

GRINDERS

BY MARGARET HEPP

Reel sharp

An equipment manager starts from scratch with new grinders in Raleigh, N.C.

Jim Swartzel loved his job as equipment manager, but in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., enough was enough.

"After four hurricanes in a year, I had to say goodbye," he says.

Fortunately for Hasentree Golf Club in Raleigh, N.C., Swartzel wanted a fresh start. He accepted a position at the then-unfinished club in early 2006. By the time the course opened in October 2007, Swartzel had just the clean slate he'd been seeking: a brand new course, a new fleet of equipment and an entire shop full of new tools.

As Swartzel compiled his list of necessities for the shop, among the most essential pieces were a bedknife sharpener and a spin grinder. Both pieces – the Anglemaster 3000 DX (\$15,566) and the Express Dual 5000 (\$39,302) – were purchased from Bernhard and Co. as part of the club's capital expenditure budget.

But before Swartzel could get the grinders running, there were a few things to consider. Because the machines required 220 to 230 volts of electricity, he had to add a voltage device. Also, the two machines were put in a separate room to combat

noise and dust. The grinding room at Hasentree is 10 feet by 15.5 feet, equipped with an exhaust fan and a 10-foot roll-up door.

Partly because he had experience using Bernhard machines, Swartzel was happy to continue using the grinders. If your mowers cut well, don't change a thing, Swartzel says.

"They're so easy to use and set up, it's a no-brainer," he says. "I'd consider Bernhard the leaders in the industry. They've been doing this for many years. But it's really Ford versus Chevy. It's not a matter of right or wrong but a matter of what you feel comfortable with and what you've been successful with."

The rotary grinder is equipped with an automatic switch, but thanks to extensive lessons from Bernhard, Swartzel feels comfortable grinding manually. It's important to get a feel for the number of passes and the speed and pressure required for the proper sharpness, he says. Automatic programs can come in handy if one has been working



The grinding process looks simple, but if you're not doing it right, you'll see a dramatic effect on the golf course, says Jim Swartzel, equipment manager at Hasentree Golf Club. Photos: Bernhard and Co.

through sand. With three degrees – light, medium and heavy – and three reel sizes to choose from, the Anglemaster and the Express Dual are equipped to handle difficult jobs.

“The machines are under a lot of stress,” Swartzel says. “You’ve got three different motors running at the same time in different directions. I put these things under a lot of pressure and literally have them running eight hours a day. No trouble. They keep on going.”

Swartzel and his coworkers typically grind twice a week. There are about 20 units at Hasentree, including two greensmowers, and their reels are ground weekly. The other units’ reels are sharpened as needed, about every two to three weeks.

Echoing Steven Tucker’s column about grinding techniques (“Setting the cutting unit,” page 18, July ’08, GCI), it’s important to have the same person sharpening all the equipment at one golf course, Swartzel says.

“Unless you’re both really consistent, it’s best to have one guy doing most of the grinding,” he says. “Otherwise, turf can look shaggy.”

Still, Swartzel is teaching his assistant, Brandon Reams, the ins and outs of grinding to perfection – just in case.

“The grinding process looks simple, but if you’re not doing it right, you’ll see a dramatic effect on the golf course,” he says.

Here are some of his training tips:

- Look at the wear pattern. It’ll change how you grind next time.

- Reel speed is another crucial consideration. It’s essential to grind as slowly as possible; grind too quickly, and the reel blade will bounce, causing the stone to miss and skip the blade.

- A lack of pressure can diminish the relief on the blade. If you’re not aggressive enough, you’ll sharpen only the tips.

“Sixty percent of my job is keeping mowers sharp,” he says. “I can do a greensmower in

about 15 minutes. I break it down, grind it, then it’s ready to go.”

Swartzel spends a bit more time on larger machines, about 20 to 30 minutes per reel or up to three hours for a five-reel mower.

“I always have four heads at the shop I can work on,” he says. “It gives us a little extra time and flexibility. That was just one of the ways I put together our equipment package to give us a little more versatility.”

It’s a philosophy Swartzel extends to his career: Be knowledgeable and versatile. He’s the president of an equipment association in the Carolinas and is also a member of the International Golf Course Equipment Managers Association.

“I simply do what’s supposed to be done,” he says. “The results are there. If you have a busy morning, it means something went wrong. I like to roll the equipment out the door and get everybody going, first thing.” GCI

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