

Roland Taylor looks at the place gang mowers have in modern greenkeeping, and asks the question...

# Do you wanna be in my gang?



The high profile that golf now enjoys has bought with it many changes – none more so than the way the course is presented. Modern landscaping has resulted in the introduction of sweeping vistas with, in some cases, almost aesthetic qualities.

Increased television coverage of golf has greatly influenced the appearance of the course especially the fairways and rough. One suspects that any media coverage places a great deal of pressure on all concerned to present an immaculate picture without a blade of grass out of place.

Do you wanna be in my  
gang?



Previous page: Huxley's HD138TR Hydraulic Reelmower cutting Alresford Golf Club's fairways

Above: Ride-ons similar to the Hayter pictured, have meant that gang mowers are beginning to be phased out

All this visual hype has led to significant changes in the way fairways and the rough are now mown.

When one turns the clock back, the scene was a great deal different; the players of yesteryear must have been faced with a veritable jungle between tee and green. This often stopped play completely as the fairways turned into hay meadows. On links courses there was less of a problem as growth of grass throughout the summers was likely to be sparse. Hundreds of balls must have been lost and considerable time wasted searching for them. Sheep were often used as natural mowers. This begs the question as to whether mutton or lamb occasionally appeared on someone's table as the result of a stray golf ball.

The introduction in 1914 of Worthington's horse drawn mowers certainly changed all this. Suddenly there was machinery available that would control the growth so play could continue were once it had had to be abandoned to nature. There were, however, minor

drawbacks - these triple units were slow and on an eighteen hole course it must have been a continuous job throughout the growing season.

By the early 1920's the tractor had replaced the horse and the number of mower units in a configuration was between three and nine, thus speeding up the operation considerably.

While these units could handle semi-rough there was virtually nothing to deal with the rough - that was until the early 50's when Douglas Hayter launched his 6/14 tractor-drawn rotary mower.

Designed initially for orchards it soon found its way onto the golf course where it tackled the dense lush grass at the sides of the fairways. Once again the course landscape changed with neatly mown areas which had previously been left uncut.

Progress was marching on and inventive minds were coming up with new ideas. Hydraulic drives had been introduced on agricultural machinery and mower designers soon recognised the

benefits these systems offered. Up until this point, gang mowers had relied on ground traction to drive the cylinders; the new units took their power directly from the tractor. The mowing operation was once again speeded-up and because of the hydraulic lifting action the new units were much more manoeuvrable. This was a period that saw the introduction of tractor mounted PTO gang mowers and hydraulically driven units.

The next stage was to provide a complete machine with its own power source and the introduction of small diesel engines and hydrostatic transmission and drive systems proved to be ideal for this application.

This, plus the development of electronics over the last decade means some sophisticated pieces of equipment have been introduced.

Today's Course Managers and greenkeepers are faced with a different set of demands and standards to their counterpart of 20 years ago. As a result, an increasing number are turning to this type of mower for their fairways, which has meant a gradual decline in the numbers of gang mowers used.

From a manufacturers point of view every product has a life cycle. This can cover a short period time or span several years. At some point sales and economics will dictate that it is no longer viable to continue to produce a particular line. Some suppliers have reached this point, but at present there are still a number of well-established manufacturers offering trailed or mounted gang mowers - for how much longer, is anyone's guess.

For the rough the rotary mower is still the answer for most areas. In recent years there has been the introduction of flexible multi-unit rotaries these closely follow the ground contours and are designed to work on undulating terrain. Recycling rotary mowers have also begun to appear and these finely chop up the cuttings before returning them to the sward. Also

on the rotary front, there are high productivity ride-on mowers with collection facilities and extra wide tractor-powered units.

For anyone faced with buying new mowers whether they are gang mowers, ride-on fairway mowers, or rotaries, there are a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration before deciding on which one to purchase.

Each situation will have its own specific requirements but there are common elements to all.

#### Performance

This must be high on the priority list. How much work are you expecting to achieve with the unit in a given time scale. In addition the quality of finish is important.

#### Over-all weight

This is critical to minimise compaction and damage to the turf.

#### Power

In the case of gang mowers and trailed rotaries, the tractor will need to produce enough output to ensure that the mowers give optimum performance. With ride-on fairway units, if the engine has limited power reserves. There will be excessive fuel consumption, higher noise levels and the unit's life is likely to be shortened.

Greater stress will also be placed on all the machine's other components.

#### Traction

Where there is a wide variation in terrain, adequate traction is required to achieve a consistent finish, and limit turf damage.

#### Manoeuvrability

These machines are generally large and have wide working widths, so in areas where access is limited they need to be checked out.

#### Operator comfort

The mowers are going to be used for long periods at a time, so operator fatigue needs to be kept at a minimum. Most manufacturers recognise the importance of this

when designing a machine, so a close look at all these facilities is needed.

#### Access for maintenance

Low level maintenance routines and limited downtime are critical to an efficient operation. Check out access to cutting units, engines or transmissions.

If these are restricted, unnecessary delays in carrying out repairs or sharpening cutting systems can occur.

#### Replacement parts availability

These need to be readily available to minimise any downtime.

#### After-sales back-up

If there is no in-house service department then the question needs to be raised of what facilities are available locally and an indication of how quickly a service unit can be on site should a breakdown occur.

#### Finance

It is a highly competitive market so most suppliers offer finance packages that spread the load and make the acquisition of equipment easier. Ask for details.

The modern course manager and greenkeeper are faced with providing the public with high quality playing surfaces and at the same time they have to run a cost-effective operation. This means adopting new work practices and looking towards building a fleet of equipment that will give the best results.

Each piece of machinery has its place in time and, in their hey-day gang mowers were (and for some still are) the answer.

They produced results that at the time were considered far in advance of what had gone before and predictably, challengers came onto the market that were designed to match modern requirements and trends. This is progress.

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