

Roland Taylor examines the world of the fairway mower

# Fairway to heaven



Capability Brown the famous landscape gardener, left his mark on some of the greatest gardens in the UK. Part of his style was to create large vistas that drew the eye to a distant point and in a way this is exactly what the golf course fairway does. It concentrates the golfer's sight on his ultimate goal - the green. In doing so they should test his control of the ball and judgment as to where best to place it for the next shot.

They also link the landscaping and add an aesthetic quality to the overall scenery and are an important

element of courses that appear on television. Maintaining them has changed over the last two decades, especially the rough. In the past a wayward shot might finish up in virtually impenetrable grass or scrub. This often meant golfers spent considerable time searching for their ball. In those days there were fewer golfers and probably less pressure to speed up the play. The density and extent of the semi and deep rough is generally determined by each club's course management programme.

## Fairways

The objective is to create a uniformity of grass cover. Mowing frequency will depend on growth and prevailing weather conditions and height of cut should be such that the ball sits well on the turf. With such large areas to maintain there are going to be considerable variances in the ground contours, so care has to be taken to avoid scalping.

The first fairway mowers were single trailed units pulled by a horse. With the introduction of three and



five gang mowers the animal power was replaced with petrol or diesel power. Many courses still use this system today or variations of it. Trailed gang mowers rely for their cylinder drive from wheel traction and as such consistency of reel speed can vary due to ground conditions. With the advent of hydraulic systems, manufacturers found the solution to this problem by fitting motors to each cutting, thus producing a uniform reel speed regardless of the terrain. There was also another advantage by fitting hydraulic

rams on the carrier each unit could be lifted independently - a feature which makes transporting between sizes and getting through narrow entrances easy. There are still plenty of gang mowers trailed or power driven available for clubs that prefer this method of mowing their fairways.

Time does not stand still and the next phase of development saw the introduction of self-powered fairway mowers - the point we are at today.

Golf suddenly took off as a sport for all and golf courses suddenly sprung

up virtually everywhere, so the demand for specialist equipment quickly grew.

The advent of the fairway mower heralded a change in manufacturers interests in golf course machinery as up until then there had been only a few companies directly involved. Speed and efficiency were the key factors and in addition operator comfort became important and words such as fatigue began to appear.

Over the last few years the competitive element has made manufacturers



look long and hard at their designs so there are now plenty of machines to choose from with a host of benefits that are aimed to make the job efficient, cost effective and easy.

Regardless of whose name is on the label the modern fairway mower normally has a diesel engine, hydraulic transmission and drives plus power steering. Generally cutting configurations are similar and made up of three or five units. Ergonomics have played an important part and features such as all round visibility, fully adjustable

seat and driving column are common.

The cutting units are fully floating, ground hugging with usually a choice of 5, 7 or 11-bladed reels.

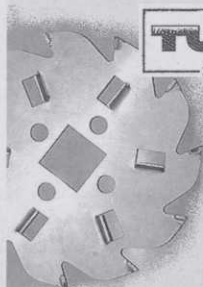
Other types of options offered depending on the make include grass catchers and interchangeable units for scarifying, verticutting and brushing.

Electronics are now becoming a key feature especially in diagnosing a fault in the engine or hydraulic system and these can save a lot of down time trying to locate the source of the problem

On the question of maintenance the

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things to look out for are accessibility to all components especially the reel units. If you are considering buying alternative reels it is important at the demonstration to ask the operator to change these over. You can then judge how easy it is and the time it takes. This is also a good time to ask about the availability of replacement parts.

### The rough

The semi rough defines the point where the fairway merges with the rough and its width will vary between courses. The cutting height needs to be no more than about 60mm and should be carried out regularly with the gang type mowers so there is a clear indication where the deep rough begins.

When it comes to heavy rough the type of mower used will differ from course to course. As the vegetation is going to be left relatively long (about

10cm) the machine has to be able to cope and a rotary or flail could be the best answer. How many times and at what intervals will largely depend on the plant life. In the case of heather to promote formation of young growth and to stop it becoming leggy it will require mowing in the autumn.

On courses where wild flora is being sown and encouraged then the management programme is different depending on how long it has been established. In the first year it needs to be cut and collected regularly at height of 5cm and 7cm throughout the growing period. In the second year and following seasons the first flush of spring growth should be mown and the cuttings removed. Continue until late May when the mowing should cease to allow the flowers to bloom. When flowering declines towards the end of the summer mow and collect again. Further cuts can be carried out

until October.

For flower management a rotary or flail with collecting facilities is a must, otherwise the clearing operation is extremely labour intensive. This type of machine is not only useful for this job but it can be used also for collecting leaves. There are a number available and the main thing to look out for when having these demonstrated is their ability to collect in wet conditions. Otherwise in the present climate you are going to be faced with either not being able to cut, or continually having to unblock the machine.

Where the rough is made up predominantly of grasses then the rotary is an alternative to gang mowers. There is a variety of cutting widths to choose from either as tractor-mounted or shelf contained units. During the last decade we have seen the introduction of wide trailed rotary mowers made up of cutting units which are independent of each other, so they are able to follow the ground contours closely. Again they are worth checking out if the terrain is difficult with scalping often occurring.

Another alternative is to let areas naturally develop, but these will require some controlled management. If they do need thinning out or some cutting, then the new spate of ride-on brush cutters are suited because they can deal with relatively heavy brush wood and saplings.

The fact that the fairways and adjoining rough account for the biggest areas to maintain means the equipment has to be fast and cost effective. What is suitable for one course is not necessarily the right answer for another. With mowing areas of this size there are a host of variables to take into account, so before changing from one method to another carefully analyse all the pros and cons - then look at as many machines as possible before deciding.