

Rotary Club



Pressure from golfers forces superintendents to provide high-quality cuts, even on collars.

NATIONAL MOWER

Improved quality cuts and ease of maintenance are fueling the resurgence of single-blade mowers for collateral areas

BY FRANK ANDORKA JR.,
Managing Editor

It seems incredible that superintendents would worry about the quality of cut in areas of the golf course meant to be penal. But golfer expectations for course conditioning and other issues force superintendents to worry about collateral areas (like roughs) almost as much as they worry about greens, tees and fairways.

Tracy Lanier, John Deere's administrative manager of golf and turf market development, says he first became aware of the demand for a better quality of cut in roughs in the mid-1990s.

"We received reports of superintendents taking our fairway mowers into the roughs," Lanier says. "While roughs are supposed to be penal, they also can't be so difficult that they slow up play. That's why the focus has shifted toward improving the quality of cut."

"Golfers increased the pressure on superin-

tendents to improve the quality of the roughs," says Tim Koch, senior marketing manager of riding/rotary products for The Toro Co. "It's changed the way superintendents care for those areas."

Superintendents maintained the roughs almost exclusively with reel mowers in the 1970s and 1980s because they felt they could get a better quality of cut. Over the last decade, however, superintendents asked the bigger mower companies to look into improving the quality of cut and the ability to stripe.

The mower companies listened and have introduced several new rotary mowers that meet those needs. They're generally less expensive, easier to maintain and give superintendents nearly the same quality of cut as reel mowers. Smaller, more flexible cutting decks have allowed this to happen.

Riding the reels

In the early days of golf course maintenance, superintendents primarily used pull-gang reel mowers. Then hydraulic drive systems revolutionized the industry 20 years ago, giving more

choices and improved quality of cut with increased clip rates, says Larry Jones, product manager for Textron's Golf, Turf and Specialty Products Division.

"You couldn't cut lower than 2 inches with a rotary mower on undulating turf because you would scalp it," Jones says. "Hydraulic reel mowers allow you to cut lower than that even on severe slopes."

Reel mowers have some disadvantages, however. They take much more time, money and energy to maintain than rotary mowers, says Stan Kinkead, president of National Mower Co.

"There's been this trend toward making mowers that are more expensive, heavier and that require more people to keep them in working order," Kinkead says. "I'm not sure why the industry moved in that direction, but it has."

Kinkead says hydraulic-driven reel mowers only last four to six years, where rotary mowers last eight to 10 years. "Why would a superintendent pay more for a mower that's not going to last as long?" Kinkead says.



Still, reel mowers will always outdo rotary mowers for overall quality of cut, though the gap has narrowed considerably over the last four years, Lanier says. Rotaries with a smaller footprint have made great gains in the market.

It's often easier to maintain newer rotary mowers than reel machines.

THE TORO CO.

Rotaries make a comeback

Koch says he starting hearing requests for more advanced rotary mowers about four years ago.

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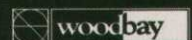
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"Rotaries are becoming the product of choice in many cutting conditions when superintendents purchase collateral mowers," Koch says. "That's not to say there's been a 100 percent shift as reels still perform better at lower heights of cut, but the number of people who are using reels is decreasing significantly."

Though rotary mowers are far from perfect machines, they do offer several advantages over reels, Lanier says.

First, they don't require as much labor to maintain. Instead of having to grind several reels and make sure they all stay in adjustment, technicians can remove the rotary blade, sharpen it or replace it without too much effort.

It's important to find a supplier who can support you over the long haul.

Second, rotary mowers are easier to operate, which is important in a tight labor market when superintendents don't have a lot of time to train new employees.

"You can put employees on a rotary mower in the roughs and let them go with minimal training," Lanier says. "They'll be familiar with rotary decks because they have probably used some form of rotary mower at home."

Third, superintendents can get the striping they desire with a rotary mower, as well as healthier turf because a rotary mower thins out lateral growth, Jones says.

How to decide

Koch says superintendents should consider many factors, including turf varieties, height of cut, frequency of mowing and other items, when they decide which mower will work best in their collateral areas.

Both types can be used on cool- and warm-season turfgrasses, depending on those other factors.

Kinthead says superintendents should research their mower suppliers before making a purchase.

They should evaluate a dealer's support network to make sure they can get proper service after the sale, Kinthead says.

"You need to look for dependability, not only in the machine, but also in the dealer," Kinthead says. "It's important that you find someone that will support you in the future if you have problems."

Otherwise, superintendents could find themselves having a rougher time when they start to mow in their collateral areas. ■



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