

COVER STORY

Strong-er bunkers

A Golden Age course with a major championship history completes a long-awaited project.

Guy Cipriano



The eighth green at Canterbury Golf Club in suburban Cleveland.

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Years of careful pitching and planning didn't prepare the Canterbury Golf Club turf team for the equipment caravan it witnessed last September. A club that nearly had everything – major championship history, soothing land in the shadows of downtown Cleveland, golf-loving members and one of the best collection of Herbert Strong-designed greens – was beginning the physical process of correcting a painful secret by embarking on a bunker renovation. "I honestly didn't believe it was real until I saw the equipment come down the driveway," superintendent Mike LoPresti says.

Canterbury's bunkers had been architecturally and structurally failing for decades. LoPresti understood the plight immediately after arriving from famed Oak Hill Country Club in December 2011, yet he followed a tradition of overcoming infrastructure challenges to produce solid conditions established by longtime superintendent Terry Bonar. When grueling days of pumping, pushing, shoveling and sand swapping ended, LoPresti quietly documented the strain the bunkers placed on his team. Cleveland averages 40 inches of annual rainfall, so bunker washouts and contaminated sand are as common in the region as losing professional football seasons.

Assistant superintendent Alan Hammond, who arrived in 2013 from Oak Hill, lives near the club and experienced dozens of deflating pre-renovation mornings, passing a greenside bunker protecting the left side of the ninth green on the way to the club's maintenance building. The saturation in his yard and the bunker's condition often foreshadowed the workday. "I could look into my yard and see puddles, and I knew what we were facing today," he says. "It was like, 'Aww man, these guys don't know what they are in for. It's going to be a long, long slug.'"

LoPresti, Hammond and the crew slugged it out, using nearly every available resource to repair the course's 107 pre-renovation bunkers following significant storms: 60, 80, 100 hours ... whatever it took. LoPresti and Hammond worked alongside their employees in the bunkers because every hour mattered, and the team often returned the bunkers to a playable condition before most members noticed the severity of the problem.

Get ahead

Frontier Golf project manager Jason Sloan urges clubs considering major work to arrange the services of a builder "as soon as possible."

"Our schedules can fill up quickly as more projects are being bid out in more advance of the anticipated start date than when things were slow, especially large projects, which can leave clubs wanting smaller projects in a tight spot," he says. "And with the current labor shortage that we are experiencing as an industry right now, contractors are not able to easily add crews to our operations to accommodate additional projects."

Incorporating the builder into the planning stages and contacting suppliers to ensure key materials such as sod are readily available are among the other advance steps a club can take to ensure a successful project, Sloan adds. Canterbury Golf Club superintendent Mike LoPresti started securing supplies in 2015, shortly after members approved a major bunker renovation, helping the club control costs once construction commenced last fall. When it comes to sand, Canterbury benefitted from being a short drive from a Chardon, Ohio, production facility.

"What I always tell clubs is that you have to organize a project two years in advance to really get it efficient and to get the good prices," says architect Bruce Hepner, who oversaw the work at Canterbury. "We put it out to bid the year before so we had nothing but the best contractors. We get very competitive bids from them all. We pick a contractor a year in advance, so they are organized, we're organized and we're off to races when we show up. We all know what we are doing."



Once he settled into his Canterbury tenure, LoPresti started gently decreasing the ferocity of bunker maintenance. The tactic was difficult because of a superintendent's prideful nature, but it proved important for the course's future.

"When I first got here, I was like, 'What are we going to do? We have to fix these,'" he says. "And I would throw everybody at them. After I was here for a few years, sometimes I would leave them so the members would understand how bad they could be. What's often the case in this industry is that we get out early, get out of everybody's way and fix everything before people have an opportunity to see. I think that helped open some people's eyes to how bad they really were. It's a good opportunity to explain what the whole situation is."

Bruce Hepner, Canterbury's consulting architect since the late 1990s, worked on a long-range plan with the club, scoring victories over the years such as modest tree removal, returning greens to original sizes, improving the irrigation system and renovating tee complexes. The work strengthened what Hepner considered a Golden Age gem with "great bones," but some of the external features remained feeble. Canterbury opened in 1922, and Hepner says based on his research bunkers were modified multiple times by different architects, although some of Strong's original designs remained. "It was quite eclectic with all the different shapes and sizes," Hepner says.

The Great Recession stalled bunker renovation discussions, but that didn't stop outsiders, including Golf Digest architecture sage Ron Whitten, from chattering about Canterbury's bunkers. Whitten told Hepner, "there wasn't a golf course in the country that needed a bunker job more than Canterbury," which has hosted the U.S. Open, PGA Championship, Western Open and U.S. Amateur. "It was the missing piece of the puzzle," Hepner adds.

As he waited on the club to approve the project, Hepner studied hundreds of bunkers, including the ones in early photographs of the Canterbury grounds. Strong's original bunkers included sharp edges and fingers surrounded by penal turf. The bunkers strayed from their original form, becoming simpler and rounder over the years. Simple, though, led to complex maintenance, and Hepner worked to make them "functional first and then add a lot of character to them."

Try it out - or not?

Showing vs. telling members the magnitude of a problem led to Canterbury Golf Club improving the bunkers on its par-3 11th hole before embarking on a course-wide bunker renovation.

The Canterbury turf team completed an in-house renovation of the hole's six bunkers in the spring of 2015. The renovation included installing the same modern liner Superintendent Mike LoPresti wanted to use on the entire project. The 11th hole was the only hole with renovated bunkers when the club and PGA Tour announced a three-year agreement to bring a Web.com Tour finals event to Canterbury. The 2016 DAP Championship was the last event played at Canterbury with the previous bunker style. The renovation started less than three weeks after the tournament concluded.

"No. 11 had the worst bunkers infrastructurally before the renovation, so we used that as an example to show the members how good they can be," LoPresti says. "That helped a lot to sell the whole project."

Bruce Hepner, Canterbury's consulting architect since the late 1990s, has mixed views on club's completing pilot projects.

"I don't do it very often," he says. "I usually try to build enough trust with the membership to say, 'Hey, you have to do it all at one time.' I have seen too many pilot holes where it didn't turn out very good, so they didn't do the bunker job at other clubs. It's a little risky, but it was something that Canterbury needed. The membership needed it to sell the whole project. It worked really well there."



Canterbury's renovated bunkers fit with the Golden Age features found throughout the Herbert Strong-designed course.

The style Hepner devised included sod faces throughout the course, but also a few bunkers that included steep sand flaring. Using what he calls "old-world construction," Hepner focused on the areas outside bunkers to ensure water from greens and surrounds flowed away from the hazards. Canterbury also installed a modern liner in the bunkers. Hepner doubled as the shaper, a tactic he deploys on many of his projects. GCBA certified builder Frontier Golf served as the builder, mobilizing a crew in Northeast Ohio last September following the conclusion of the Web.com Tour's DAP Championship, the first televised tournament hosted by the club since the 2009 Senior PGA Championship. The course remained opened during construction, allowing members to play their final 2016 rounds while witnessing the metamorphosis.

Heavy, slow-draining clay soils halted construction even after last fall's minimal rains, Frontier Golf project manager Jason Sloan says. The project also included adding six miles of drainage throughout the course and renovating more than 20 tees. To accommodate repositioned fairway bunkers, the Canterbury crew moved irrigation lines and heads, a task led by second assistant superintendent Terrance DiLoreto.

"It is always a unique experience to work on a historic golf course dating back to the Golden Age of golf course architecture," Sloan says. "It is a pleasure and an honor that we take very seriously, as we know our work becomes part of a rich and significant history of the golf course."

Work started in a far corner of the cozy property, and by winter, construction reached the center of the club, where the paved driveway, parking lot and maintenance facility converge. The project finished this past spring. Canterbury received more than 1 ½ inches of rain in a short period on Memorial Day and Fourth of July weekends. Member-member weekend was even wetter, with the club absorbing 4 ½ inches in three hours.

"Last year we would have had to make a decision: Are we changing cups and cutting greens, or are we fixing bunkers?" LoPresti says. "This year it was just a normal day."

Multiple years of weather data is needed to fully quantify labor savings, although LoPresti says it now takes three to four employees and less than two hours to fix bunkers following significant storms. Avoiding major washouts allows Canterbury's specialized employees to execute detail-oriented tasks, Hammond adds. The new design requires more fly mowing, a process that has become more efficient as the crew learns the nuances of the 102 bunkers.

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