



# Palm Beach Trade Winds



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A surface that is a surface, is a surface... Right? In sports, whether the surface is asphalt, clay, wood, astroturf, or turf... a surface is a surface. Right? Wrong! In basically all sports a surface is a surface, except in the game of golf, where there are no two surfaces alike. Not even within the front to the back of the very same green.

Considering the game of golf possesses so many variables, what is the one common element that all golfers can relate to when comparing golf courses throughout the world? The answer: Putting green speed quality. All golfers have a sense for putting green speed, whether the golfer feels the green to be like concrete or a shag carpet. A somewhat desired putting green speed quality can be achieved, whatever our handicap, as we all can appreciate an excellent putting surface.

Within the topic of good putting green speed quality, the variables start to surface. Factors such as turfgrass species, variety, geographic location, weather, time of day, soil and moisture content, fertility, topdressing, etc... etc...., can determine putting green speed quality. What is the most evident of all factors? Answer: Height of cut and means of cutting. Researchers have many conclusion for achieving that ultimate speed quality; however, of all the comparisons and analogies, what is perhaps the key element toward high quality? Answer: Type of machine employed for mowing. It is at this point, the chairs start to squirm, as we all have strong feelings on the pros and cons of walk and triplex greens mowers.

I believe we will all basically agree that a walk mower will ultimately achieve a better putting green surface in comparison to a triplex mower because of the very simple agronomic fact that an excellent, high quality "fast" putting green surface will obviously be mowed at tournament specifications, with stimp meter readings averaging 10 feet. This fact alone creates excessive stress to the turfgrass plant, by which only the delicacy of a walk mower will thereby "aid" in achieving and maintaining, for an extended period of time, a better putting surface. I am not saying I favor one versus the other, nor is the intent of this article to be controversial; however, it is not the golf course superintendents who must be aware of the derivatives of the two different machines, but rather the rest of the entire golfing population be aware of the pros and cons of such a cultural practice.

All too often a golfer will make a comparison about the condition of greens of two different clubs, without even being aware of what type of machine performs the mowing. The comparable variables of type of club, extent of play, budget, type of cultivar, cultural practices and ulti-

mate speed desired will determine just what type of machine meets the club's requirements. If all of these variables could ever be found equal between two different clubs, then we could compare apples to apples.

We, as the golf course superintendent, are given the responsibility to advise a club toward that certain direction of maintaining an excellent putting green surface. All too often a club will impulsively be led to believe that walk mowers can be their key to success. The club, with their golf course superintendent, should objectively evaluate the desired product, evaluate total cost, and the answer will glaringly hit you in the face... you will not even have to contemplate the situation, as the answer should already be revealed.

Such is the case for George Cavanagh, Certified Golf Course Superintendent at the President Country Club, in West Palm Beach. Upon the building of an additional 36 holes, management has confronted Mr. Cavanagh to objectively evaluate walk mowers versus triplex for greens mowing. Mr. Cavanagh recently made a personal survey within Palm Beach County regarding this situation, by contacting many clubs of diversification, to objectively evaluate such usage. The golf course superintendent was asked the following questions, with a general conclusion as follows:

1. *Do you use hand mowers, if so, why?* Replies were rather equally balanced as many courses use walk mowers in the winter, while triplexes are dominant during the summer, and those who use walks in the winter, generally switch during the summer. Reasons for using walks were reinforced by quality of cut and less wear stress during the crucial winter months. Those who employ walks find maintenance expenses higher by comparison, but are willing to pay the cost.

2. *How many greens do you have?* A distinct pattern showing the larger complex, and the development courses prefer triplexes, in comparison to the smaller exclusive private country clubs preferring the walks even though additional costs are incurred.

3. *Do you overseed?* Those overseeding found the walks more beneficial toward a better stand of turf, while some prefer walks for just the period of seed establishment, while those who do not find the need to overseed, generally find the demand for cut can be fulfilled by the triplex.

4. *What is the average size of your greens?* Greens sizes were averaging 6000 square feet. There was a correlation

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with the smaller the green size and the heavier the amount of play, the need for walk mowers, while the larger the size, obvious wear tolerance can be reduced; thereby, allowing triplexes. Some courses find a need for both types, as walks are used on greens that are not agronomically sound, or greens with severe shade; whereby, walks will aid with such a delicate situation. Some even prefer walks for the perimeter cut, while the triplex mows the remainder of the green.

5. *Do you find you can cut greens lower with walks?* Surprisingly, the walks are not employed for the reason of lower cut, but again for reasons of truer cut and less wear. A lower height was not considered the objective, as cultural practices were satisfactory no matter which type of machine performed the cutting.

6. *Do you use walk mowers 7 days or skip?* Cost evaluations can best be given as the answer. The totally exclusive, private club, where cost is generally not a factor, prefer walks 7 days a week. Some chose to skip walks on weekends primarily for ease of labor while some chose walks for only special occasions.

7. *Procedure for winter/summer?* Those who chose walks, prefer usage primarily for the winter, while seldom were the walks used year round. Considering we must contend with a 12 month growing season with the need of such extensive summer renovation, the labor force can not afford to be used for such tasks as simply mowing greens, when so many other projects must be resolved.

8. *How many greens can I mow?* One man can mow all 18 greens with a triplex and stay ahead of play if given enough lead time. Seldom will a man mow more than 5 greens with a walk mower. Cost in labor time can be as much as six times as expensive, if the walkers were to mow three greens each.

9. *How do you transport walks?* This is a key question, as seldom does the average golfer consider the need for additional ground transportation. Considering the time element is a key factor, if the greens are to be mowed ahead of play, a major expense can be incurred for proper efficient vehicles and trailers.

10. *Rate quality?* Those who employ the additional cost of walks, generally agree with management, that the type of cut is beneficially worth while; however, one must certainly be willing to pay the bill for additional mower purchases, because one will still usually employ triplexes during the summer.

An overall summary can best be stated as; yes, walk mowers will aid in producing a better high quality putting green surface; however, there are many other factors to consider and the cost incurred will most certainly be far greater than triplexes.

First, one must consider, does your club really require the need for such high quality putting surfaces? If the answer is yes, then one must critically examine the exorbitant additional cost of machines, parts, labor and total time involved. If the answer is again yes, then you have already reached a conclusion; however, if you answered no to just one part of this discussion, then proceed no further. ■

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