

Hover-mower manufacturer recapitalizes

By HAL PHILLIPS

YARMOUTH, Maine — Banking on their domestic manufacturing operation, engine-design innovation and an influx of capital, the new owners of Grasscraft, Inc. hope to make a dent in the hover mower market this year.

Grasscraft is celebrating its fifth anniversary in 1996. Unfortunately, the first four were marked by a woeful lack of working capital, making service and expansion extremely difficult. Steven Searle, Grasscraft's new president and chief executive officer, hopes to change all that.

"We're prepared to invest the needed capital and manpower to meet our goals: A three-fold increase in sales and production over the next three years," said

Searle, who purchased the firm in October 1995.

In a market dominated by Flymo and Allen — two British firms with U.S. distribution — Grasscraft sees its Maine-based manufacturing operation as a selling point.

"People realize that since we manufacture domestically and sell direct to our customers, we can offer lower pricing and better service," said Searle. "Getting warranty work done and ordering parts from a foreign company can be a real problem."

Added David Rodway, Grass-

craft's VP of sales: "A big part of our marketing program is dealing direct... I think we're going to sell half the mowers at dealer price. We want to pass that savings on to the course by dealing direct."

Searle and Rodway said the golf course market has always been receptive to the Grasscraft product, with its nylon safety cutter blades, unbreakable polyethylene deck, 5-hp, two-stroke Tecumseh engine and aircraft quality, computer-designed impeller.

However, the firm isn't standing pat. Current research and

development efforts are focused on a 4-cycle prototype now being tested in North Carolina.

"The 4-cycle engine is about five times quieter," Rodway explained. "It doesn't pollute near as much as the 2-cycle because the oil and gas are separate... It's also much more durable. The best example of that? Well, when you get into heavy grass with a 2-cycle, it bogs a little bit and you may have to pull off. The 4-cycle blows right through it."

While Grasscraft intends to deal directly with superintendents, some distributor relationships are inevitable. The firm has already lined up Agri-Pacific to rep the

product in Asia-Pacific.

"Our mower is made in the USA, every piece of it," Rodway said. "We've visited a lot of superintendents and it's very difficult to get parts. We have the capital and the manpower to service this product. We realize the sale doesn't stop when the mower is shipped."

"We think it's important people realize we have the funding, the capital to back this thing up — to have enough stock, to have enough parts to make it work."

For more information, contact Grasscraft at 1-800-646-6013, PIN #4319; or drop by their booth (#293) in Orlando.

Hueber resurfaces

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"If Accuform had insisted on a non-compete clause, then it would have been a different matter. But they didn't."

However, Hueber's plans to launch the Sabertooth rake line were diverted this past fall when Accuform, citing U.S. patent protection (no. 4,41,150), demanded that Sabertooth cease and desist marketing, selling and manufacturing its round-backed rake called the Original.

"Our patent is pretty broad and protects us with regard to rounded backs," said Accuform spokesman Neil McDougall.

Hueber never admitted liability but discontinued the Original line.

"My former partners felt that one of our rake designs came a little too close to the design of the Accuform rake," he said. "They made their points very aggressively. But I didn't want any bad feelings. In the interest of goodwill, I've made alterations to the rake in question and have applied for patent protections."

The rake once known as the Original has been modified and renamed the Dual Action. The new model features on its rounded back a ridge designed for smoothing traps and squeezing water off greens.

All Sabertooth rakes sport an egg-shaped cylindrical head providing an elongated sleeve designed to hold the handle more securely. They also feature a golf grip to avoid splinters from sun-worn fiberglass handles.

"The tines are also shaped differently — like a saber tooth, wider at the base — so they're stronger and don't break off as easily," noted Hueber. "The rake is really very different. Injection molded. Difficult to crack. Far different from any other rake out there."

Hueber said he has secured several distribution channels and will pursue more. "I do have some sales reps and we will direct market the product," he added.

The firm can be reached by calling 1-800-664-3545. It's booth number in Orlando is 2692.

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*Based on research conducted by the Center for Golf Course Management, a subsidiary of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

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