkers (I dislike the sound of the term sand trap because it denotes the feeling that the bunker is merely a mechanism to ensnare some unsuspecting animal wondering across the golf course) originated on the links of the old Scottish courses where sheep would hunker down to shield themselves from the cold winds blowing in off the sea. The constant huddling of these sheep in the sides of the sandy dunes along the Scottish links would cause the sides of the dunes to erode from wind and rain and thus created bowl-like depressions that golfers would use as hazards when playing. As I was not present at that time, I cannot state with any affirmation that this account is indeed how bunkers came to be, but I am fairly confident that the same sheep had nothing to do with the creation of the sod wall bunkers that adorn many links courses. The whole lack of opposable thumbs issue for sheep would make it entirely too difficult to handle the sod without tearing it apart.

As golf course architecture began to expand, so too did varying styles of bunker design as a natural progression of varying styles of golf course design. We have all seen and played the old style bunkers with the high flashed faces. They look great on television and ominous in person, but they can be a bear to maintain and expensive in terms of labor and contaminated sand from rainfall. Many products and methods are now available to help cure this problem, some going so far as to mix Portland cement into the subsoil of the finished bunker to make it rock-hard and less likely to erode. Personally, I would rather not create something that could potentially break a golfer's wrist if the guy on the sand pro gets the sand a little thin in the bottom of the bunker from the constant raking. The corner of the filter fabric floating up through the sand is scary enough to be cause for concern when your ball is buried.

Sometimes, bunkers are used simply to "frame a hole"—a term that can be overused in our industry. They are also used to contain errant shots, keep balls out of water hazards, and break up an otherwise seemingly endless sea of green created by well-manicured turf. Donald Ross once said, "Often the highest recommendation of a bunker is when it is criticized." I tend to agree. Good bunkers create conversation among golfers because some will like them and other won't. To me, the best bunkers are those that dare you to come close with a tee shot, a lay up, or an approach in order to receive the best angle or location from where to play the subsequent shot as your reward. Get too close or too bold, and suffer the consequences. That is why golf is a thinking person's game and why we are so thrilled when we shoot a low number, because—if only for that one round—we have bested the course.

So instead, I personally like to have bunkers with faces sodded down to the sand and semi-flat bottoms that make the sand visible without all of the headaches associated with maintaining the flashed faces. That's not to say that all bunkers have to be visible. A few hidden bunker bottoms on a course are fun too—you know something's down there because you see a deep hole looming near the green, you just aren't sure exactly what it is or how deep it may be. As such, much consideration must be given to the placement, shape and configuration. Bunkers are not to be thrown around on a grading plan like dice on a craps table. Keeping with this games analogy, think of them more as the obstacles in a game of Stratego. One day, I hope to create a course with no sand bunkers at all, just a lot of creative shaping, hollows and mounds around the greens and fairways. It will of course require the right piece of property and the right owner who wants to try something different for the sake of being different, not so much to save on maintenance and long-term capital improvement costs (though it would do that). And for me, it would also be a means to disprove those who believe that large yawning bunkers filled with acres of sand make a golf course better. I don't buy into the notion that bunkers make the course, but they do provide nice contrast in photos. And photos, like political sound bites, make for good fodder when the media descends on a new or renovated course and the many annual "best of" lists hit the news stands.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know or email him at nathan@watermarkgolf.com. Copyright 2008.