Walk-behind greens mowers more popular

With golfers demanding lower cuts to get ever faster putting speeds, "having some type of grooming unit is becoming very important in allowing a slightly higher cut while maintaining speed," said Pat Lewis, superintendent at Portland (Maine) Country Club.

Basically, groomers grab hold of horizontally growing turf grass, like creeping bentgrass, and straighten it up before cutting it, said Jacobsen's Buchanan, whose company introduced its Turf Groomer™ in 1986. Most manufacturers offer some type of grooming unit.

Grooming units allow superintendents to cut grass higher, resulting in healthier turf, while often yielding even faster speeds. Jacobson, 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 verti-cutting 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," Buchanan said.

"Groomers have helped overcome some of the problems presented by the other major innovation, thinner bed knives. The seemingly paper-thin bed knives on the market today allow cuts as low as 5/64-inch. While 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 below 1/8-inch," Peairs said.

"The older bed knives were much thicker," Muser added. "They lasted longer, but you were limited to how low 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 lower cuts.

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 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," Peairs recommended. "Let the people who cut your greens try them all. Then survey each one. Usually there is overwhelming support for one particular model."

"As the turf industry continues to grow, so will our need to reach all segments of the turfgrass industry — everyone from homeowners to commercial developers, from municipal maintenance to sod producers — who will benefit from our efforts with the Turfgrass Council," said Sam Linker, immediate past president of the Turfgrass Council and superintendent at Mallard Head Country Club in Mooresville.

Turf Work Group and help all of us provide the best quality turf." -- Dave Buchanan, Jacobsen

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