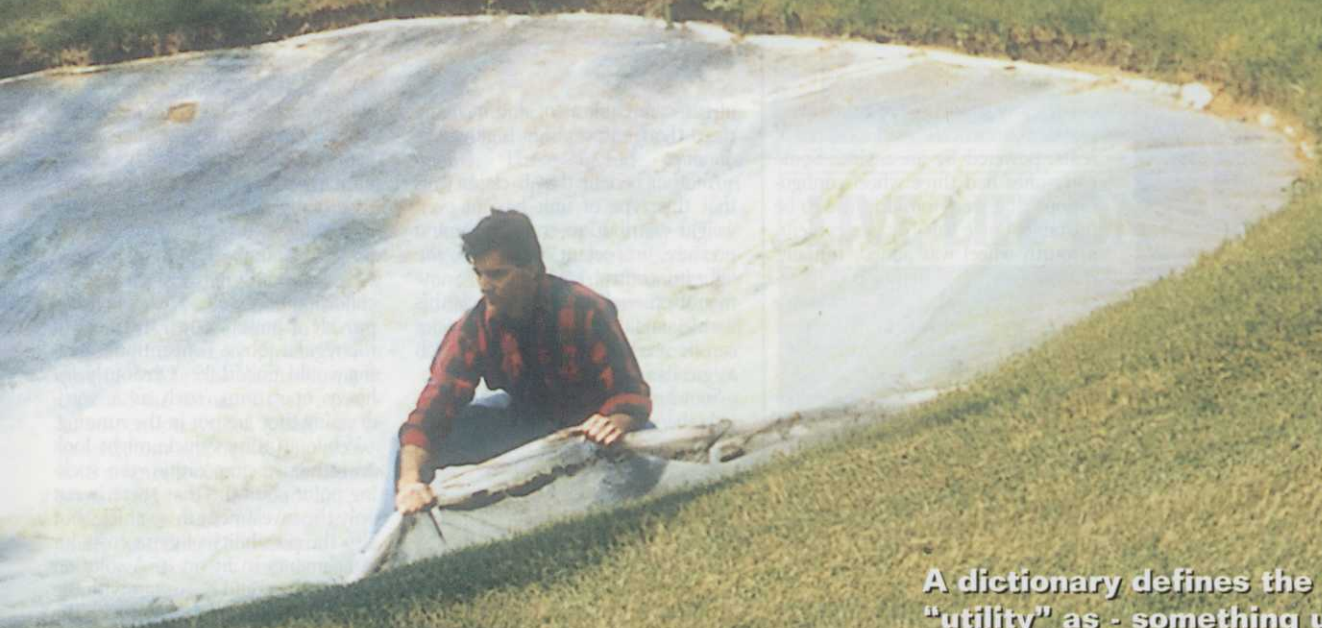




# WAN

## FOR ALL SEASONS



A dictionary defines the word "utility" as - something useful or designed for use. The vehicles that fall into this category certainly come under this description as many readers have already discovered. The modern offerings have come a long way since those early days, when some manufacturers and greenkeepers had the foresight to recognise the benefits such an animal had to offer. Roland Taylor reports ...

# A VAN FOR ALL SEASONS



The early models were primarily a platform on wheels, with a couple of seats, powered by an engine. Some early ones had three wheel configurations that were found in use to be unstable. Once this became evident, a fourth wheel was added. Initially, their main role was to transport materials and people, but gradually attachments were added that increased the vehicle's versatility. With the addition of power takeoffs and linkage systems, it has become an easy-to-connect source for a host

of turf-care equipment and in many cases the transport side is now secondary.

Another benefit that is claimed, is that this type of unit has an even weight distribution and low ground pressure, important factors in the fight to control compaction. Some manufacturers' literature reflects this with claims that their utility vehicles can be used on sensitive areas, such as greens.

So, where does the utility vehicle fit into the scheme of things as far as a

golf course is concerned? Does it replace the tractor and trailer? On paper the answer is probably yes, but in practice it is not so cut and dried.

Certainly, they are said to be able to go on fine turf and in places where it would be imprudent to take a tractor, especially if the ground conditions are soft. They may also provide a power source for most of the regular jobs a conventional tractor would undertake. Obviously for heavy operations, such as a vert-draining they are not in the running.

While a utility vehicle might look an attractive proposition, the sticking point could be that there is not only the investment in a vehicle, but also the possibility of extra costs for attachments to fit on it. A solution in this case would be to start with the basic transport unit, then add the extras when funds become available.

Trawling through the utility vehicle literature it becomes clear that there are plenty of choices, so when considering this type of machinery the areas and the tasks it is going to be used for need to be fully taken into account.

Weight and carrying capacity are key factors. Another feature to be on the look out for is the ground pressure rating when fully loaded and with an operator on board. This does not appear in all the literature, so some detective work may be needed.

When it comes to power sources there is a choice of petrol, diesel, LPG or electric. The transmission is either a continuous variable or synchromesh system and there are two and four wheel drives versions depending on the particular make. A differential lock is fitted as standard on a major-





ity of models. Power steering is a not always a feature so this could have a bearing on the units handling, turning circle and its manoeuvrability. It is something worth checking out.

As the vehicle is likely to be used for long periods, operator comfort is another aspect that requires looking at in detail. Even if only travelling from A to B the ride wants to be comfortable, especially over rough ground. While manufacturers might expound the virtues of their particular suspension system, it can only be gauged from experience. The answer is to arrange a demonstration, climb aboard and test it for yourself.

Noise levels are now increasingly under the spotlight both from an operator's point of view and the public. These are generally shown in leaflets, so a comparison of different makes and models is easy to make. Another specification to look out for is the ground clearances, especially if a course has a lot of undulating terrain.

At some stage there is the likelihood that a unit will be required to tow a piece of equipment, so its towing capabilities and capacity and is relevant. Depending on what the utility is being initially bought for will largely govern the importance of its overall versatility. Where a vehicle is to be used mainly for transporting smallish items such as pedestrian mowers, top dressing, fertiliser and hand tools, then the dimensions and carrying capacity of the cargo box are a priority. Cargo beds are in all shapes and sizes with the options of full, two thirds and one third, with side or without configurations.

On some models the list of optional attachments is long, plus there are

now a number of companies offering trailed and specially designed attachments. These include sprayers spreaders, top dressers and other turf care equipment.

Apart from using a utility vehicle for course work, it could also be converted to a mobile repair unit by the addition of a portable generator, compressor, welder and toolbox. Should a breakdown occur out on the course, the service technician, plus all his kit, would be on site in a few minutes. One of the smaller models would be ideal for this purpose.

#### Utility plus

Another piece of equipment that comes under the "utility" heading is the loader or skidster. A number of these types of machine are now available in the UK. There are four-wheeled units, which have a platform at the rear for the operator to stand. Because of their compactness they are said to be ideal for working in very confined areas and the drive system to the wheels allows you to spin turn, which makes them highly manoeuvrable. Also available are slightly larger loaders that have a driving seat. Some models in this category articulate in the middle, a feature it is claimed that provides tight turning without leaving tracks or damaging the turf.

The basic power units generally have 4-wheel hydrostatic drive as standard. On some makes there is a 2 pump hydraulic system, one for wheels and the other to drive or lift the attachments. Other companies offer an auxiliary circuit as an option. This is in the form of a flow divider valve, which enables the operator to

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# A VAN FOR ALL SEASONS

increase or decrease the oil flow to the attachment, or the wheel drives. Petrol or diesel engine versions are available.

A big feature of all these multi-purpose machines is the speed at which one person can fit or remove an attachment. It usually means connecting or disconnecting hydraulic hoses and fitting or removing two locking pins, and the unit is ready, some manufacturers claim this takes less than a minute.

A look at some of the operations that a loader or skidster could be used for on a course illustrates the versatility of these units.

## Ditches, ponds or bunkers

A backhoe is ideal for clearing out ditches and ponds, or even digging new bunkers. They are compact enough to get in the tightest of spots and are said to be capable of moving a lot of soil in a short period of time. Various bucket widths are available.



## Landscaping

For making new seedbeds there are soil cultivators. These will, it is claimed, in one pass grade, bury stones and any other debris. Other attachments for landscape work

include, grading rakes, scraper blades and levellers. An earth auger takes all the hard work out and speeds up creating the holes for tree planting.

## Fencing

By using a loader or skidster with minimal labour, fencing becomes a highly efficient and cost effective operation. Most companies offer a choice of earth auger drills for producing various depths and diameters of holes. In addition, some manufacturers have a cement mixer attachment. This means fence posts can be erected and set in concrete immediately without the necessity of having to bring in additional plant.

## Drainage and irrigation

Providing trenches for irrigation insulation, electrical cable or small drainage pipes, is said to be fast and easy with a trenching attachment. At least one manufacturer offers a bore-driving head with a rod and reamer kit for going under paths without dis-

turbing the surface. Once the installation has been carried out the trench can be back filled using a blade and leveller.

The list of other attachments is extensive and includes, tree forks, rotary brooms and a wide range of buckets. Some companies also have wood chippers and rotary or flail mowers.

A skidster or loader could be a considerable asset to the fleet, but unless there is sufficient all-year-round work for this type of machine, a better proposition would be to hire one as and when required.

One suspects, that like a lot of machinery, once a utility vehicle, skidster or loader is on the fleet, it is soon discovered how many other applications it can be used for, that were not originally considered. For those courses that do not already have one, it is a piece of equipment worth checking out with a view to including it in future machinery replacement planning.

