

BY JOHN WALSH

It's in their hands

The maintenance staff at Great River Golf Club meets golfer expectations one piece of handheld equipment at a time

"You get what you pay for" is an all too familiar saying, especially in the golf world. Golfers at Great River Golf Club in Milford, Conn., can attest to that. According to golf course superintendent Sean Flynn, the semiprivate club, which opened in 2000, charges more per round than all but about two daily-fee courses in the state. Golfers' high expectations go hand in hand with green fees, and because of that, the detail work done on Great River's course using handheld equipment is important to meet them.

"When members come to play here, they expect perfect conditions," Flynn says.

Flynn, who has been a superintendent for five years and at Great River that entire time, works with a \$980,000 maintenance budget, which has remained relatively flat for the past eight years. The capital expenditure budget is as needed, but the club is averaging \$30,000 annually on golf course projects. Equipment purchases, which have been tied in with the operating budget, average about \$70,000 annually.

On a scale of one to 10, Flynn, who works with a staff of 18 to 20 in season and six during the winter, considers handheld equipment a 10 regarding its importance to maintain the course, which features tree-lined fairways on the front nine and a links style with water on all holes on the back nine. His fleet of handheld equipment, which he added to once he arrived at Great River, includes:

- RedMax backpack blowers
- A Stihl handheld blower
- Stihl backpack blowers
- RedMax string trimmers
- Echo string trimmers
- A RedMax reciprocating edger
- A RedMax power broom
- An Echo extended-reach hedge trimmer
- A RedMax hedge trimmer
- A Stihl extended-reach pole chain saw

- A Stihl 036 chain saw
- A Stihl 029 chain saw
- A small RedMax chain saw
- HoverMowers
- Lawn-Boy push mowers

On the Tommy Fazio-designed course, which is ranked No. 5 in the state by Golf Digest, the staff uses HoverMowers to cut grass around the 101 bunkers, string trimmers to edge them and backpack blowers to clean them out – all done once a week. When mowing greens, tees, collars and approaches, the staff takes blowers with them each time they go out. They also edge along cart-path curbing once a week.

"It's required to bring a blower on just about every task, even mowing greens," Flynn says.

The breakdown of man-hours needed for each task using the handheld pieces of equipment is:

- Blowing debris on greens, tees, approaches – five minutes per area daily
- HoverMowers – five operators, eight hours weekly
- Bunker edging – two operators, eight hours weekly
- Blowing debris in bunkers – two operators, three hours weekly
- Cart path edging – four operators, four hours weekly
- Blowing cart paths – four operators, four hours weekly
- Clubhouse grounds – three operators, four hours weekly
- Miscellaneous string trimming – two operators, six hours weekly
- Hedge trimming shrubs – four hours monthly
- Hedge trimming phragmites – 160 hours annually
- Chain saws – 80 to 100 hours annually.

Fortunately, Flynn doesn't

have to abide by any noise ordinances.

Sometimes Flynn buys new replacement handheld equipment; other times it's repaired.

"Our equipment manager will typically give me the repair scenario, and I will decide at that time," he says. "The rule of thumb is if the repair is more than half of the replacement cost, we'll just purchase a new one. The age of the piece of equipment also will determine how much we're willing to spend on repair."

Flynn spends \$3,000 to \$5,000 annually for handheld equipment, which is a line item in the operating budget. He uses certain brands and models (listed previously) because of ease of use, comfort and durability. On average the equipment lasts four to seven years:

- String trimmers – two to four years
- Backpack blowers – four to seven years
- Chain saws – five to 10 years
- HoverMowers – four to seven years
- Hedge trimmers – four to seven years.

Before making a purchase, Flynn gathers the input from everyone on the staff, including the equipment tech, who must work on the equipment and have the ability to get parts quickly, and the operators, who must be comfortable with the piece of equipment in their hands.

"If they're not happy with a piece of equipment, or frustrated with it, it will reflect the quality of their work," he says.

Several factors go into Flynn's purchases.



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"For us, it is hardly ever about price," he says. "You get what you pay for. If operators continually return to the maintenance facility with a piece of equipment that's not functioning correctly, that wastes a lot of time. Then it must be fixed, and two people's time is wasted. If you choose to buy a piece of equipment for a considerable savings, chances are you'll spend that much money in the future paying for lost labor, quality of work or time and parts to repair."

Flynn buys the majority of the handheld equipment from Jacobsen distributor Steven Willand.

"Our equipment technician, Malcolm, has a great relationship with their service department," he says. "In the five years I've been at Great River, there hasn't been one issue they've not been able to help us with. Having a strong sales rep and dealer support is just one more tool in the shed."

"We are only as strong as the weakest link," he adds. "Having all of the tools to get the job done efficiently and effectively makes things so much easier in the long run." GCI

At Great River Golf Club in Milford, Conn., the rule of thumb regarding handheld equipment is if the repair is more than half of the replacement cost, the staff will purchase new equipment.



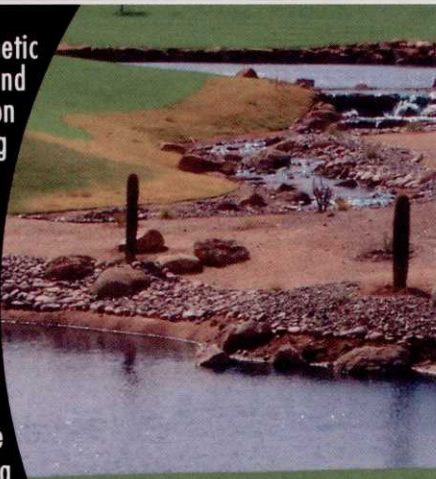
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BY MARISA PALMIERI

Handheld homework

Circling Raven Golf Club's equipment manager evaluates handheld equipment

With a background that includes four years working for an equipment dealership, Darak Bigler, equipment manager at Circling Raven Golf Club in Worley Idaho, supports golf course superintendent Brian Woster in conducting a lot of research before making any purchasing decisions on handheld products.

"At most courses, the superintendent has the final say, but most superintendents will leave it up to the equipment manager to do research and give them a couple of options," Bigler says.

Bigler, who has been at Circling Raven for seven years (he was on staff for the grow-in before the course opened in 2003), may be in the market soon for an entire fleet of handheld equipment.

Aside from phasing out several John Deere string trimmers that came with an initial equipment package, Bigler hasn't had to replace one piece of handheld equipment yet. And he's only had to rebuild two – one backpack blower and one string trimmer. Sooner or later, though, he knows the time will come when repair costs offset replacement costs, and he'll be in the market for a new fleet.

His ongoing research includes field testing equipment, shopping around equipment and parts prices, and interacting with manufacturers to learn about new technology.

Bigler and his full-time, year-round assistant do most of the handheld equipment testing themselves. They'll attend dealers' open houses or request demo products, which they put to use in actual conditions on Circling Raven's 18 holes.

"When it comes to handheld equipment, I definitely like to run it and examine everything," Bigler says. "There's a lot involved – horsepower, weight, operator comfort. There's a fine line between equipment that's a bit cheaper, but not durable enough."

When Bigler requests demo equipment, he'll have the maintenance crew test the pieces and ask them if they like it or not.

Circling Raven currently operates a mix of

product lines, including a Tanaka walk-behind edger and several backpack blowers; several RedMax backpack blowers, string trimmers and reciprocators; two Husqvarna chain saws; two Stihl pole pruners; and five Allen hover mowers.

"When they bring a piece of equipment in, we'll ask, 'Is there anything you don't like about it?'" Bigler says.

Because Bigler doesn't operate with a throw-away mentality – he rebuilds equipment whenever possible – parts prices weigh heavily on his decision.

"I'll always shop around – it doesn't matter if it's equipment or nuts and bolts," he says, noting he values dealer support but knows he often can get a better rate by buying direct from the manufacturer or through a niche distributor.

For example, Bigler prefers to buy bearings

from a bearing house rather than a dealership.

There's no set rule for how Bigler makes repair-or-replace decisions. He considers each piece on a case-by-case basis. For example, rebuilding the backpack blower and string trimmer cost about \$100 in parts and two man-hours each. That's not bad for equipment that costs \$300 to \$400 to replace, he says.

"When you tear down a piece of equipment, you have to figure out if it's going to be worth your time in labor and parts to rebuild it," he says. "If it's \$200 in parts and four to five hours of labor, is that justifiable? It depends on the workload in the shop."

During the past year, a new "tag-in/tag-out" policy has lessened the amount Bigler spends to repair equipment by an estimated \$2,000.

The course has a sectional maintenance program, where each crew member is designated



Darak Bigler

Assigning numbers to all pieces of equipment and requiring crew members to sign them out has reduced replacement costs due to damage by about \$2,000.

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two holes to take care of from tee to green with the exception of some basic tasks that take place first thing in the morning, like greens and fairway mowing, bunker raking and cup cutting. Because of this arrangement, most of the handheld equipment is assigned to the crew members, but some pieces are shared.

If equipment damage is a result of negligence, employees pay half the cost of parts. Before creating a sign-out program for equipment, employees who didn't want to be responsible for damage would try to sneak items back into the shop without reporting them. They can't do that now. Every piece of shared equipment has a number that corresponds to a tag, which hangs on a board in the shop. When an employee signs out a piece of equipment, that item's number is moved to his name on the board.

"When they bring it back in, we physically look at the equipment and make sure no damage has been done, so we know it's ready to go for

the next day," Bigler says, noting that no damage has been attributed to negligence – which he defines as being careless and creating an unsafe environment – since instituting the program.

"The 'tag-in/tag-out' system has helped out quite a bit," he says.

But there's a downside: It's created more work for the managers, including Bigler, his assistant, the superintendent and his two assistants.

"One person has to be free to check everything in and out," he says. "You have to put effort into it to make it work."

The final component of Bigler's handheld homework entails talking with manufacturers to find out what new products and features they'll be releasing. He visits their trade show booths at the Golf Industry Show each year.

"I'm fortunate enough to go to the national show every year," he says. "I always talk to the manufacturers, see what's new and what they're doing to better their products." GCI



Darak Bigler

A sign-out process for equipment prevents Circling Raven's crew members from trying to sneak damaged equipment back into the shop.



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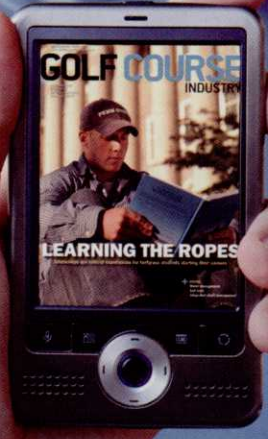
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