

Work trucks top out on high end

Manufacturers agree: New models mark the end of upscale trend

By HAL PHILLIPS

Could it be that after five years of loading features onto their heavy-duty utility vehicles, manufacturers are beginning to downsize?

"I think we've hit the ceiling in terms of what the end-user is willing to pay for the product," said Peter Whurr, product manager for Ransomes America Corp.

"In some cases, there will continue to be a market for those upscale units," said Ron Skenes, communications manager at E-Z-GO. "But we see a very strong market for a more basic vehicle."

"We're going in the exact opposite direction," added Don Smith, president of Smithco. "It has gotten very sophisticated. Toro and Jake are both coming out with water-cooled engines,

I think Jake and Toro are the new kids on the block and their products are very good. They should give Ransomes a run for their money. But at close to \$15,000, only the most exclusive private clubs can afford them.'

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diesels... I think Jake and Toro are the new kids on the block and their products are very good. They should give Ransomes a run for their money.

"But at close to \$15,000, only the most exclusive private clubs can afford them. The courses that dot their I's and cross their T's to turn a profit can't justify that type of cost."

Whurr's firm manufactures the Cushman Turf Truckster, which for years has set the standard for utility vehicles. Competitors agree the Truckster is powerful, versatile and dependable. The still greater compliment involves competing firms vying for a piece of this high-end market segment.

But manufacturers have seen the writing on the wall: Performance doesn't always outweigh cost. Even Jacobsen and Toro — both of whom have recently released upscale utility units —

acknowledge the genre can't get any bigger.

"Very definitely," said Rick Cairns, project manager for Toro, whose Workman was unveiled in early 1993. "When we researched this market back in 1989, we determined the high volume at any sort of facility was on the low end. If a club has 10 vehicles, eight or nine will be lightweight.

"But we also figured there was room in the heavy-duty market. Cushman had a good product, but it was getting old and the market segment was vulnerable. We figured there would be room for three players: Toro, Cushman and one more. It turned out to be Jacobsen."

Indeed, Jake launched its SV series in Dallas this year. It's loaded with features, according to Product Planning Manager Bob Krick — features the superintendent has demanded.

"This happens all the time," said Krick. "The superintendent sees the cost go up, but they keep asking for more comfort, all-hydraulic features, etc.

"The market responds with products of higher quality, more comfort, less maintenance. I think the customer may cringe a little bit at the price. But once they realize all it has to offer, they can justify the extra couple thousand dollars.

"We pretty much got everything we wanted on this vehicle," Krick said of the SV series. "I think we've peaked out. If it gets any bigger, it's a dump truck."



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Behold, the industry's first, all-composite rim from Melex. Known best for golf cars, Melex has not been a major player in the utility vehicle market. But that will change "soon," according to Bryan Taylor, VP of marketing at Melex. Come 1995, look for the all-composite rim on the firm's new entry in the utility vehicle field, said Taylor.

Low-end vehicles dominate volume sales

By HAL PHILLIPS

Those manufacturers polled by *Golf Course News* agreed with the assertion that eight of 10 utility vehicles at any club are mid- to low-end models. They also agreed that, as this market segment matures, manufacturers must choose a niche and pursue it.

The Toro Co. has taken the most unique approach, attacking the high-end market with its Workman and leaving the low- and mid-range units to its competitors. The Workman retails for approximately \$14,000, according to Marketing Manager Rick Cairns.

However, with Toro, Jake and Ransomes vying for the high-end dollar, is there enough to go around?

"It's pretty tight," Cairns admitted.

Peter Whurr, product manager at Ransomes America Corp., said he thinks the market has changed: There is no longer a large enough market for the upscale unit, he said, and his competitors may have over-engineered.

"Maybe they've gone just a little bit too far in terms of the what the market really needs," said Whurr. "What we learned very quickly was, you can't make a product that meets everyone's needs, or you end up with a very expensive product."

Ransomes has adjusted by offering the Truckster and the more inexpensive, lighter-weight Truckster Jr. that retails for about \$8,000.

"We feel there is a limit to what a customer will pay," said Whurr, "and we feel the Truckster is at that limit. But we've gone to the Truckster Jr. to appeal to the superintendent with less money to spend."

E-Z-GO offers four different classes of utility vehicle, from the

smaller Tough One to its top-of-the-line GXT 1500, which goes for \$6,800. But E-Z-GO hasn't turned a blind eye to the larger, more upscale market.

"We're watching the market to see how receptive it is," said Communications Manager Ron Skenes. "Right now we feel we have the vehicles to meet the market demands. But that doesn't mean we've ruled out introducing a new vehicle in that [upscale] class.


"You have to take advantage of different niches as they come up — like the non-golf turf market... I think the grounds maintenance

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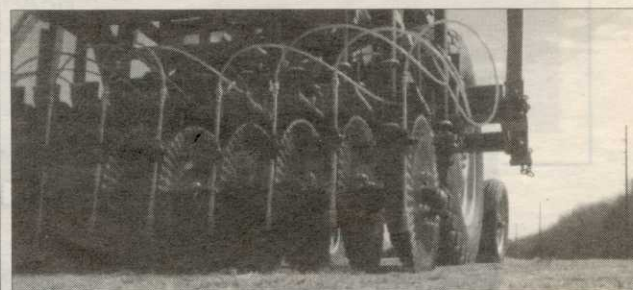
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