

# Winter maintenance – getting

**James de Havilland provides some excellent advice on making the most of your winter maintenance.**

Late autumn will see a flurry of mail from dealers advising of their special out of season service deals. Have your mowers and other items of kit serviced during the winter months and save money.

On the surface, this may seem like a little bit of flannel, but if you are not taking advantage of out of season service deals, you are missing out.

Although modern equipment may well be reliable and boost productivity, it still needs looking after. Routine servicing is one thing, and possibly it may remain within the scope of an in-house workshop. But there are some items of kit that can make it difficult to stray from filter and oil changes. Anything else may need the services of a third party.

This is not because equipment, such as a modern fairway mower, is harder to work on. It is more to do with the increasing use of electronics and advanced engine management systems. In many cases, diagnostic checks and software tweaks can only be carried out by trained dealer personnel.

Of course this does not mean it is time to out source all machinery maintenance to equipment suppliers. Although it is tempting to suggest a good winter service and mid-season check will be enough to see a mower go through a season, the reality is somewhat different.

Modern equipment will have to earn its keep on a golf course, and as a result it may well need more care than fixed service intervals can offer. The key is to get a balance, exploiting dealer facilities when they are at their least expensive and using in-house facilities as much as possible to reduce overall costs.

With a fairway mower as an example, routine greasing and keeping the reels good and sharp are obvious priorities. Add a regime that includes cleaning after every use, with a good clean once a week. It is surprising how reliability can be increased when a strict cleaning programme is introduced.

This is not because a clean machine suddenly becomes more reliable. It is simply because routine cleaning helps workshop personnel spot potential problems. The odd loose nut, chafing hose or weeping coupling can go unnoticed if buried under a coating of dried on clippings.


So what has this got to do with winter maintenance? In itself, not a great deal. But what is clear is that planned maintenance is considerably cheaper than ad-hoc repairs. So, only the bravest Course Manager would forgo at least some in-house workshop facilities.

Relying on a third party for every element of machinery repair and maintenance is a risk too far. The key is getting the balance right. Having high capital cost equipment, such as ride-on mowers, given a complete winter service by the supplying dealer makes a great deal of sense.

Maintenance deals are of course increasingly wrapped into purchasing packages and these can make a great deal of sense when it comes to the care of more complex kit, but only if the true costs are properly thought through.

In some instances, it can pay to negotiate a separate maintenance package with a dealer supplying certain bits of kit, such as mowers. Out of season service deals sometimes make a 'bolt-on' service package better than one wrapped into a full lease hire, or similar, purchase plan. On-site mid-season visits to give a mower a service are also worth building into a deal.

Although it is tempting to save a few pounds by cutting a few corners on servicing, well maintained kit tends to be trouble free. For some,



**Before signing on the dotted line for a new item of critical kit, take the time to visit the supplying dealer's workshop and parts store. The best tees, greens and fairway mowers are only as good as the people who look after them.**

however, this talk of third party servicing is seen as something of a retrograde step. Being able to carry out all routine servicing in-house can save time and money, particularly where trained workshop personnel 'know' the demands placed on a given item of kit.

A modern ride-on fairway mower remains a complex item of equipment, but its servicing needs will not necessarily tax the skills of a fitter who has been working on this type of mower for years. The point, however, is that the number of golf clubs that can support workshop personnel with the necessary experience to look after more advanced kit is limited.

As manufacturers and supplying dealers are increasingly linking in a maintenance package to various sales initiatives, it also follows that for many clubs the need to justify full time workshop personnel also diminishes.

For both manufacturers and dealers it makes sound business sense to ensure a given item of kit is serviced using OEM replacement parts, and it is for this reason that many new equipment sales often come linked to attractive maintenance packages.



# the best deal on equipment



A good service contract will include mid-season checks. In-house workshop staff should be involved when considering maintenance packages. The key is getting a good balance between in-house routine maintenance and dealer servicing.



## Warranties

Of equal importance, there is a need to ensure equipment is serviced during its warranty period. It is difficult for warranty claims to be handled sympathetically when there is no record of the machine having been serviced in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations.

This is of increasing significance as more and more equipment comes with long original or extended warranty schemes.

The issue of warranty claim validation can make in-house servicing regimes a problem. If a hydraulic motor fails on a mower within its warranty period, the end user would expect it to be replaced without charge.

The supplying dealer, however, could quite legitimately reject the claim if they have not been responsible for the mower's maintenance. Why should they, or more relevantly the manufacturer, allow a claim when both parties have no way of knowing servicing has been carried out to the right standard and to schedule?

Supplying dealers in the past would often deal with warranty claims on 'self-serviced' equipment sympathetically, in many cases standing the

cost of repairs of at least part of a manufacturer refused claim. Such are the tight margins under which many dealerships now operate, however, that such largess is increasingly difficult to sustain.

## Fixed costs

It is the need to work to fixed costs, however, which can make 'dealer' servicing attractive. As it is now common practice to offer a maintenance package with high capital cost equipment, it follows that more operations will take up what is offered.

As a given package will typically span the period over which the finance is to be spread, a golf club will know in advance what maintenance costs are going to be over a given period. Barring accident, equipment costing is considerably easier if a pre-priced maintenance package is built in.

For these packages to offer good value for money, it will depend upon how well the terms are worked out between the parties involved. In some cases early schemes got the costs wrong, with some manufactures underestimating the level of work some machines would do in a season and vice versa.

Current schemes remain competitively priced as they can help sweeten a purchasing decision. In fact buying an item of new kit without looking at what can be included in terms of maintenance is, at best, short sighted.

But make sure you know what you are getting. A deal that offers the back-up support of a loan machine if a critical item of kit is taken out of action is well worth looking at. The key is to shop around and discuss specific needs with suppliers.

It is all well and good talking about how all inclusive purchase schemes are offered, but for any maintenance initiative to work all parties involved need to know what is involved.

In some instances, a dealer will allow certain tasks, such as routine oil changes, to be carried out in-house. They will supply the relevant filters and oils to the customer so they can change the fluids themselves. This can help reduce package costs.

More commonly, the dealer will offer a mid-season machine check, this entailing an on-site visit that could see the machine having the fluids and filters changed plus possible adjustment to drive belts etc. A full service is pre-arranged for a period out of season.

The costs are all budgeted for beforehand, so the end user is not going to be presented with a large and unexpected service bill.

As we enter a period where future cost planning is of growing importance, fixed service cost schemes start to become increasingly attractive. But this is not to suggest it is time to close in-house workshops either.

Once these facilities are lost, they are expensive and difficult to re-establish. The key is to combine the two to ensure equipment spends more time earning its keep and less time in the workshop.

## A good maintenance package should offer:

- Planned regular maintenance that satisfies manufacturer warranty requirements.
- Enhanced residual values due to service history.
- Fixed servicing costs.

## In-house workshops offer:

- On site cover for breakdowns.
- Maintenance schedules to match specific machine use.
- In-house modifications to meet course specific needs.
- Mechanical expertise.