

Higher prices are barely allowing most manufacturers to maintain existing profit margins.

## Speaking of mowers. . .

By **Ron Morris**

There are many behind-the-scene factors which determine why a purchaser for a golf course will buy a particular type of mower. You could say, yeah, well if he's going to mow greens with it, he's going to buy a greens mower. Right, but which brand and what options will he select? Then, the purchaser must weigh safety features, maintenance factors to include design and cost, and the reputation of the distributor for service. Each aspect that the purchaser makes a decision on will center on cost. Probably the biggest question is why have prices risen so rapidly in such a short period of time.

It was interesting to note an editorial in *The Georgia Turf-Grass News* which stated the price of one specialized piece of turf equipment went up from \$5,200 to \$8,500 in less than three years. That's a 68 percent increase. Will they price themselves out of the market? I don't think so, because it's happening to everyone in the market. We'll explore some of the things that have made cost rise so rapidly in the last few years, some of the things you can do to cope, and some of the manufacturer's philosophies behind their products.

### **Safety**

It is estimated that some 40 million homeowners are out mowing their lawns each weekend during the summer months. Figures for 1978 show that there were 160,000 accidents involving mowers. If you figure each person mows their yard about 16 times a year, you get an accident rate of .025 percent. That's one-fortieth of one percent. Quite a low rate, you would think.

But when the ones who do have the accident start suing, all hell breaks loose. Thousands of dollars in a single settlement make the front pages of newspapers and all of a sudden there is a major push for legislation to make mowers safer. The manufacturer must pay his people

to design the safety feature into his products and pass the cost on, so he can maintain a profit margin. His product liability insurance goes up. Again, he must pass it on. Then, there is the cost of the safety feature itself.

For sometime now, there has been talk of requiring (by the government) a blade brake on rotary push mowers which would stop the blade if the operator lets go of the handle, or a dead-man control which would shut off the engine. This feature could raise the price of a simple push mower by \$30 to \$70. It is tragic that someone should become severely injured through a mower accident, but do you penalize the 99.975 percent who use the product safely? Issues are beginning to turn away from the most benefit for the greatest number and look only at "worst case" examples.

If you could pass a law against two guys picking up a rotary mower and using it as a hedge trimmer, you know you would have to post a 24-hour guard to make sure they obeyed the law.

### **Maintenance**

Probably the most often ignored, but best maintenance advice anyone could give is to perform routine maintenance as outlined in the owner's manual. Most mechanics (not all) have an aversion to book work. But you can't place all the blame on the mechanic. There is often a lag in communications down the line from the manufacturer to the distributor to the customer and then to his mechanic.

Hydraulics are rapidly gaining acceptance in the golf course equipment market. They make the work easier, but there are hoses and seals and valve banks, a completely new arena for mechanics who have never worked with hydraulics before. Send them to training schools! Most hydraulic problems can be avoided if you keep the fluid clean and replace

it at recommended intervals. The fluid might look good, but it does break down with age. Hoses also. The rubber deteriorates, depending upon what you wash the unit with. Replace them at recommended intervals, even though they look good. There's generally a reason for every specification the manufacturer writes in the owner's manual.

Along these lines, *Golf Business* must make a retraction. Some months ago we printed in our *Idea File*, the use of dye to stain fluid so it would show up quickly if a leak developed as you were mowing. We still think the dye is a good idea, however, the particular dye recommended did not go completely into solution and remaining crystals act as grit, wearing at the system. Other forms of dyes are being investigated and we will keep you posted.

One thing to keep in mind, if you do use a dye: Don't become complacent about maintenance, thinking you'll be able to catch it by the color when it does occur. It might be a major break and empty the system on your green!

### **Keep it sharp**

Some people will backlap their mowers daily and others will backlap weekly. It's hard to tell which is sharper. However often you backlap to keep your mower sharp, it is essential to be redundant and say backlap often enough to keep it sharp. The person who waits to sharpen the mower until after little ridges begin to show up in the swath is getting a little sloppy. And he's going to have a larger reel replacement bill because the grinder has to take off so much metal to true the reels up.

To prevent nicks in the reel blades, it is important to reset them periodically without regard to the cut. Out of sight, out of mind. There is a tendency to think everything is all right, as long as the cut looks

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good. If the bedknives loosen up, it allows larger debris to go between the blade and bedknife and causes nicks. If they are too close, heat builds up and ruins the edge.

Important tips to remember: Run the reel until normal operating temperature is reached, before setting. If set cold, friction will expand the metal and then they may be too close. If the grass is light, or it is extremely hot weather, check often. Grass provides the lubricant for reel to bedknife contact. Don't let the reels run when you're not actually mowing.

#### When to replace?

The annual cost of operating a mower is a significant part of the golf business. A conscientious manager must evaluate costs for various mowing jobs and take every reasonable step to reduce them. A good rule of thumb is to explore replacement when it looks as if operating, maintenance and downtime costs are going to exceed the replacement cost for a mower.

Individual situations bear a role in replacement. If there is a back-up unit, downtime would not be as dear as if there were none, and the turf just didn't get mowed when the mower is broke.

To determine when a mower has reached the end of its economic life, you must first determine the weighted annual cost. When cumulative repair and depreciation exceed this figure, the end has arrived. To calculate weighted annual cost, you must add the annual depreciation, which is the purchase price minus the salvage value divided by the expected life span. Add the annual cost of all repairs and the estimated replacement cost, then divide

by the number of years since original purchase.

#### Purchase price

The cost of a mower is a reflection of many variables. The manufacturer's price is based upon the cost of production plus the cost of marketing, plus the profit margin on producing and marketing the piece of equipment. The cost of production includes the rapidly rising cost of raw materials, labor and overhead. Just as your electricity bill is rising, so is the manufacturer's and the distributor's. Both must be passed on for each to maintain a static profit, which is actually a loss, due to inflation. The price goes even higher as the manufacturer tries to cope with inflation.

You're spending a lot of money, granted. But you have to mow the course. To get the best price, you might consider competitive bidding. There are a couple of things to watch out for. Beware of underbidding. If it is an inferior product, or does not have service behind it, you might end up paying much more than the price difference between it and a top-of-the-line mower.

Do not automatically purchase at the lowest bid. Consider the difference between price and cost. Price is what you pay to get the mower out the door. Cost reflects the total expense of owning, operating and maintaining the mower over the period of its useful life. Consider reliability (downtime), versatility, capacity (acres mowed/hour), and durability (longevity).

#### Philosophies

Most manufacturers and distributors view their operation with a biased eye. This pride in the equipment that they manufacture and sell,

and the service behind it, brings you, the customer, back for service, parts, and replacement and makes you feel good about it. This pride in maintaining a reputation has made many bitter over government interference. A good reputation can lead to success, however, there is over-regulation by the government, leading consumers to think that they are protected no matter where or what they buy. Simply not true, but the majority is being penalized by the evil of a few.

It has been estimated that direct government regulation has increased costs by at least 30 percent over the last five years. The plus is that the workplace and equipment are safer, the minus is that the end product cost more.

Most equipment manufacturers support a research and development department. Over the last five years, the majority of this department's time has been spent coping with government regulations, designing safety features into both workplace equipment and end products. What's wrong with safer? Nothing except that it costs.

We don't advocate making a lath operator stand on one foot, blindfolded, but we don't think you should have to pay a higher price for a piece of equipment because of the labor involved in moving fire extinguishers up or down the wall when all that matters is that they are there, they are within reach and they work.

Every manufacturer that I have ever talked to has told me that if a customer is having a problem with a piece of equipment, he isn't getting to the guy who can solve the problem. No manufacturer wants a piece of equipment out there doing a bad job. Reputation and service are the roots of their business. **GB**

