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Where to leave bunker rakes? This course designer has the definitive answer

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To leave a rake inside or outside a bunker? That is the question

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As a seasoned [golf course architect](#), Forrest Richardson gives a lot of thought to the minutiae of the game.

Among the topics he has been inclined to ponder: the proper placement of [bunker rakes](#).

If Richardson had his druthers, there would be no need for him to wrestle with this matter, because bunker rakes would not exist.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that they dumb down the game,” Richardson says. “But they don’t make things better for golf.”

One drawback, of course, is that they get in the way. Consider the incident Richardson witnessed last month while playing in an outing at the [Olympic Club](#) in San Francisco. It was the kind of thing he’s seen more times than he can count. On the par-3 15th hole of the Lake Course, one of

Richardson's partners hit a wayward shot that got hung up on a rake on the steep face of a [green-side bunker](#). When the player moved the rake, as he was entitled to do by the Rules of Golf, his ball stayed where it was, leaving him with a more challenging lie than he likely would have had if the rake hadn't been there.

Was there somewhere else the rake should have been left instead?



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As it happens, Richardson has done more than contemplate this question. He has researched it, conducting a survey that might qualify as the most exhaustive exploration of bunker rake-placement ever carried out. This was more than 16 years ago. Richardson originally published the results in a 2008 article in *Golfdom Magazine*. Clearly, though, the issue hasn't gone away. And

after last month's Olympic Club outing, Richardson was inspired to recirculate the article in his online newsletter. You can read it in full [here](#).

Meantime, here's a look at his methodology and findings.

For the survey, Richardson focused on the three most common options for rake placement: inside the bunker, outside the bunker and partially in (he chose not to consider more obscure alternatives such as subterranean rake compartments, or those long-out-of-fashion spike-shaped rakes that can be plunged into the ground like spears, because the vast majority of courses don't use them).

Richardson then canvassed rules officials, course operators and other industry figures, asking them to assign letter grades — A, B, C, D and F — in eight categories of concern: interference with play; ruling complexities; access to the golfer; interference with maintenance; aesthetics; wear

Not surprisingly, each option showed different strengths and weaknesses. While the inside-the-bunker option got great grades in “aesthetics” and “maintenance interference” (an A in both categories because the rakes are largely out of view and don't have to be moved for mowing), it flunked “ruling complexities,” earning an F for all the funky things that can happen, such as balls hitting rakes in the sand and the other way around.

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The outside-the-bunker option, by contrast, got an A in “ruling complexities” because it rarely creates complicated decisions. But it was assigned a D in both “maintenance interference” (the rakes get in the way of mowing) and “game traditions,” because, as Richardson wrote in his summation, the rake “has the potential to deflect a ball toward or away from the bunker, constituting an artificial influence to the game that may change the outcome of a match.”

There’s more. Much more.

Leaving rakes outside bunkers, Richardson’s survey found, makes it easy for players to get their hands on them (a grade of B for “access to the golfer”), but it’s hard on the rakes themselves, as they often wind up lying in wet turf (a grade of D for “wear and tear to the rake”). Not that leaving rakes inside the bunker is a great solution either. “Not only wet, but also gritty,” Richardson noted. “Grade: C.”

You get the picture. The guy went deep.

When all the individual grades were tallied, the inside and outside option both wound up with the same overall grade: C+. The third option, partially in, referred to in the survey as the “propped position,” fared best across most categories, earning an overall grade of B+.



And the winner is...the “propped” position

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Along with that grade, Richardson offered guidance. “In this position,” he wrote, “the rake is placed in the bunker with the tines down and the handle propped on the lip. Ideally, the handle will be a foot or less beyond the lip so it can be grabbed, yet does not place the tines too far up on steeper slopes.” In this way, he noted, the rake has little contact with the ground (good for longevity), is largely out of view (good for aesthetics) and only scant chance of interfering with a ball in play.

“There, you have a pragmatic assessment of bunker-rake positions,” Richardson wrote. “Part scientific, part physics, and part as if Olympic gymnastics judges were in charge of the scores.”

Or a strict high school teacher.

Though Richardson didn’t say it, he might as well have. Getting rid of rakes altogether would likely be the only way to get an A.

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