

The big red machines of BIGGA Golden Key Supporter Toro are a common sight on golf courses all over the world but, as Scott MacCallum found out, the talents that have to be combined to produce them are anything but common.

T-time



How often have you gone to BTME and bumped into a colleague who's said "See Toro have a new machine out.?"

More than likely you will have replied "Oh yeh? I'll maybe take a look later on... Heard whose got the so and so job?"

No doubt you would see the new Toro at some stage but such is the frequency of the release of new machines from Toro and the other big machinery manufacturers these days the announcement of yet another innovation is hardly earth shattering. Is it?

But if you knew what went into producing just one new piece of kit - the concept, design, manufacturer, testing, marketing etc - you would be far more likely say "Wow!" than merely "Oh yeh?".

Walk into Toro's worldwide Headquarters in Bloomington, Minnesota, and you'll witness scenes that wouldn't look out of place at NASA. The technology involved in producing the latest turf maintenance machinery, its irrigation and consumer products is cutting edge and the brains involved in making sure this is put to good use are high browed and plentiful.

You are quite likely to find someone poring over a computer screen displaying a three dimensional image of a cutting deck electronically testing the stress levels from every angle or bump into the mechanical display showing off the qualities of the new Workman 1100 with its jointed chassis for a smoother ride. You might even see Igor the robot which travels throughout the building delivering mail.

A visit to Minneapolis is a treat the winners of the Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping Award and Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year experience and this year John Coleman and Sally Doherty have already made the trip.

Over 1000 are employed there alone while the overall Toro staff number just under 4000 which gives you just a taste of the sheer scale of the operation.

"We say that the sun never sets on

the Toro empire - I wonder where we got that line from," said Barry Beckett, the ex-pat Brit who is Toro's Worldwide Marketing Manager.

"But it's true. 24 hours a day someone is using Toro product. When we're asleep it's being used in the Far East or in Europe," he said before explaining about the inherent difficulties this causes but which have been eased by advance of the Internet.

"If someone somewhere in the world is having a problem we have "Frequently Asked Questions" on our Website and all the users have to do is click on the appropriate national flag and the information appears in their own language."

It is that sort of attention to detail and depth of thinking that has ensured Toro's name is so frequently to be seen in golf course maintenance facilities across the world.

The complications of dealing in a universal market are emphasised by Barry when he talks about providing products on a worldwide basis.

"There are different regulations in place in different countries so that means standardisation is difficult. Also the Japanese for example tend to be a different shape from, for example, the Germans so seats have to be different sizes and set differently to take account of this. Everything has to be produced in different languages from on-board instructions to the operator manuals."

Toro started out by making agricultural tractors to pull ploughs in Minneapolis in 1914, before being recruited to produce munitions for the first world war.

"In 1922 we were approached by a local Golf Course Superintendent who had still been using horses to pull his gang mowers but who thought it might be possible to hook his mowers to one of our tractors. They tried it and it worked and from those humble beginnings we were launched into the golf business," said Barry.

"In the mid 1960s Toro took the significant step in acquiring an irrigation company, and the product lines have increase markedly since then, through in-house development

as well as acquisition, to the extent that Toro is so comfortable that it is the one-stop shop for every potential need outside of the clubhouse building the phrase "Total Solutions" is the Toro mantra

This covers fine turf products and services such as irrigation equipment,



reel and rotary mowers, utility vehicle, sprayers, consumer and contractor equipment, site management software, infra-red grass diagnostic services..., the list is ever growing. Indeed one of the latest additions to the stable is Multicore, whose products are currently being integrated into the Toro family.

"We are always thinking five to ten years ahead. You can't jump over a high bar from a standing start. You have to take a run up," said Barry.

"It's not always a smooth path. Things go wrong, the industry changes, competitors do different things but we know this is the only way to go because you can't do everything at once, you have to plan in stages.

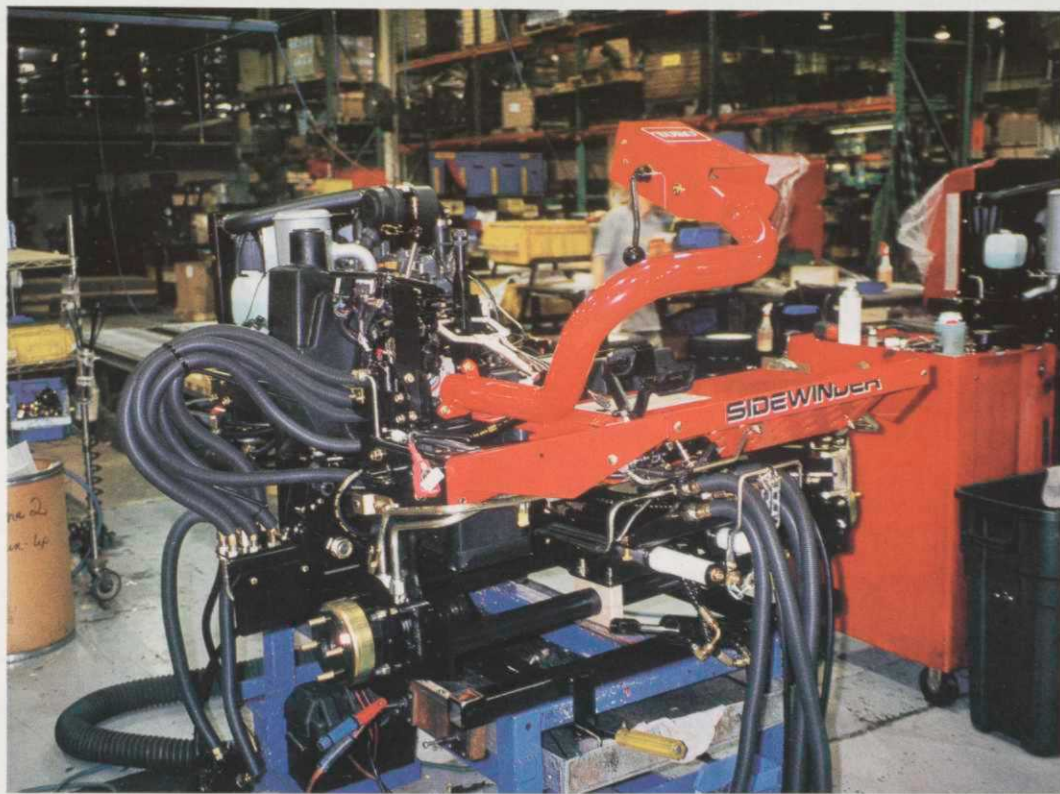
"The list of things you want to do is always longer than what you can do. With people, time and money you can do anything but there isn't enough of all of them. Quite often it isn't the money part which comes up short it's the people and the time."

Toro has built up an exceptionally close relationship with the distributor in each of its major markets and

Sally Doherty and John Coleman, the reigning Toro winners, visited the Toro facilities earlier this year



A sidewinder is assembled in Tomah



in the UK it is Lely (UK) Ltd.

"We have been with Lely for about 16 years now and we have done well in the UK because of Lely's commitment to building the business. In fact the average length of the relationship of Toro with each of its European distributors is 27 years and in the case of Switzerland it is 52 years.

Lely and Toro are in touch at least once a day and with the advent of e-mail that communication has increased.

"Wherever I am in the world I can attach spreadsheets and send and receive information from Graham Dale or Pete Mansfield. Electronic communications have really helped us a lot in terms of being able to keep on top of business. We have video conferencing facilities which allow us to get a lot of people in the room at this end and the same at the other and we can get a lot of work done quickly as a group."

The main manufacturing base for the commercial market is 180 miles from Bloomington in Tomah, Wisconsin, where all the familiar products are assembled-including the Sidewinder and the Dingo which were launched last year.

The Tomah factory has a staff of around 600, the majority of the assembly workers being women who appreciate the nine month working year with the summer holidays off.

"We wind down in June and start up again in September and during the down time we clean the entire plant," explained Plant General Manager, Don Yahnke, a man whose pride in his factory shines as brightly as a spanking new red machine which has just emerged from the 15 stage paint process.

At its peak there are several production lines working at any one time but such is the sophistication of modern day machines, and the care that is put into their assembly, the number produced per day is surprisingly low.

"We can make 13 workmen a day; seven Fairway 6000 series; 22 Sidewinders and the same number of Dingos," explained Don, and when you consider such output is to ser-

vice the entire globe you can appreciate the reasons behind the occasions when there might be a delay before a dealer can get one to you.

With such a large company it would be easy to lose the personal touch and in that regard Toro works hard to ensure that its distributors and dealers work to the same high standards.

"We want customers to appreciate that when they deal with Toro there is an expectation of what they are going to receive in terms of parts and general support," said Barry.

"Anyone can sell a piece of machinery to a golf course but it is when it goes wrong that the acid test is applied. Where is the parts back-up? Where is the technical back-up? Who do you call to help figure it out? Where do you get an operator trained? It is the after sales service and support that is the key to the second and third purchase.

"You've got to get the people who have purchased product once or twice to buy again next year, and in five... ten years time. If you have a bad experience you're more likely to try one of the other companies next time."

To ensure that doesn't happen Toro has people who travel the world checking the standards of distributors and dealers.

"They arrive at a distributor and say they are going to do an inventory or they might ask what the part's fill rate is. Or they might give an order for ten parts and see what they can supply off the shelf. We have a criteria that they have to meet. If they are bad they can be literally put under notice and told that if they want to keep the Toro franchise they must start investing in whatever is needed to put it right."

That's not to say that no-one at Toro ever puts a foot wrong.

"We're not perfect. We're a people orientated business and someone will

press the wrong button or insert the wrong number on a part's order. It's human error but how you recover the situation is the key."

So looking down the line what can the BIGGA member expect from Toro.

Director of Public Relations, Don St Dennis, believes the greenkeeper of tomorrow will be tapping into satellite technology but is aware of the need for cost effectiveness.

"Satellite global positioning is now being used in golf carts to speed up play etc. We can share that same technology and map out the course for spraying and chemical applications so that they can be more cost effective and environmentally sound. People will be able to keep detailed computer records of what was applied, what the wind speed was at the time etc so when the inspectors visit all the information can be supplied at the touch of a button."

Having said all that the size of the fine turf industry is small and that

puts limitations on what can be achieved.

"Our industry is relatively small in the scheme of things and a lot of development of the new technology and materials comes from the automotive business and the people who are developing new plastics and polymers. We tend to piggy back on them.

"We could produce the world's greatest lawnmower with ten computers on it, satellite navigation etc but it would cost half a million so whose going to buy it. You have to wait for other industries to do the ground breaking development first - remember how expensive the first computers were."

So there you have it. So the next time you hear about the latest new product released by The Toro Company you'll have a better idea of the immense work that goes into it and be more inclined to say "Wow!"

