Walk-behind greens mowers

By Peter Blais

With golfers constantly demanding better conditions, courses that can afford them are favoring walk-behind rather than riding greens mowers, according to industry experts.

Referring to the modern golfer, Dave Fearis, superintendent at Blue Hills Country Club in Kansas City, Mo., said: "We've created a monster. They expect perfection.

"There's a definite advantage to walk-behind mowers. You generally get a better quality of cut, less compaction, no triplex ring and no hydraulic leaks like you sometimes get with riding mowers."

"We like walk-behind mowers because they generally do a better job," agreed Jim Latham, director of the United States Golf Association Green Section's Great Lakes Region office. "There's a conversion to walk-behind mowers at some (upscale) courses. But budget constraints keep many courses from buying them."

Price isn't the problem, according to Ransomes, Inc. Director of Customer Service Bud Muser. Walk-behind mowers cost around $3,000 apiece, a riding unit $10,000 to $15,000.
he said. The problem is the labor needed to run the walk-behind units. "One guy can do 18 greens in a single morning on a riding mower," Muser said. "It's going to take several workers, with each one using his own walk-behind mower, to do the same job in the same amount of time. "Most every superintendent would like to use walk-behind mowers if he could. But most just don't have the budget to do it." Ransomes' Executive Vice President Dave Fondrie estimated that, overall, about 10 percent of U.S. courses manicure their greens solely with walk-behind units. The rest use riding mowers or some combination of the two. The percentage of walk-behind-only courses increases dramatically, however, at courses with higher maintenance budgets, he added. "You get less compaction, less likelihood of scalping and better striping capabilities with the walk-behinds," Fondrie said. "There's a trend back to the walk-behinds at courses where members demand a higher level of performance and appearance."

The mechanics of the walk-behind greens mower has changed little over the years, according to Dave Buchanan of Jacobsen Textron. "It's basically still an engine and a reel," he said. The biggest advances have come in turf-grooming attachments and the thickness of bed knives, he said.

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Walk-behind greens mowers more popular

Grooming units allow superintendents to cut grass higher, resulting in healthier turf, while often yielding even faster speeds. Jacobsen, for instance, claims regular use of its groomer attachment increases green speed by 25 percent. It also helps eliminate graining and control thatch. Grooming units can also be used every time a green is mowed, as opposed to verticutting units that perform some of the same functions, but can be used only occasionally because they are "too aggressive to the grass," Muser said. Consequently, grooming units keep putting speeds uniform year-round.

"Grooming units are probably the biggest advance in the past five to 10 years." — Dave Buchanan, Jacobsen

That increases green speed, it puts tremendous stress on turf and makes it more susceptible to disease. The only way to maintain green turf at that height is to apply more chemicals, a practice that puts the golf industry at odds with environmentalists. "Twenty years ago you didn't even think about the 1/8-inch cuts that are so common today. People laughed at you if you went below 3/16-inch. With the new bed knives you can go well below 1/8-inch," Fears said.

"The older bed knives were much thicker," Muser added. "They lasted longer, but you were limited to how close you could cut by the blade's lip height. Now everyone has these tournament knives with virtually no lip. They cut lower, but they don't last as long. You sacrifice blade life for how low you can go."

While the life of a bed knife may be short, the walk-behind mower itself is likely to live to a ripe old age. "If you've got a good mechanic, you can run these things for 10 years," Latham said. "When they get too old to use on greens, they can be used on tees and the approaches to greens. Chicago Golf Club just removed some 20-year-old units from service."

A handful of companies sell walk-behind greens mowers including Bunton Co., Deere & Co., The Toro Co., Jacobsen and Ransomes. How does a superintendent choose the right unit for his course?

"Get a demo of each type," Fears recommended. "Let the people who cut your greens try them all. Then survey each one. Usually there is overwhelming support for one particular model."

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