



Providing properly for maintenance should be a club's number-one priority, though too often budgets allow more cash for other departments of the club. This month, The Learning Experience advises on how you can cut costs without cutting corners.

Cutting remarks

Today's Course Manager on occasions has good reason to wear a salesman's hat, since he must compete for the machinery, staffing levels and materials to do his job effectively. If your course is in great shape, revenue generated will greatly benefit the overall health of the facility and its income, simply because members bring more guests, while visiting societies – a vital source of income for most clubs – will continue to impact favourably on the overall spend, especially in bar consumption and food revenue.

Providing properly for maintenance should be a club's number-one priority, though too often budgets allow more cash for other departments of the club. It's a fact that where capital machinery purchases are a priority, at least in your view, you will often have a battle on

your hands unless you are well prepared with facts and figures and can present a wholly convincing case.

So, like boy scouts, being prepared must be your first priority if you are to get the machinery you need. The case of fairway mowing is one example, since the purchase price of a multiple reel mower is only one part of its lifetime cost. Every season your budget must include operational costs for fuel, manpower and maintenance.

When the time comes to add a new mower to your inventory, by looking further than the factory price and calculating all related operational costs you can arrive at an annual cost for different types of mowers. This will assist in making wiser selections between, say, triplexes, 5-gang or 7-gang units. Indeed, by calculating in advance

you may have a strong case for purchasing larger yet more productive units if your presentation shows operating reductions for each year.

Since each course has its own profile, for the purpose of this exercise we will concentrate on the costs of purchasing, operating and maintaining triplexes and multiplexes. Once a true cost is determined, a decision can then be made to determine whether your course profile warrants the added expense of a different type of unit.

Some important assumptions must be made in order to establish the life-time cost of any cutting unit, for example its anticipated productive life under normal golf course conditions. Reliable calculations backed by experience suggest that a 7-reel mower will last about nine years; a 5-reel unit about seven years, while a triplex will be productive for five years. By using these realistic averages a depreciation figure can be arrived at, given that a mower is worth on average about 10% of its purchase price at the end of its productive life. By taking 10% from the purchase price and dividing the remainder by the number of productive years you will arrive at a realistic depreciation figure.

As an exercise, take the cost of a triplex at £17,000; its life span five years. Ten percent of £17,000 is £1,700, which is its worth after five years. Dividing the balance of £15,300 by five will give an approximate annual depreciation of £3,060.

Such simple calculations will provide useful information; for example the depreciation annually of a 5-unit mower is about the same as a 7-gang unit, for though the 7-gang is more expensive it has a longer productive life. Of course, purchase price is just one of the calculations

A Bat wing rotary mower at work.





A pair of lightweight fairway mowers, working together

that must be made; others being maintenance, the cost and consumption of fuel and the cost of manpower.

Maintenance is dependent upon the number of cutting reels on the unit. Generally reels need to be ground annually, with bottom blades replaced at the same time. Reels should be checked for adjustment each day and readjusted a least every week. The practice of backlapping will help keep blades keen.

Maintenance should be calculated by following recommended schedules based on hours worked. Though it is difficult to generalise, assuming your mower is operating for about 300 hours annually an average first year contract maintenance cost is around £1300 for a triplex, increasing to upwards of double that figure over five years (as the machine gets older), while for a 5-reel fairway unit the costs are close to £2000 annually, again increasing with age.

Manpower costs can accurately be linked with a mower's productivity. A rule of thumb is that a 30-inch reel cutting at five miles per hour will cut one acre each hour, allowing for overlapping, turning and getting to the site but excluding collection and disposal of clippings. A triplex will mow three acres per hour while a 5-reel unit will tackle five acres in the same time, a 7-reel unit seven acres.

The larger the area the more apparent the advantages of larger units becomes. For example, if you were to cut 30 acres twice each week with a triplex your operator would spend 20 hours on the job each week. Switching to a 5-reel unit reduces this time to 12 hours; a 7-unit to just nine hours each week.

From this you will see that increased unit size impacts favourably on man-hours worked. For example, a switch from triplex to 5-unit cutters will reduce man-hours by one third. Assuming labour costs at around £10 an hour, the savings would be considerable at £6,240 for the 5-unit against £10,400 for the triplex.

Clippings removal can add as much as double to the man-hours worked, thus a larger unit will allow more frequent cutting and the elimination or reduction of clippings removal.

Of course, larger units require more horsepower and fuel as the width of cut is increased, yet fuel consumption per acre is lower due to higher productivity. Favourable comparisons can be made by calculating the number of gallons of fuel consumed each hour. A petrol-powered triplex will consume an average 0.7 gallons per hour; a diesel engine on a 5-reel unit marginally more and a 7-gang unit with a diesel-powered water-cooled engine about 1.2 gallons per hour. Calculating the area to be mowed per hour per unit, figures will reveal that 5-and 7-units consume roughly one third less fuel per acre.

Total costs can therefore be arrived at by adding maintenance, man-hours, fuel and purchase costs, these providing a more accurate figure for the true cost of buying and operating a larger unit. While no two golf courses are the same, the lower costs of operating larger units can often provide you with justification for a larger unit. Your case will look healthier when you back it with facts and figures, providing sound reasoning for not only reducing overheads but, in many cases, adding improvements in overall course conditioning.

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