

Things that go bump in the wet

This is a message about machine operator safety. It is written from personal experience about an incident that happened to me in Germany about five years ago.

The location is the 11th fairway of the Japanese Golf Course on the outskirts of Dusseldorf. The time is approximately 9.00am on a dull drizzly Saturday morning. Present are me and our solitary ride-on greens machine – a Toro GM 3000.

I had the sad task of cutting the 18 greens that fateful day in spring. Not so bad a task normally, but today there is a constant, if light, drizzle. The kind that slowly but surely gets you soaked over a number of hours. I had been cutting the greens that day since 6.45am and had been chased all the way round by two keen Japanese golfers whose sole task was to get around the 18 as quick as possible, and then to retire to the Japanese baths in the clubhouse. Thus having set the scene of a wet and miserable golf



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course, equally wet greenkeeper, I shall continue with the story.

I had cut 10 greens by 9 o'clock. I then arrived at the 11th tee to start my approach to the 11th green. Approach is the right

word because what I haven't mentioned is that the 11th is not very long, 100 metres maybe, but has a gradient of at least 1:3. It's so steep that in the dry you can putt off the tee and watch the ball roll down to the green if you wanted to. Sat on the Toro, I had the choice of attempting to take the long way round past 13 and 12 and risk being caught by the banzai golfers behind me. It only took a few seconds to make my decision – I'll go the long way. Gravity however, in conjunction with Toro slick tyres and wet grass had other ideas! Before I had chance to reverse, the machine had started to slip down the 11th fairway towards the 11th green. I tried to reverse to no avail, it went faster if anything. Brakes were useless, and I doubt if ABS brakes would have made a difference.

Things were getting tricky so I ditched my wish as I needed all hands to control the situation. The machine had adopted a 45 degree angle of attack to the green and I was now sliding diagonally down the slope at a gentle pace. One of the problems of the slope is that it not only goes down but also slopes off to the right to a copse of trees and a gully that is about 15 feet deep. Panic sets in! Controlled panic that is because at this moment I still kept a cool head. My only chance to get out of this situation was to attempt to out accelerate the ever increasing slide and head towards the left and try and run aground in the hard rough.

This manoeuvre was only partially successful. I temporarily regained control of the machine and managed to get it to steer away from death valley. My attempt to reach safety in the hard rough was scuppered by lack of traction from my super slicks. So near and yet so far, at an ever increasing rate of knots, I raced past the hard rough and continued my journey down the 11th!

Once again the GM 3000 had adopted a 45 degree stance on the slope. Steering had no effect and all seemed lost. I was now in the hands of gravity and in big trouble. The thought that now went through my mind was not the landing on the green, but the two diagonal running two feet high ridges in front of it that had been designed to divert surface water run off into the copse on the right, what kind of job would they do in diverting a Toro complete with operator? I decided not to find out. Unlike the tradition of great seafaring captains, I decided to abandon ship. Not a big problem as the low slung 3000 lends itself quite well to emergency exits. My tortuous journey was however not at an end. Not long before this incident we had all been issued with lovely blue rubberised rain suits. The drag coefficient of a greenkeeper's bum clad in rubberised polyester and sliding on grass, is about the same as a greased eel on a water slide. I now found myself parallel with my machine sliding at the same rate of knots towards the ridges that now resembled "Beecher's Brook"!

The Toro and I reached the first ridge neck and neck and flew over the Toro doing a pathetic impression of a low flying Red Arrow jet.

The hard landing was immediately followed by the launch on ridge number two. This time the result was not so good but far more spectacular. The Toro decided to get rid of its boxes in readiness for the meeting with terra-firma. Rubber clad greenkeeper and Toro landed side by side on the green. Me with a few bruises, the Toro minus its cutting units but otherwise undamaged.

Seconds later, Al, my mate, came round the corner on the sand-pro. His question of "What's going on?" received a curt reply!



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