PRODUCT FOCUS

BY JOHN WALSH

Decisions, decisions

Relationships, service drive superintendent's choice to lease mower fleet

Cutting units are the core of every golf course maintenance operation. And because they're so integral, there are several important factors to consider before making the decision to purchase or lease them. Eric Shomaker, director of golf course operations at the private, 18-hole Mountaintop Golf Club in Cashiers, N.C., explains his philosophy about leasing mowers.

Opened in July of 2006, Mountaintop is only open part of the year – May 1 through about mid-November. The course features cool-season turfgrass wall-to-wall because it's high on the southern tip of the Appalachian Mountains. The lowest elevation of the course is 3,750 feet above sea level. Yet Shomaker says there are golf courses with Bermudagrass fairways just 30 to 40 minutes away.

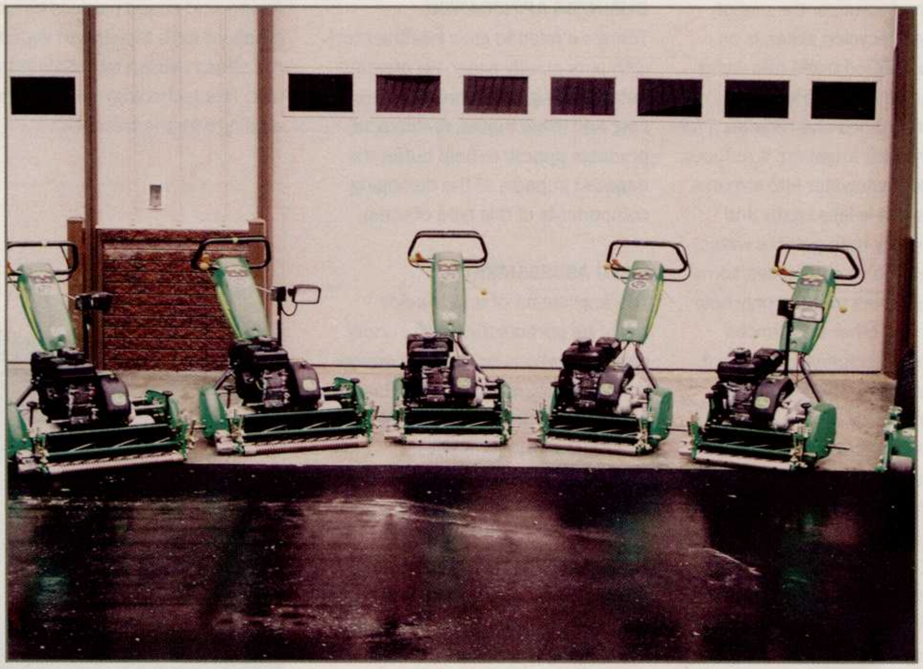
When it comes to mowers, Shomaker says the company he works for has national account relationships with Toro and John Deere. He says 80 percent of his mower fleet is John Deere and 20 percent is Toro. The fleet consists of:

- 10 John Deere 18-inch walking greens mowers (180B series);
- One Toro Greensmaster Flex 21 greensmower. "I use it from time to time, but I'm not sold on the piece," he says;
- 12 John Deere 26-inch walking mowers for tees and approaches (260 series). He says there's 2.5 to 3 acres to mow in those areas;
- Three John Deere fairway mowers with five cutting heads (3235 series);
- One John Deere rotary unit with five cutting heads for the rough;
- Two Toro Sidewinders with three cutting units and a rotary deck for small areas in the rough; and
- One big Toro rotary mower with five cutting units for the rough (4500 series).

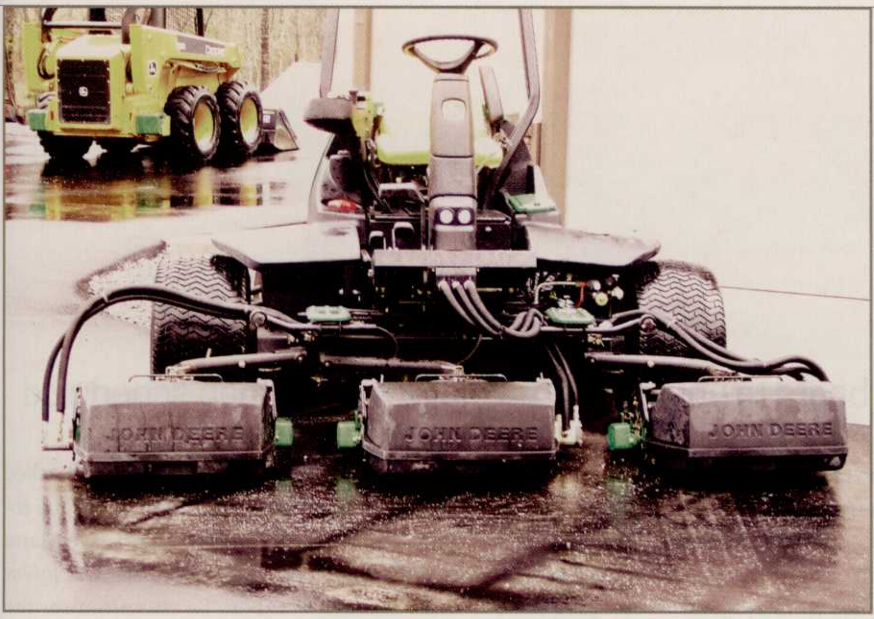
"I wasn't convinced of the John Deere [rotary] units enough to convert, so I went with Toro 4500," he says. "As far as the Sidewinders, John Deere didn't have anything to compete. But I've been pleased with the John Deere rough mower. It's as good as Toro."

Before making any purchasing decisions, Shomaker, who has a maintenance budget of more than $1.5 million, opened the playing field for John Deere and Toro. Making the decision was up to Shomaker, and then he presented his decision to the owner. He says being a new course didn't influence what brand he purchased.

"However, I had a great deal of support from John Deere on the grow-in of the course," he says. "I didn't want to buy a lot of new grow-in equipment. I just needed a few pieces here and there – a greensmower,



All mowers in Eric Shomaker's fleet are part of a four-year lease.
Photo: Mountaintop Club



Because Mountaintop's staff doesn't put many hours on the mowers, Eric Shomaker receives good residual rates on them. Photo: Mountaintop Golf Club

a fairway mower and utility vehicles. I purchased tractors and things I knew were going to last."

During the grow-in, Shomaker, who has a staff of 16 full-time workers and 19 seasonal workers, was able to obtain used John Deere equipment that came off lease from other facilities. But, he says, they still had to be quality pieces of equipment that produced a quality cut.

"Toro did some of this on a smaller scale," he says.

At the time of the grow-in, Jacobsen was going through a transition in which the local distributor was going out of business, so there was an uneasiness about the service aspect of purchasing mowers from the company, Shomaker says.

"The lack of representation from Jake was so poor, people couldn't get parts for four or five months," he says. "No commitment could be made to Jacobsen at that time. However, Jacobsen is getting things worked out."

LEASE NOT PURCHASE

All mowers in Shomaker's fleet are on a four-year lease. He says he prefers leasing more than purchasing because he can turn equipment in every four years.

"New equipment is always coming out," he says. "Looking four years out, I want something better."

Another reason why Shomaker, who's been at Mountaintop since April of 2004, prefers leasing mowers instead of buying them is because there's not as much out-of-pocket cash the owners need to put forth up front. Shomaker says anything with a life of more than seven years, such as sod cutters, tractors, blowers, skid steers, is purchased, and equipment such as mowers and utility vehicles is leased. The total cost to lease all the mowers is between $160,000 and $180,000 a year.

"We don't put a whole lot of hours on the equipment, so I get good residual rates," Shomaker says about turning in the equipment after the lease ends.

Maintenance is another aspect that factors into purchasing and operating a mower fleet. The cost to maintain and repair all Shomaker's equipment, including the utility vehicles, is $23,000 a year.

Service is also an important factor when leasing or purchasing mowers.

"Service is way up there for me," Shomaker says. "Service has never been a problem."

Interestingly, Shomaker has come across a situation in which he liked a certain brand of mower better than another brand, but the service wasn't as good as the other brand.

All the mowers Shomaker uses are gas powered. The rough and fairway mowers are diesel. Even though manufacturers are working to improve electric fairway and greensmowers, Shomaker is skeptical of electric fairway mowers because Mountaintop's site is hilly and he worries about the longevity of the batteries.

"I'm not going to experiment with a purchased one, but if someone would give me one to use over time to evaluate, I would do that," he says. "Electric is just as good as gas as far as cutting quality. The electric reels themselves reduce the chance for hydraulic leaks, but the mowers are gas driven. I worry about power. Besides, the noise reduction on gas and diesel has improved."

Shomaker's purchasing decision-making process also includes input from the crew members who operate the mowers, keeping an open mind and considering relationships.

"I'm not locked in to one manufacturer," he says. After this lease is up, it's an open playing field; yet I've established relationships with people, and it's hard to walk away from those relationships after a four-year lease. Maybe there will be a few pieces that change, but I will be loyal to people I have relationships with."

In the end, Shomaker realizes it's not his equipment, it's the members.

"I need to manage the budget to meet the members' needs," he says. **GCI**

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Shomaker has 30 mowers in his fleet, which include John Deere and Toro brands.