

Make

BUNKER

Master The Mechanics

The main reason golfers have problems with a greenside bunker is they treat it like a regular golf shot. It is, but in only one respect — you swing the club on the same path as you do for standard shots. Otherwise, the bunker shot is thoroughly different than any other shot you play. The material being played from is like no other faced during a round, and you must hit behind the ball, something to be avoided at all costs with conventional shots. Finally, within the conventional swing path, you must use an “unconventional” swing technique to be successful at these shots.

The first thing I do with students taking a bunker-play lesson is to have them hit pitch shots from long grass just behind the bunker. This helps in two ways. First, they will understand how important it is to get the ball airborne. They instinctively don't want to flop the ball in the bunker in front of them. Secondly, these shots are played like a bunker shot, as you hit into the grass behind the ball. Because there is less resistance to the clubhead out of grass, they get a comfortable feel for that type of impact. It prepares them to accept hitting a “fat” shot in the sand and to make the long, slow swing that produces the best results.

This also helps to deal with the psychological fear so many golfers have when playing out of bunkers. In the end, learning and mastering sound mechanics will give you enough confidence to overcome the intimidation factor.

The Backswing — Get Vertical

The key element in making these shots is a vertical or V-shaped swing arc, which you will not use for any other golf shot. Achieving this swing path is equally contrary to convention. It is absolutely essential that you hit down into the sand behind the ball. The V-shaped swing is the way to assure that happens. Any leveling of the club's



For a standard greenside bunker explosion shot, the line of your feet, hips and shoulders should be left of the target at address. The clubface is square to the target, as compensation for the swing, which will follow the body line. The backswing features an immediate up-cocking of the hands and wrists as the arms swing the club back along the line of the body. There is virtually no lower body movement at this point in the action.

path in the backswing is going to foster a shallow path at impact. This almost inevitably produces a thin, bladed shot that lines the ball over the green.

The takeaway should begin by lifting up the club with your arms while at the same time up-cocking the wrists. Up-cocking means that your thumbs come back toward you. The wrists must not cock sideways or horizontally, as this flattens the swing plane.

The best way to achieve this up-cocking is with a dominant right hand. In other words, start the backswing with the right hand. Also, grip the club more in the fingers so you have maximum feel for the clubhead. A finger-oriented

hold will allow the wrists to move with more fluidity as well.

The Downswing

Too many golfers think, or are told, they must take the club back to the outside or away from their body so they can cut across the ball in the downswing. They believe this gets the club through the sand more easily and puts backspin on the ball. Neither is going to happen, except by accident.

Taking the club back to the outside causes too steep a downswing and too deep a penetration of the clubhead into the sand. The club does not go more easily through the sand, but

SHOTS *Easier*

By **Alch Strauss with Al Barlow**



In the downswing, the angle of the wrists formed at the start of the swing should be retained as the arms swing the club down into the sand and along the line of the body. The club continues to swing to the left of the target, but the ball goes right at the pin. Only after the ball is well away is there any lower body movement.

instead digs too much. The ball then either stays in the bunker or just barely gets out. Accuracy is diminished because the clubface will not be facing the target at impact.

Swing the club along the line of your body, with the clubface aimed at the target at address, and you will automatically cut across the ball. You will hit it on line to the hole because the ball goes where the clubface is aimed, not your body.

What's more, by not changing the plane or path of your basic swing, you will make a more comfortable, familiar pass at the ball, which is bound to improve your overall bunker-play performance. This is the basic swing con-

cept. However, there are important details within that framework.

In the downswing, keep the right hand loaded by maintaining the angle formed at the wrist by the up-cocking to start the backswing. Retain the up-cocked wrist position all the way to the point of impact with the sand and simply allow the weight of the falling club to produce the basic force required to get the club through the sand and the ball out of it.

In effect, the backswing is a right-hand and arms action. The downswing is an arm swing where the hands stay relatively quiet. There is very little to no body movement when playing these shots. You never want the clubface to

change its angle in the forward swing. Keeping the hands quiet is the key to this.

This fundamental stroke for green-side bunker shots applies no matter what type of lie you have. It will accomplish the first priority in bunker play, which is to get the ball out of the sand with one swing. However, in respect to the second most important criterion — getting the ball close to the hole — alignment, aiming and weight distribution are the main considerations.

Body Alignment & Aiming

The first thing to do when preparing to play a bunker shot is to get your body properly aligned in relation to the target. Of course, you will need to dig your feet into the sand to establish a secure foundation. The line of your feet and body must be aimed left of the target about 10 feet. A line drawn from the target to your ball and another from the target to your left foot should form a narrow cone or triangle. For very short shots, the body is a bit more open — say 12 feet. For longer ones, it should be about 6 feet.

Because you will be swinging the club along the line of your body, or on a line left of the target, open the clubface so the lead or bottom edge of the club is exactly horizontal to the target line. In other words, your body aims left of the target, and the clubface aims directly at it. The key element here is that the swing itself is on the same path as it is for all other shots.

As for putting backspin on these shots, you shouldn't expect it. In fact, if you get backspin, you've hit too close to the ball and risked hitting it first. You may see the pros get backspin on some bunker shots, but they will tell you that they got away with a mistake. They reduced the margin for error to the danger point. Almost all bunker shots will have some roll, and those that don't should simply stop where they land. That's the ideal.



At address, your weight should be predominantly on your left side. Play the ball off the instep of the left foot. The club should hit approximately 2 inches behind the ball in sand that is fairly firm but readily penetrable.

You can even hit 4 inches behind and get out of the bunker. In both cases, though, you better have the club moving with some force. Be sure you follow through. You will get the ball out in both instances, but it will not fly as far and will roll more than when you hit it at the 2-inch mark.

On the other side of the ledger is the shot that stays in the bunker either because you did not hit it hard enough or because you hit farther back of it than 4 inches. In the first instance, you have probably slowed the club down before it gets to the sand. This is what we call deceleration. Golfers usually decelerate for fear of hitting the ball first, out of a general fear of the shot or just not paying attention to where you must hit behind the ball. Trust your mechanics and the construction of your sand wedge, and you have nothing to fear from these shots but fear itself.

Getting The Right Distance

For bunker shots of less than 50 feet to the pin with a good lie — the ball sitting on top of sand that is not too firm or too soft, and on the level — the length of your backswing will determine how far the ball goes. All the setup and swing mechanics described previously are the same, but how far you swing the club back to get a certain distance is a matter of individual experience. Some golfers just hit the ball farther than others with what appears to be the same swing length.

If the sand is soft and heavy, you need a longer swing than for standard stuff, because there is more resistance to the club going through. If the sand is firmly packed, you can make a little shorter swing because there is less resistance.

For explosion shots more than 50 feet, some changes in technique are required. A few basics remain the same — the up-cocking of the wrists and the ball position — but the stance is not quite as open, nor as wide. If you narrow your stance, you will get some natural, unsolicited leg action. Just let it happen, though. Don't create it.

The clubface is not quite as open for these longer explosions, and the backswing will not be quite as vertical. It will be more U-shaped, which is achieved by delaying the up-cocking of the wrists. Swing the arms up a little more before up-cocking. The arc will

Ball Alignment

At address, the ball should be aligned off the left heel, at least. Many golfers play these shots toward the middle of their stance. The result is often a bladed shot — the ball hit first — especially if there is any body movement in the swing. If you err, do so to the left. With the ball well left in your stance, you are giving yourself the best chance if all other mechanics fail to hit behind the ball and get it moving up and forward.

Because it can be difficult to find the right ball alignment when your stance is so open, a good way to assure you have it correct at address is to pull the club straight back from the ball to your feet. This will tell you where you are playing it.

Weight Distribution

You should keep at least 70 percent of your weight on your left side. This helps reduce body action in these shots, especially in the backswing.

How Far Behind The Ball Do You Hit?

The recommended average distance to hit behind the ball is 2 inches. Keep your eyes on that mark. However, you don't have to be absolutely precise. There is a margin for error, to the rear. You can hit 3 inches behind the ball and get a decent shot.



The fried egg is when the ball is visible but partially below the level of the sand and in the middle of the crater it made when landing. Square the blade for this shot and take a less open stance. The backswing gets vertical from the start with an immediate up-cocking of the hands and wrists. Aim to hit into the edge of the crater directly behind the ball. The follow-through should be short.

be widened a tad, just enough to alter its shape to what is needed.

The Fried Egg & The Buried Ball

The fried egg is when the ball is settled in the crater it made when landing. The ball is the yolk, and the crater the white. You will be able to see most of the ball. A buried ball is when it has burrowed deep into the sand and you can see only a small part of the cover.

For both situations, the setup and swing mechanics are identical to those for a standard good lie. The difference is mainly in the set of the clubface. For the fried egg, you don't want to break the yolk (catch the ball first). Square the blade — it's not open or closed — so the lead edge hits first into the sand. In the downswing, strike the back edge of the crater.

For the buried lie, you need the face to be closed, aimed left of your target. Therefore, aim your body slightly to the right of the target. A shut clubface will give you the degree of dig necessary to extricate the ball from this difficult spot. This is a much easier shot than you might think, if you play it correctly. Hit down hard close behind the ball with a good bit of force. A follow-through is not necessary. You don't need much of one for the fried egg either.

For both shots, the ball is going to come out running more than usual. It is difficult to gauge how much. Getting out and somewhere on the green is the main goal. Not many of these shots end up close to the hole, and you shouldn't expect that.

Playing Downhillers & Uphillers

Here again, the basic mechanics remain the same. The key to success



A buried or plugged lie is when the ball has burrowed deep into the sand and you can see only a small part of the cover. For this shot, the clubface is closed so the leading edge can dig sharply into the sand. Therefore, your body alignment should be slightly to the right of the target. Again, the backswing is very vertical, and the downswing is a little more forceful than usual. The club should hit about an inch behind the ball with not much follow-through.

with these lies is orienting your body to the slope.

When playing uphill, tilt your shoulders to the right to match the degree of slope you're dealing with. For a downhill lie, tilt your shoulders to the left. In this way, you will be able to swing the club along the slope of the ground and not dig too much on uphillers or slide the blade into the ball on downhillers.

The downhiller is the more dangerous shot of the two, even with the best mechanics and body alignment. The best way to assure the correct penetration into the sand is to play the ball a couple inches farther back in your stance than normal. It should be in the middle of your stance or even farther back. Also, open the clubface a bit more.

For uphill lies, getting height is not

a problem. Therefore, don't open the blade quite as much and you will get the distance you need.

Overcoming Bunker Anxiety

Aside from the mechanics we've described previously, there are other means by which to overcome bunker-shot anxiety. One is to develop a preshot routine. Before you get into the bunker, take a couple of up-cocking, V-shaped practice swings outside of it. A preshot routine has a way of easing tension, because you are doing something familiar.

Another is to grip the club lightly. Very little grip pressure, especially with the right hand, will keep the rest of your body tension-free. Remember that the hands begin to tighten on the

handle as the swing begins. That's a natural physical phenomenon. The club will not come out of your hands or even loosen. It may feel that way, but it just doesn't happen. Try to maintain that feeling of softness in the hands throughout the swing. It will help create the long, slow swing that you want and produce the right distance and direction for your green-side bunker shots. **GI**

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For uphill and downhill lies, tilt your body at address to match the slope. On uphill shots, the left shoulder will be considerably higher than the right. For downhillers, the reverse is the case. Play the ball farther back in your stance for downhill shots and set the hands more forward of the ball.