

## Time for a technological breakthrough

If you haven't yet, take a few moments to read the cover story on John Deere's acquisition of Player Systems Inc., one of the companies involved in the course management technology that utilizes the global position system (GPS).



Michael Levans,  
editor

In my discussions with John Deere's Shawn Phillips, now acting general manager of Player Systems under the Deere umbrella, we batted around possible turf maintenance scenarios once GPS and equipment were wed with a device that could effectively control rolling stock from a remote location.

I pictured the space-age superintendent sitting behind a sleek, Scandinavian desk, a 25" color computer screen staring back at him. From there, this superintendent could not only have a full profile of his irrigation system (hell, that's old hat) but he'll be able to control a fleet of robotic mowers and pesticide applicators in one big beautiful golf course maintenance symphony.

"I can't say if that would be the exact scenario," said Phillips, "but I wouldn't rule something like that out."

"The superintendent, through Precision Turf Care [a component in Player's package] can monitor his vehicles but have control over what hits the grass," said Richard Beckmann, director of sales and marketing for Player Systems. "He can take an area around a lake and map where certain chemicals can or cannot hit the grass. He drives the vehicle but the application is automated, so that person literally drives the vehicle and we're able to interact with the nozzles. The nozzles go off and on depending on what part of the course the driver is on."

When was the last time a piece of technology really broke through and made difference on the golf course?

In what is considered a fairly low-tech industry, GPS seems like such a natural, almost perfect extension to the industry's equipment. Course developers are now using GPS for extensive mapping — information that easily translates for maintenance and irrigation needs. It's a hit at the courses that use it on golf cars. Players get their yardage, but course owners can

track speed of play, number of rounds, even bombard players with advertising in those precious few seconds between the last green and the next tee.

But what's the next step?

Last winter we ran a story on the LawnNibbler, a robotic mower designed and built by the Machine Intelligence Laboratory at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Fla.

The LawnNibbler uses a radio wire buried at the perimeter of its work area and is controlled by sonar and infrared emitters that tell it where it is in its environment. Its navigational system works like GPS via a trilaterization process using three poles placed to define the machine's territory.

Although John Deere can't comment on exactly how they'll harness the possibilities, it's my guess that a LawnNibbler-like mower under the full control of a tried-and-true GPS system like Player's is not out of the realm of possibility — maybe even in the works.

Now, integrate irrigation, work vehicle locations, pesticide and fertilizer applications and rolling stock on the superintendent side, golf cars and speed of play on the owner side, yardage and access to the clubhouse on the player side and you have a totally automated golf business.

Everything can be tracked and benchmarked, success and failures measured.

I've always believed that technological advances were supplier driven. Something is designed, created, marketed and eventually used by those savvy few, and the next thing you know you have something that users are clamoring to get their hands on.

Then you get the knock-offs and honest competitors. Prices drop, imitators fall by the wayside and you have a solid market for something that was once considered unlikely.

## Life on the edge sometimes goes over the edge

Grass is getting cut shorter. Shoulder seasons are longer. Golfers are more demanding. And superintendents are getting more stressed out, some throwing up their hands and even leaving the profession.

Are the 1990s really the Golden Age of Greenkeeping? Have superintendents taken turf care to the extreme and become their own worst enemies?

"The demand for low-cut greens and disease-resistant grass has not always started with the golfer. The superintendent wants something better to maintain — not easier, but better," said Bob Mitchell, who has retired after many years as executive director of grounds at The Greenbriar resort in West Virginia.

Well, the superintendent has gotten that "something better," time and time again. Whenever we turn, it seems we see evidence of bentgrasses that grow further south, zoysias that grow further north, Bermudas that are seeded types, bedknives that cut lower, groomers that do this, aerators that do that — knowledge expanding through the stratosphere.

This gives superintendents the tools to nurture an expanding array of turfgrasses beyond the limits of today. They're taking conditions to the edge and sometimes they go over the edge. Other times, when an alert superintendent foresees a turf disease coming and cuts back on maintenance practices to reverse the conditions, he faces the possibility of getting fired.

All of this pushes the envelope in superintendents' personal lives.

Meanwhile, the demand for faster greens, shorter-cut fairways and roughs that aren't at all rough may have begun in America. But, sadly, that appears to have spread to the Homeland (and Heartland) of Golf. Some Brits want the same in their own courses. Can you imagine the Old Course at St. Andrews manicured to the specifications of an American parkland course? Old Tom Morris would roll over in his grave.

"The membership today has such high expectations but knows so little about the business. You put those two together and it's a dangerous combination — it's a recipe for trouble," said one superintendent.

"Golfers today are not as tolerant as those in the past," said Mitchell. He mentioned stresses that are "brought on by the younger golfer who wants better conditions or lower prices, and those things don't work together."

"Good superintendents will try to give their members what they want, but it's killing them. They are being driven into the ground to produce more and more," added Dan Jones, the longtime superintendent who just retired from Banyon Golf Club in Florida.

Jones admitted to burnout from the rigors of a job that, in the South, is unrelenting 365 days a year.

"A lot of people a lot younger [than Dan Jones] are burning out," said superintendent Tim Hiers of Collier's Reserve in Naples, Fla. "It's not an anomaly in him. A lot of guys are getting out and taking different career paths."

There are so many paradoxes in the business of greenkeeping. A superintendent could keep a golf course in immaculate condition for years — then get a three-week aberration in the weather. Members used to having a golf course that, condition-wise, is 99 on a scale of 100, suddenly have an 82. What happens? Too often, the superintendent gets fired. And even when it does not happen, the stress the superintendent is under not knowing his fate, can be overwhelming.

Professors will tell you the trend toward "a carpet golf course" has to reverse, but when and how will that occur?

What happened to the "Brown is Beautiful" campaign of a few years ago... to the "reality check" owners were urged to give concerning Tour conditions in the everyday life of their golf courses... to the reawakening of what the Stimpmeter was really created to do (measure consistency, not speed)?

Perhaps it comes down to the governing bodies — to the U.S. Golf Association, the PGA of America, the PGA Tour and LPGA getting the word out: Golf is not a good run on a clay track; it is a good walk in God's nature.



Mark Leslie,  
managing editor

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