

Tip of The Month

The Ups & Downs of Greenside Bunker Play

By Lana Ortega

Playing golf in Colorado means you get the opportunity to play plenty of fantastic links-style golf courses. To play well on a links course you must know how to adapt your basic fundamentals to tackle the most common obstacle on a links layout - the greenside bunker. This month I'll discuss two lies in the bunker - uphill and downhill - that require slight variations from the basic greenside bunker shot.

Uphill Lie in a Bunker

In addition to the length of the swing, clubface position is one of the factors that determines the distance of a bunker shot. Normally, you would open the face to create a higher, shorter shot and square it up to hit a shot that carries and rolls farther. You'll want to square the face of your sand wedge for an uphill bunker shot where you have some green to work with. You don't need an open clubface for this shot because the slope and your body's arrangement adds effective loft to the shot. At address, tilt your shoulders to match the incline of the bunker with more weight on your back foot. The key to a bunker shot on an uphill lie is to swing up the slope on the forward swing, splashing the ball out of the bunker on a thin wave of sand. The amount of arm swing back and through should be appropriate to the overall distance of the shot.



If the lip is severe and there's not much green between you and the flagstick, you need to produce a shot that gets up quickly and lands softly. Do this by opening the clubface at address, but instead of tilting the shoulders to match the slope, do the opposite. Level your shoulders with your weight on your front foot and the ball in the middle of your stance. As you swing the club back, hinge your wrists early to create a steeper angle of approach. The slope will stop the clubhead as it works into the sand on the forward swing, popping the ball up and onto the green. The speed and force of the swing controls the distance of the shot.

Downhill Bunker Shot

The downhill bunker shot presents more challenge because the lie will cause the ball to come out with a lower than normal trajectory, yet the ball must climb high enough to clear the front lip and land on the green. The downhill lie also means you must guard against hitting the lip of the bunker with the clubhead on the backswing.

To hit this shot, open your clubface and body at address appropriate to the overall length of the shot and play the ball more toward the middle of your stance. Tilt your shoulders to match the slope's incline with more weight on the front foot. This body arrangement is key to allowing the club to work up the slope going back, and down the slope on the forward swing. If the back edge of the lip is steep and the slope severe you may be forced to position the right foot out of the bunker in order to tilt your shoulders parallel to the slope. This creates a steep enough swing to miss the edge of the bunker going back, and also creates a steeper angle of attack, allowing the clubhead to work down into the sand on the forward swing. If the right foot is out, however, make sure it's pulled back slightly so that the right knee doesn't interfere with the swing.

The key to executing a downhill bunker shot is to hinge the wrists early in the takeaway. An early wrist hinge serves three purposes: 1) it helps you negotiate the lip of the bunker which may be very close to the back of the ball, 2) it sets up a very steep angle of attack on the forward swing, helping the club work down into the sand, and 3) the hinge helps generate the clubhead speed necessary to execute the shot.