

FEATURE I

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Quality Used Turf Equipment: Creating Options for Superintendents



In a perfect world, every Superintendent would have a blank sheet and sufficient budget to develop a capital plan that assures the highest of standards, regardless of cost. However, for most, the world is not perfect.

Our present reality, of having to do more with less, requires another look at some practices that may not have been desirable in the past, including the purchase of used machinery. Equipment prices have increased at a dramatically higher rate than inflation for many years. Machinery prices are up at a time when the industry is awash with economic challenges. Something has to give, and quality used turf equipment is an increasingly viable option for many.

On the positive side, Superintendents who consider used equipment have a wider array of choices than in the past. For this, we can thank the ever helpful banking industry. Thanks to financial innovation and favorable tax treatment, courses in many parts of the country have transitioned from direct ownership or capital leasing (ex. dollar buy-out at end of lease term) to operating leases. An operating lease works similarly to a car lease. Equipment ownership reverts to the leasing company or dealer at the end of a three to five year term. Most of these machines find their way back to market at the end of the lease. In comparison to the past, when used machines were found mainly in bone yard operations, we now have a steady supply of machines of all shapes, sizes, and conditions, usually with about four or five seasons of use.

While it is correct to assume that many of these machines have been reasonably maintained, a minority are gems, and a few lemons are hiding among the rest.

How to get the best and avoid the rest? A few basic steps can help greatly.

Inspection: The course equipment technician should be very involved in establishing three standards: proper operation of every system and control; confirming that the machine had

routine lubrication and servicing; and confirming the integrity of the most costly components: frame, engine, and drivetrain.

Among operational checks, function of safety interlocks is often overlooked.

For past maintenance practices, wear should be appropriate for machine age and hours of use. Is the wear and tear consistent with proper maintenance practices? Are lift arm bushings tight? Are there signs of abnormal or abusive wear? Do lift arms carry a static load? Do hydraulic lines appear in good condition, etc?

Engine and drivetrain tests can range from simply checking for proper operation to engine compression and pump pressure tests.

While it is difficult to check every single facet, a good inspection will lead to a decision on whether the machine has been reasonably maintained and on whether the major components are in good shape.

Cosmetics: Does the machine look its age? Foot beds rarely lie. A 200-hour machine does not have

the paint wear in foot beds of a 3000-hour machine. Heavily sun faded surfaces may indicate prolonged outdoor storage. Many reputable resellers make a practice of repainting entire components, but selective spot repainting may be an attempt to conceal rust or other damage.

What the supplier has done to the machine:

The supplier should have a rigorous inspection process that documents in detail what has been done to each machine. The technician can then verify the supplier's report. Vague answers from the supplier are a red flag. Some of the industry jargon can be misleading. For instance, 'reel and roller bearings have been gone through' only means that they have been

(continued on page 7)



checked and are working, it does not mean they have all been replaced. 'Refurbished' means something different to nearly every supplier. Each can answer differently when ask what it means in relation to their machines.

Support after you buy: Do you have a strong sense that the supplier will stand behind the machine and you after you buy it, whether through a written warranty, a handshake agreement, or their reputation? Do they provide customer references you can talk to and trust? Does the 'national' reseller in the trade magazines have as much stake in supporting you as local suppliers do? While many of the national resellers are very reputable, it may be difficult to get timely service from someone hundreds of miles away.

Next is how much to pay. As with cars, turf maintenance machines depreciate most rapidly during their first few years. A rule of thumb for a machine in good condition is that about 40-60% of the original value is lost after four to five years and 1200-1500 hours of use. Then depreciation slows. Once the hours exceed 2000, and particularly beyond 3000 hours, depreciation accelerates again. In our climate, with 300-400 hours of use per season, good quality four-year machines can be purchased at about half the price of new.



How does this add up? The math works differently for every club and situation. What is common to all is that good used equipment can create options for the Superintendent and his club. For example, a Superintendent may contemplate a budgeted capital purchase of \$25,000. He may buy a new machine for \$25,000. But if he decides to spend only half of that on a used machine, he now has new options: additional capital purchases to reach \$25,000; or redeployment of some of the \$12,500 saved into operating expenses; or simply not spending the money saved. In our present reality, creating options can be critically important.

Whether used turf machines are right for you is your decision alone. Equipment resellers provide you with a middle ground between paying for a new machine and being unable to purchase what you need. Concerns about machine quality and support can be addressed by evaluating both the machine and the supplier. In the end, quality used equipment is another option for Superintendents and their clubs to consider when economizing in today's business environment. **-OC**

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