

Keeping up with grinding is necessary but time-consuming – does spin grinding or backlapping save more time?

Back to the grind

Maintaining your mowing equipment is essential to the health of the turf and to the conditioning of your course. For many clubs, it's a full-time job for an equipment manager or superintendent and his crew to keep their mowers sharp. We asked a handful of those in the industry what techniques they use and why. Most prefer spin grinding since it is more time-efficient and accurate than backlapping.

ALL AGREE, GETTING TO THE GRIND, IS A FULL-TIME JOB.

Seven equipment pros share their techniques and philosophies behind their grinding regimen.

Dennis Blackwell
Equipment manager
Martindale Country Club
Auburn, Maine

“I don’t do backlapping. I used to do it, but now I feel it’s not the best solution unless it’s an emergency. My old superintendent liked backlapping, but the new superintendent doesn’t. Grinding is all in the angles. If you do grinding on the reel, it puts a virtual relief onto it versus backlapping where you are making it a flat surface hitting the bed knife with those angles when they start wearing. That’s the theory. It makes sense. Based on what we’ve seen now, the way it cuts the turf... it just seems like the best way. You see, you are not getting the right contact on the bed knife. What we would do before is put more angle on the bed knife, but we learned that’s not the way to go as you end up wearing them prematurely. With our Bernhard grinder, it is so easy to set it up. It only takes five minutes to do it the right way. It’s sometimes a pain taking off the reels versus just putting it up in the air for backlapping. But,

with grinding I know they are nice and sharp and ready to go. We grind our greens mowers and touch them up every few weeks.”

David Blowers
Equipment manager
East Lake Golf Club
Atlanta, Ga.

“At East Lake Golf Club, we run a zero contact program using a pair of products from Bernhard. We sharpen as required. When the unit comes in from the field it is checked every day. When the crew is done using it, we check it. If it doesn’t cut a single piece of paper cleanly and satisfactorily, we sharpen the reel and then reassemble it. We strive for that clean cut. If it doesn’t cut to our satisfaction, we then put it on the grinder and grind for a fresh edge. The key to maintaining a sharp edge is maintenance. If you maintain constant, vigilant adjustment in the repair process that cutting edge goes a lot farther in between sharpening requirements. If you let it go to point it doesn’t cut to your satisfaction, you are no longer in maintenance mode, but

in repair mode. There are no short cuts, the key is diligence. We make the time and set the priorities. I do not believe in backlapping. I’ve been in the golf business for 30 years both a mechanic on a golf course and a service manager. I’ve seen all programs. Backlapping is certainly a tool somebody has to use, but it’s more for someone working by himself with a limited number of mowers. You can’t control or modify the angles with backlapping.”

Mike Koopman
Equipment manager
The Old Collier Golf Club
Naples, Fla.

“I’ve been spin grinding for 18 years. That seems to fit my schedule the way I like to keep things the best. We do not backlap at all. The one thing we do, every time a machine is used, it gets cleaned, brought in the shop, checked and adjusted. If it cuts paper we will use it the next day. If not, we will grind it. That’s the routine we do. Every time it’s used it gets checked. Some places mow two or three times and check it, but

I'm a firm believer if you used it, you need to bring it back in and check the height and the cut on it and have it ready for the next day. We check our greens mower every day. I like the ease of setting units up in the grinder we have. We have the Express Dual Reel Grinder and we have the Anglemaster bed knife grinder from Bernhard. You can set them up, grind them, and you are in and out in three minutes. One man can grind two or three sets of reels before lunch. I backlapped years ago before I had spin grinders. When I went to spin grinders it was a night and day difference. Backlapping is a thing of the past because I can almost take the units off and grind them as fast as I could backlap and not have the mess."

Andy Caddell

Director of golf course maintenance
Pinehurst Resort and Country Club
Village of Pinehurst, N.C.

"We do 90 percent grinding. We still do some lapping on the larger fairway and rough units. But on tee mowers and green mowers, we only grind. The grinding advantage is speed. We have close to 400 reels here. We have eight golf courses. Grinding units are easy to set up. Typically, we start the latter part of March into May, topdressing every two weeks with light topdressing, so we are mowing in sand 50 percent of the time during the summer. Our greens mowers will typically grind once to twice per week, sometimes more, depending on how heavy the sand is going down or whether we are aerifying. But, once per week is the norm. We still do a little backlapping and relief on our fairway units, but it's so much easier, it's so much easier on the smaller units, to just snatch the reel off, stick them and spin them and put them back on. For the bigger fairway units, it's harder to get the reels off and get it set up and done in a hurry, so we will backlap in between grinds. We grind our fairway units about four times per year and do regular maintenance on all our equipment. Every greens mower that goes out, we will put them up on the lift, check them, set them, reset height every day and determine from that whether they need to be ground or not. Usually first mowing after sand they will be ground. I have two divisions of my shop – six guys that do nothing but reels all day. From the middle of April until October, our grinders are running all day long, every day. We have three sets of grinders at the main shop and another set at each of my satellite shops; we have four total shops."

Todd Bartos

Head mechanic
Canterbury Golf Club
Beachwood, Ohio

"They topdress a lot, which tears the mowers up. So, I backlap the greens mowers to keep them cutting until they pick up all the sand. I then put a fresh set of reels on that are already ground, and then I will regrind the knife. It's a full-time job for me just to keep the mowers sharp. I'm always backlapping or grinding. If they cut two days in a row, the mowers would be completely dull, so I backlap. I could grind every day. For the fairway units, I put relief in them. We put relief in the greens mowers this year, too, and



Sand and heavy topdressing eats through blades – regular maintenance is the only way to always have a healthy cut.

it helped a lot. It didn't take the front of the knife off and it gave the sand a place to go. I spin them, release them, and then put them back together. I don't get that washboard effect and they cut so much nicer. I spin grind the mowers, then put in a relief grinder and then put a little relief in each spiral reel, so the front edge is touching the knife and not the whole blade. In the summer, I'm always doing something with the mowers."

Shahid Bhatti

Equipment manager,
Congressional Country Club
Bethesda, Md.

"I do a little bit of all methods. I grind when I need to and I lap when I need to. If it just needs a little touch up, I'll lap it. But if it's in bad shape, I'll grind them. I use the Bernhard Dual Express to grind. We topdress our greens and this eats up the mowers, so it is time to grind. When it gets to the point, it gets worn and the reel is rounded, it's time to grind. If there is only a little light sand, I'll lap it. We do a lot of grinding. I'll grind my greens mowers five to six times per year. The fairway mowers I do twice per year. When we

open in the spring, we start with the sharpest mowers we can have. I don't angle grind. I flat grind. It takes less time and it takes less meat off the reels. You don't want to take a lot of your reels. You're putting your angle on the bed knife instead. When you relief them, you relief your bed knife a little more than you would normally. I grind 12 greens mowers in a day. Normally, we don't tear them all up at one time; rather, three to four at a time. If they are not cutting 100 percent, I'll backlap. I check my mowers every day. For every mower that goes out, I check the cut, the height, and the machine for leaks to make sure it's ready to go for the next morning."

James Cleaver

Equipment manager
Roaring Fork Club
Basalt, Colo.

"Our sharpening procedure is a war between cut quality and its link to disease resistance in relation to the benefits of top dressing and its effects on soil profile and overall plant health. My job is to inform the superintendent what the equipment can and cannot do, and to provide machinery that is sharp and accurate on a daily basis and under different types of conditions. Last season, we mowed greens daily with Jacobsen Eclipse 22-inch electric greens mowers. We have six of these machines, and one is dedicated to green No. 6 where we have some air flow problems and disease problems. That one was sharpened once per week. The three that mow the rest of the course were sharpened every third or fourth day. So one mower would mow 18-24 greens then be completely dismantled, the bedknife sharpened or a new one installed, and the reel sharpened. We do not backlap. When sand is introduced we will sharpen each day until we feel we're out of it.

"The two fairway units (with one set of extra reels) came in at least once a week for adjustment, and were sharpened every two weeks last season. The walking tee, approach and specialty mowers are all checked by operators and sharpened or adjusted as needed. I run the course each day with a prism and sometimes a handheld microscope to look at height and quality of cut." **GCI**

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ONLINE EXTRA

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