



'Sunbelt' superintendents face tough equipment problems

by Steve Watson

Billy Fuller knows what it means to run a golf course in the South. He knows the problems with equipment maintenance and he knows that superintendents in the North usually aren't faced with quite the same problems.

For the most part, superintendents use the same equipment in both regions, but golfers demand play year-round in the South, and this puts a heavy demand on equipment there.

"In the South you've really got to work hard at preventive maintenance," says Fuller, who moved in May from the Kiawah Turtle Point Golf Course at Kiawah Island, South Carolina to take charge of Augusta National in Augusta, Georgia.

"Up North they don't seem to worry as much if something goes wrong with a piece of machinery," he explains. "They know if they can just rig up something to keep it going for a couple of months, the course will close down and they'll have time to work on it thoroughly."

Not so on Fuller's courses. Daily attention to maintenance commanded top priority on Turtle Point, and Fuller says that other top quality courses in the South cannot afford to relax on maintenance if they expect

to keep their equipment lasting long. It can be a real problem at times. It's a problem that calls for a good mechanic.

"It's so very important to have a good mechanic down here where equipment never gets much of a rest," he says. "A lot of places don't even have a full-time mechanic, and this is a big mistake."

"You should really have two mechanics if you can, not just one. If you have just one, a lot of times you end up putting out fires every day on a piece of equipment that's a couple years old, and that's not so good. With two mechanics you can keep things running every day like they should."

John Hilton, superintendent at the Country Club of Spartanburg in South Carolina, agrees that a good day-today equipment management and maintenance program is critical in the South. In fact, Hilton, who runs a course that gets play every month of the year, goes even further in emphasizing the importance of the mechanic in a year-round golf course operation.

"I've always believed that, down here, the mechanic is more important than the superintendent in many ways," says Hilton. "He makes the

difference in a greens mower lasting six or seven years versus three years."

Everyday cleaning, greasing, and general care plays an extremely important role in the successful operation of a course that's open year-round.

"It's especially important to follow the manufacturer's specifications on how often to change oil and filters and such on your equipment," explains Hilton. "I think a lot of superintendents in the South used to be a little lax in keeping up their equipment, and as hard as we work our mowers, this being lax will lead to early deterioration of the machinery."

Hilton believes that if the course gets year-round play it's important to keep a good supply of critical spare parts on hand. Down-time can really hurt.

"A lot of us don't think far enough ahead," he says. "A good superintendent in the South will determine through their mechanic what the most critical parts are (such as belts, bedknives, throttle and choke controls, filters and reel assemblies), then keep a good supply of these parts on hand all year."

Some would say that to keep a southern course and all its equipment running smoothly, spare parts are great but in the end it pays to keep more units than you need at a given time. So says Dr. Jim Watson, vice-president, customer relations, the Toro Company, in Minneapolis.

"It's important to consider keeping additional units on courses in the South," Watson says. "I think that because a greens mower or a rotary mower gets used more heavily in the South, you would probably find more superintendents there keeping reserve units than you would in the North."

Watson notes that, with a couple of



If golfers play year 'round, mowers mow year 'round. Being able to send a set of reels in for grinding, as in the photo above, means having a back-up set.





exceptions, the equipment used in the North and South, whether Toro, Jacobsen, or another brand, is identical. The exceptions are that sprigging-type units find a place in the South where bermudagrass, zoysia, St. Augustine grass, and other vegetatively propagated species are used. In the North there are more aerator-seeders for seeding bluegrasses, bentgrasses, and the fescues.

Superintendents usually use no special equipment in overseeding bermudagrass greens. Scarifiers, verticutters and aerifiers find a home on courses in New York as readily as they do in Georgia, where over-seeding is common.

Bermudagrass and zoysia, two mainstays in much of the South, will often wear a mower's parts out more readily than bentgrass and bluegrass will, Watson says. As a result, there's more lapping and bedknife wear in the South. It's important to keep on top of the situation.

"Because equipment in the South wears out quicker than in the North, the timing of maintenance is probably more critical in the South," explains Watson.

On a course that closes for three or four months during the winter, the maintenance crew can afford to take the time to thoroughly work over a piece of equipment. Sometimes this can mean that a seven or eight-year old unit can come humming out of the shop every spring looking almost brand new, says Ned Brinkman, general sales manager of the Jacobsen Division of Textron, Inc., Racine, Wisconsin. It can be a real advantage to a superintendent in the North, an advantage the superintendent in the deep South can only dream about.

"When they close down the course for the winter the crew can take the time to literally clean, paint and

lubricate every screw on all their equipment," Brinkman says. "They can keep their crew busy during the winter doing this sort of thing."

A quick patch-up job on a mower late in the season up north will often suffice until the course closes, but in the South a superintendent can't afford to relax for long. Like John Hilton says, daily care is not just important in the South, it's essential.

Brinkman adds that a superintendent in the South may be better able to justify buying an expensive piece of equipment than his northern brothers because of the year-round use it must endure in the South.

Maybe so. But one thing's for sure—whatever equipment the superintendent in the South buys, it pays to keep it in top-knotch shape every day of the year. GB

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