

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.



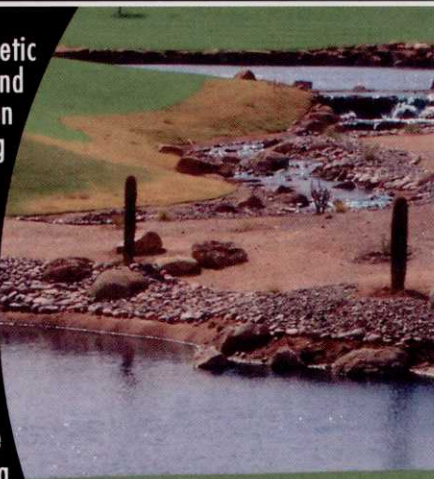
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