Superintendent's groomer invention a breakthrough in technology

By Vern Putney

Larry Lloyd died in 1985 a young 46, but the inventive genius of the former golf course superintendent at Rancho Canada Golf Club in Carmel, Calif., lives on in the revolutionary Turf Groomer.

While research and development teams work all over the world, it is oftentimes the superintendent in the field who gets the brainstorm that creates major innovations.

In this case it was Lloyd's brainstorm which the giant Jacobsen Division of Textron Inc. in Racine, Wis., turned into reality when it introduced the turf-grooming reel in 1986.

Benefits of using Turf Groomer have been remarkable, say superintendents and company officials alike.

Kevin Ross, superintendent at Falcon (Maine) Country Club, said that after a September meeting of a dozen superintendents from around the country, "It seems almost everybody said they were using or gaps in their state were."

"Now it's even on Jacobsen's fairway units."

The turf conditioner is said to virtually eliminate granulating in greens and to increase green speed as much as 25 percent without lowering the height of cut.

"Some superintendents are using them every day very diligently. We make sure each of our greens is groomed once a week," Ross said.

"With the Groomer you can maintain good ball speed with a higher cut."

Maintaining higher cutting heights can improve turf health, help lower summer soil temperatures and lessen weed problems. Regular use is said to smooth out green irregularities caused by ball marks, old cup placements, green stables and sand from traps.

Other techniques such as verticating, top dressing and drying out the green can be reduced or eliminated.

Lloyd's mechanical talent was evident early. The Napa Valley native took his first golf course job at age 18 on the famous Silverado Golf Club in Napa. In 1962, at age 22, he became superintendent at Pajaro Valley Golf Club in Watsonville.

Lloyd switched to Nick Lombardo's Del Monte Country Club as superintendent in 1965. When Lombardo acquired the Fig Garden Golf Course in Fresno, Lloyd added superintendent responsibilities there.

Pajaro Valley Golf Club was added to the Lombardo chain as a lease property. Lloyd oversaw operations there. He installed his Dad, Paul Sr., as course super, and rode herd on his work until the senior Lloyd became comfortable with the job.

Next project was a new course in Carmel Valley, now known as Rancho Canada. While course super there, he became club vice president and board of directors member, posts he held at the time of his passing.

Lloyd, then 32, as the contractor oversaw the entire operation. Building was started in February 1980 and the 36-hole layout, designed by golf course architect Robert Dean Putnam of Fresno, opened for play in April 1970.

The West course is regarded as the third-toughest course on the Peninsula, measuring 6,835 yards with a par rating of 72.3.

To build the greens and save money, a local sand was found in an old sandbar in the middle of the course was used exclusively, without amendment or drainage. The cover was Sea Side bentgrass.

Of the 300,000 square feet of greens surface, two greens were 22,000-square-foot monsters.

"You have to be unique," understated Lloyd.

From this project may have sprung Lloyd's intense interest in greens and efforts at improvement. A skilled mechanic, he maintained his Lamborghini and Corvette sports cars in the splendidly stocked garage of his home in Pacific Grove. Constantly tinkering and experimenting, he devised the mower that Lombardo declared would revolutionize care and maintenance of putting surfaces.

Lloyd perhaps would not have made such a broad statement, but the product of his fruitful mind has done just that.

Lloyd's breakthrough features a precise machine front roller of closely spaced grooves with special beveled edges that momentarily lift horizontally growing grasses. Powered knives rotate through the slots in the roller to immediately slice the horizontal grass blades, stems and surface runners before they spring back down. Jacobsen advertising manager Jim Byrnes said this meshing of the front roller and powered knives is the critical difference between turf conditioning with the Turf Groomer and would-be clones.

The close association of the front roller, powered knives and bedknives gives the Turf Groomer and Greens King mower a very short roller base (distance from front to rear roller.)

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**Balancing Act**

COUNTRY CLUB
Inventions help superintendents’ jobs and improve golf course operations

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The royalties would have put Erswell on Easy Street, but might have lessened his inventive turn of mind.

Golf officials in the United States and abroad had good reason to remember “The Father of Maine Golf.”

His pet peeve was the putting cup, only 4-3/4 inches in diameter. He attacked that tantalizing target for at least 75 years.

“How can they justify such a small area?” he railed. “Two shots to reach 400 yards or more, and two or three more strokes to get the ball in that little hole. A six-inch cup is must require.”

Erswell managed to persuade several courses to install the larger cups, but traditional and withering glances from the Royal and Ancient Golf Club and U.S. Golf Association it like the Groomer will.”

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Lloyd’s groomer means equal greens

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“You want approximately the same surface and speed on all 18 greens. And you don’t want to have to fight grain. Our experience is that regular use of a grooming reel will help superintendents meet these goals.”

“Get the grain out,” said Carl Edmonson, superintendent at Arrowhead Country Club in Montgomery, Ala. “A verticutter just won’t do it. It’s not the same.”

Mr. Erswell, you have violated.

Therefore, you will desist from using the wildcat Erswell club and the unorthodox approach.

He foresaw that good steel shafts would replace the hickory handles, and was the first to adopt them in Maine.

Erswell ground down the early stiff metal shafts at certain places to obtain more flexibility. Some of his test clubs became standard with the manufacturers.

ERSWELL’S BEGINNINGS

Erswell’s introduction to golf came about 1897. He worked as a train dispatcher and telegrapher in Ohio and Wyoming, and played baseball during the summer.

While playing ball in Cheyenne, he saw a six-hole course not far from the ballfield, apparently laid out on a buffalo range. The ground was cupped and rough.

“I used to see men walking around and swinging sticks. Every once in a while there would be a puff of dirt and they would start walking again. We found out the men were hitting at a little ball. We ballplayers thought those guys were crazy. Most were Scotsmen and Englishmen.”

Gow. George W. Baxter of Wyoming one day said: “Charlie, I should think you would try golf. You ought to be good at it.”

Erswell’s first attempt at the “gutta percha” ball was a whiff. Two or three more swings moved the ball only a few feet. Erswell quit on the second hole, mounted his bicycle and wheeled home.

The setback was temporary. Obtaining a leave of absence from the railroad, he moved to Denver, Colo., where he took lessons for three weeks from a Scottish pro.

Returning home, he practiced constantly, “pushing the pill” around so relentlessly that his baseball friends began calling him “Bug.”

The nickname stuck.

Two years later, in 1899, Erswell won the Wyoming state championship at medal play.

That was Erswell’s golf career highlight until 1916, when he hooked up in a playoff with Poland Spring (Maine) Country Club’s Arthur Fenn, believed the first American-born golf pro, for the Maine Open championship and the Maine State Golf Association’s first medal.

Erswell triumphed in nine holes and long treasured that medal, which became a watch fob.

Although a maverick because he always was searching for a new and more effective way, Erswell recognized the need for order and organization.

With the help of Erswell A. “Do” Randall of Portland, he formed in 1903 the organization which 14 years later became the Maine State Golf Association.

Erswell promoted the first Maine Open Amateur tournament in 1902, and in 1904 started the Maine Resident title tourney for the Owen Moore Company trophy of which he obtained permanent possession.

He won the Open Amateur title in 1918 and the Resident title six times between 1905 and 1917.

Several times he was champion at Brunswick Golf Club and Portland Country Club.

A member of the U.S. Senior Golf Association, Erswell organized the Maine Seniors in 1930 and was the first official state Senior champion in 1932.