

The ● daily grind

"The fun of the game only begins when you can see the hole, and the real sport when you are on the putting green; it is after the cards are dealt that the excitement commences."

John L. Low,
 "Concerning Golf", 1903

Make no mistake about it, Mr Low summed up the situation perfectly in speaking of cards being dealt, yet with the best will in the world the greenkeeper, as croupier, cannot deal four aces to every player, every single time.

While it isn't possible, it doesn't entirely matter, the game of golf being something of a lottery anyway, though the greenkeeper who disregards the fact that over 50% of golf is played on the putting green is dicing with danger.

It cannot be over-emphasised, regardless of all other architectural golfing niceties, that your putting surfaces will be the most remembered aspect of your course after the round is done. Reputations are won and lost upon them, so before a single blade of grass comes under attack make certain that your mowing units are given VIP (Very Important for Putting) treatment, not just occasionally but on a routine, regular basis.

While not every club afford themselves the services of a full-time mechanic, (though the practice is growing), it is upon the shoulders of such an individual - in-house or dealer provided - that a great deal rests.

Competence goes without saying; the best mechanics being those whose empathy for the job is a mixture of understanding grass, the agronomics of growing and mowing, and the eye of a golfer in realising the premium placed on the putting surface. Above all, they should understand the machinery and be able to explain its use and care to others.

In the field, each operator should be tutored in the specific use of each item of grass-cutting machinery, be it walk-behind or triplex unit, such that any risk of second-rate results is minimised. Not every trainee greenkeeper will feel confident the first time he is set to the task of cutting greens, thus it is important that tuition be taken at a

pace which permits minimal error.

Being accompanied by a seasoned operator; one who is willing to explain the difference between a good or mediocre cut and how potential mistakes may be avoided will prove profitable. In the very beginning such tasks are best learnt on temporary greens or upon nursery turf.

The formula for obtaining good results every time a mower is used is easy in the extreme, yet so often is overlooked. Understanding first that any cutting unit in daily use will eventually wear out, every operator, no matter how pressed, should follow a routine of stop, look and listen.

Stop

In practice this means not starting the machine unless it's proven fit to the job. A daily visual check should include inspection of cutting knives and bottom blades, checking for nicks, dull spots or signs of a blade having been bent, indeed any damage that may have occurred from previous mowing or off-course transportation.

Look

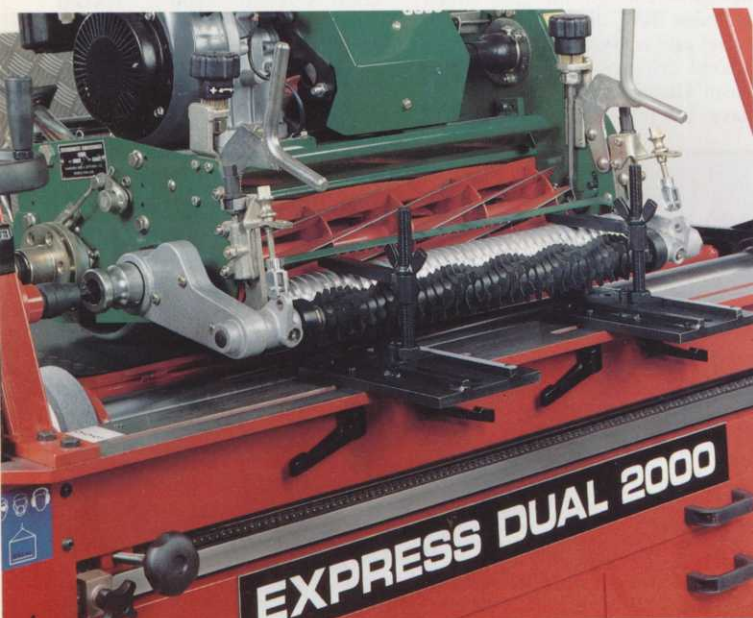
While the machine is stationary, check fuel lines, grasp each cutting blade unit and try to wriggle it, checking for anything that may have worked loose. Excess grease or dripping oil/fuel lines are tell-tail signs that all is not well. Do not allow any machine that is below par to be used.

Look again

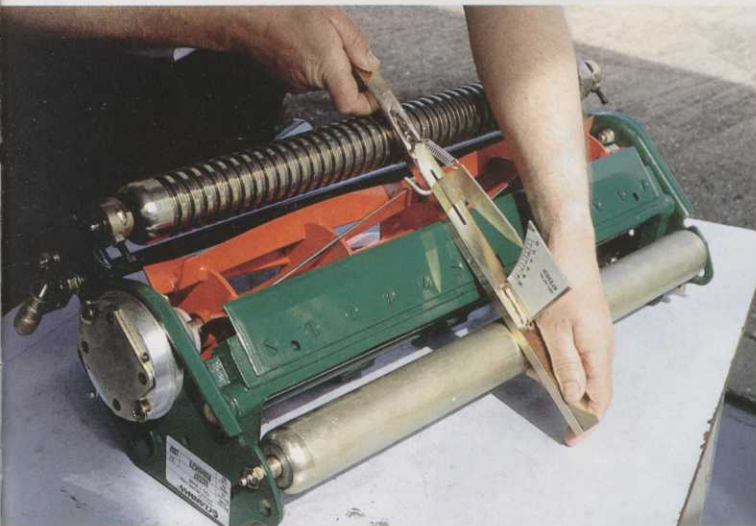
On the green this time, be vigilant concerning debris, stones, discarded shoe spikes (the greenkeepers' curse), or coins used as ball markers. Switch the surface with a suitable nylon pole.

Listen

The motor will tell you if something is wrong, as will the cutting unit. If an engine's purr becomes a growl, be suspicious; there might be bearing problems, worn bushes, or worse. If the cutting unit sounds 'off', (a different pitch, perhaps),



A Ransomes Greens Super set up on an Express Dual cylinder grinding machine.



The levelling bar, used here on a Ransomes Greens unit, provides spot-on accuracy when setting height of cut.

this will indicate an inferior contact between top and bottom blades. While your ears are doing their work, your eyes also should be scanning for any irregularity of cut either high spots left or low spots scalped, all an indication that something is amiss. While cutting greens, observe the grass box and empty it before it becomes necessary. A weighty box of grass clippings can seriously affect mowing height.

Reference to handbooks will reveal the importance placed upon replacement of filters with OEM (original equipment manufacturer) equivalents, also the vital part clean oil plays. It is dicing with disaster to prolong such vital work. The manufacturer also will tell of an equal priority, that of ensuring each bottom blade matches and mates perfectly with the top blade.

Perfect mating of blades calls for expert grinding and sharpening, with grinding of the bottom blade necessary each time a refit is called, often after topdressing or as a routine fortnightly schedule. Current thinking suggests that backlapping – using a fine, emery-based compound to lap against both mated blades while they spin – still provides the keenest edge while avoiding shearing the grass.

Selection of the bottom blade is all important, dependent always upon cutting requirements. In general, the lower the cut, the thinner the blade, with regular, thin, or even a championship blade. OEM blades are best, made to factory specifications and with specially hardened steel. Checks for accuracy (no bends) will ensure the bottom blade is properly matched to the mower, a perfect fit (no dragging) being another essential in the quest for cutting perfection.

If bottom blades are the key to success, the fine tuning of reel blades by grinding and sharpening is an equal. These blades begin life in perfect shape, yet in time and

with rigorous work over a season a cylinder may become slightly tapered, effectively shrinking the unit. Help is at hand, however, for by sharpening the unit, especially on an automatic spin grinder, the blades take on a new lease of life. A blessing for the turf professional, spin grinding virtually eliminates human error. Modern thinking again suggests backlapping after a spin, removal of high spots or burrs to produce the desired effect.

If all this appears routine, that's exactly what it is. Consistent cutting quality comes only with perfect matchmaking, this vital adjustment of blade to blade alone determining the quality of cut. Many greenkeepers swear by a method of checking accuracy know, as the DT (or Daily Telegraph) method. A page of newspaper folded in two and placed between top and bottom blade should produce a cut to the top and a fold to the bottom. Nothing else is acceptable. A little fine-tuning of machinery, along with implementing this foolproof method, will produce perfect results every time.

The greenkeeper or mechanic should check daily the cutting height settings, having first established that rollers and drums are undamaged and free from end play. These must be aligned before setting takes place. Height should be uniform at each end of the bottom blade, checked before tightening and checked again to ensure that such tightening has not caused movement. Be sure to check height settings when the blades are cold, not immediately after grinding.

Bernard Darwin, greatest of all golf writers, once wrote: "We ought not to regard the putting green as a kind of lucky bag out of which we may draw a good or bad putt by mere chance." With modern technology and good greenkeeping sense, the element of chance now rests in the hands of experts, dealing aces galore.

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