

Modern fairway management has certainly benefited from the introduction of 'lighter' mowers with narrower units. This has not made the actual job any easier, a wet mild spring and fast growth sometimes stretching mowing capacities to the limit. The key is having the capacity to cope

Making Light Work

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James de Havilland hops on the current crop of light ride on mowers.

When trailed gang sets first started to be replaced by ride-on fairway mowers, the choice of models on offer was initially limited. Indeed, some of the earliest ride-on models had much in common with the five-gang commercial cylinder models upon which they were based. Fairway mowers have now changed considerably, but the trick still remains in matching the right mower to the job.



With five 21 inch units, the 2 and 4WD Toro Reelmaster 5200-D and 5400-D can be specified with 5 or 8 bladed 5 inch cylinders. In damp conditions, all-wheel drive can be of benefit, even of a relatively flat fairway



John Deere 3225C and 3235C models feature 22 inch cutting units, this now universally popular format being the size Deere has stuck to from day one. Cab option is increasingly popular, offering protection from the elements and stray balls

If the mowing equipment clock suddenly turned back to the mid-80s, many courses would be in trouble if modern kit had to be replaced with the best that was offered back in 1985. Staffing levels would probably need to be doubled and members would notice a dramatic change in the look and play of greens and fairways. Lost balls would triple overnight.

A bit of an exaggeration? As it is not possible to go back and both manage and play a course as it would have been a couple of decades in the past, it is difficult to say. But anyone who has an intimate knowledge of a given golf course will no doubt agree that greens now tend to be far more consistent and faster, roughs are ringed with more forgiving aprons and year round play and winter mowing is far from unusual. The whole look and feel of a course now would be very different than it could have been back then.

A key change, however, would be in the fairways. Although mowing heights have not necessarily altered, the quality and frequency of cut certainly has.



Alternate day mowing is now common in high season, and the 'ultra' light fairway mower, with diminutive 5 inch cylinders and 18 inch cutting units, is available, albeit with a relatively limited market.

Early ride-on fairway mowers would typically offer five sets of 30 inch units with 7, 7.5 or even 8 inch cylinders. By the time John Deere entered the golf market with its light fairway models in around 1993 with its 22 inch units, it offered a choice that could include 5 inch cylinders. Fast forward, and Jacobsen has been brining in its 18 inch ultra light 1880 models for a couple of years.

This has lead to a pretty diverse range of ride-on fairway mowers. At the standard end, it is possible to have a model like the Jacobsen Fairway 405 with its seven 26 inch units and the Toro Reelmaster 6700D, also with seven gangs but 22 inch cylinders. At the other extreme the 18 inch five gang Jacobsen Super Light LF-1880 is offered with diminutive 5 inch cylinders.

As such, it is useful to divide what is on offer into standard, light and ultra light categories. The description of course relates to the cutting units, but it is fair to say lighter units are associated with a physically lighter mower as well. Sit the extremes of what is on offer next to each other and it is soon apparent that the bigger the units, and particularly when seven as opposed to five gangs are fitted, the larger the power unit becomes.



No, Hayter has not entered the light fairway mower market with its 26 inch unit FM524, but it is a relatively light machine in terms of ground bearing pressure, the company putting this at between 10 to 24 psi depending upon specification and tyre pressures

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All obvious stuff. But it is when visiting a course that has made a progressive switch from a 'standard' ride-on to increasingly lighter models that the differences in the look of the fairways can be noticed. So too can fairway management. Light mowers are less able to tackle long wet grass and the odd stone or patch of soil that were easily digested by heavier models can spell a trip to the workshop on an ultra light model.

Stepping into the dangerous waters of generalisation, links type courses with fine grasses are more likely to adopt smaller 5 inch diameter reels, parkland courses perhaps erring toward a larger 7 or 7.5 inch cylinder. Again in generalisation territory, the smaller diameter units will be maintaining a cut height of 12 to 13mm, the larger 15 to 16mm.

As is often the case, however, local conditions and available water have a tremendous influence on how a given course mows its fairways. There are also different mowing heights that can be dialled in depending upon annual rainfall. Winter mowing heights are also a consideration. In many cases a cosmetic winter mow will see mowing heights increased to 18mm plus. None of these are cast in stone and as such it will always pay to know how mowers differ and how what is the right choice now could well change in the future.

Popular for its versatility, the five-gang Toro 5500-D is fitted with 22 inch units with 7 inch cylinders. Available with a choice of 5, 7 and 11 blades, it is this type of mower that can be specified to cope with different mowing conditions



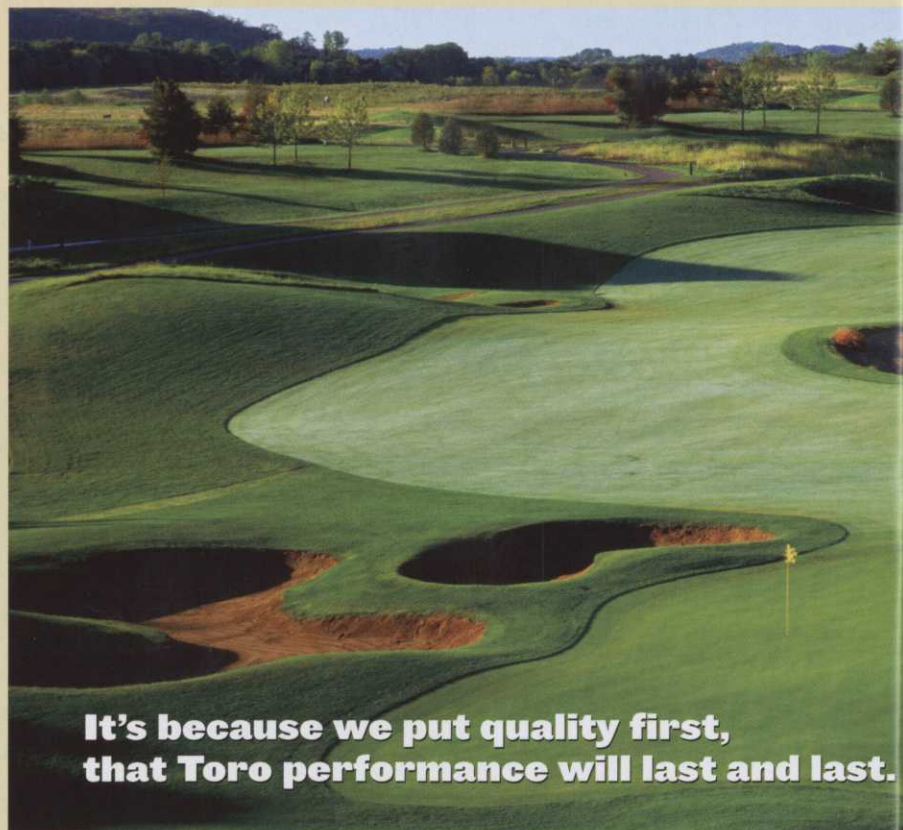
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Perversely, some suggest it is winter mowing that has influenced the uptake of light fairway models. With grass growing on through the season, being able to get onto the fairways to cut it with a physically light machine is a key issue. Compaction remains a concern, the footprint of light fairway mower often enabling grass to be cut in conditions when a larger ride-on is best left in the shed.



Jacobsen LF3400 and LF3800 models look pretty much the same, but offer a choice of 34 or 38hp power units to drive the five 22 inch units. The more powerful model is offered with 7 inch cylinders, against the 5 inch units on the 3400



The diminutive Jacobsen LF1880, now offered in Turbo 33hp form, is claimed to be the lightest fairway mower on offer. Its narrow 18 inch cutting units even have the option of 'greens' specification 11-blade cylinders



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