



BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

Keeping a Mow Profile

Nobody has yet invented a fairway mower that combines the ultimate in production and quality of cut — but manufacturers are trying

Insistent golfers have always judged courses by the state of their greens. If a course's greens were in bad shape, so was the club.

Blame it on the Augusta Syndrome and higher green fees, but more golfers today are taking their demands a step further — to the fairways. It's getting where many golfers won't tolerate poorly conditioned fairways, says Brad Hamilton, marketing manager of the Reelmaster product line for Bloomington, Minn.-based Toro Co. "Nobody can afford to have cruddy greens, but fairways are becoming a key area of differentiation between golf courses," Hamilton says.

Many courses sport carpet-like fairways. In fact, many superintendents are under pressure to cut fairways even shorter to appease members' requests to have the tightest and fastest-playing golf courses around. Hence, fairway mower manu-

facturers are in demand to supply superintendents with equipment capable to help them do their jobs.

"Superintendents are looking for a higher quality of cut," says Chuck Greif, manager of worldwide market and development for John Deere's Golf and Turf Division in Raleigh, N.C. "They want a cut as crisp and clean as on greens and tees."

Can't have it all

"Superintendents want a machine that does a lot of work in a short time," says Ralph Sylvester, senior manager of education development for Textron Golf, Turf & Specialty Products in Racine, Wis.

While today's technology is light years ahead from where it was 20 years ago, it's still difficult for manufacturers to provide superintendents with mowers that increase production without sacrificing quality of cut. "Production is always an issue,

Blame it on the Augusta Syndrome, but more golfers are demanding fantastic fairways.

but it's Catch-22," Hamilton says.

Since most superintendents value quality of cut more than any other factor, manufacturers are supplying them with mowers equipped with smaller cutting units for better quality.

"Most courses are getting away from 30-inch heads," Greif says. "Today, we have fairway mowers that are converting over to 22-inch heads."

Hamilton explains that 22-inch heads provide a closer and tighter cut than 30-inch heads because smaller heads follow the ground's contour more uniformly. But a gang of 22-inch heads doesn't produce like a gang of 30-inch heads.

"Superintendents have to live with today's technology," Hamilton says, noting they can't have the best in production and quality of cut. "But someday, Toro or another company will have a breakthrough idea so there isn't this tradeoff."

Striping and burning are also synonymous with quality of cut. But if a superintendent lowers a mower's height of cut on his course's fairways, he'll sacrifice aesthetics. Hamilton explains that longer and shaggier grass enhances striping.

Let there be light

Lightweight fairway mowers promote better grass-growing conditions because they're gentle on turf. Not surprisingly, weight continues to be an issue with the machines. Greif says there are two sub-topics related to the weight issue: footprints and maintaining good pressure of mowing heads on grass.

Superintendents want lighter mowers that minimize footprints and compaction, Sylvester says. However, the mowers can't be so light as to lessen the pressure of mowing on the grass, which could affect quality of cut, Greif notes.

"Most fairway mowers have either a hydraulic pressure system or mounted springs to hold heads toward the ground," Greif says. "You want a head that gets down there and does a quality job."

Greif suggests that superintendents use

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mowers that cause no more than 10 psi of pressure to combat footprints.

Sylvester says fairway mowers could be built even lighter if manufacturers use different metals, such as aluminum.

The clumps

Clipping eradication is another issue:

Golfers don't like to see clumps of clippings scattered on golf courses, even if they don't affect playability.

"This has been a big deal in the last three years, and it's getting hotter," Hamilton. "In a perfect world, a superintendent would be able to send his crew out in the morning to cut a dewy fairway, and he wouldn't see a clipping when his crew

was done. As a manufacturer, we're trying to get superintendents close to that point."

Toro and other manufacturers have concentrated on better roller designs so clippings don't accumulate and cluster on cutting units. Rotating brushes with vacuums on rear rollers of cutting units also help disperse clippings.

"With power brushes on the back, you can eliminate clumping, which can eliminate an operation such as blowing off fairways," Greif adds.

Nice ride

While experts say that quality of cut is the top issue, they agree that ergonomics and drive are also vital factors.

"Riding a fairway mower can be monotonous," Greif says. "We need to make a mower more comfortable and the operator station more friendly."

Sylvester and Greif say mower features such as tilt steering, premium suspension seats with lumbar supports and ergonomically located controls help reduce an operator's fatigue. "We need to provide employees with better tools to do their jobs so they're not worn out when they go home at the end of the day," Robson says.

Strange as it sounds, operator-friendly fairway mowers can help retain employers in a tight labor market. A course with newer and more modern equipment will retain more employees than a course with broken-down equipment, Robson says.

Hamilton points out that rider-friendly mowers are vital for many immigrant workers, especially Hispanics and Haitians who are usually shorter than Americans.

Environmental issues

Hamilton expects that most fairway mowers will someday be powered by alternative fuels because of more stringent emission standards on diesel fuel. "But I'm not sure how that will manifest in terms of new products," he says.

In a year, Sylvester expects Textron's fairway mowers to use only biodegradable oil.

Of course, manufacturers will continue their efforts to make mowers that are more mechanic friendly. They'll also strive to make mowers as quiet as hummingbirds. ■

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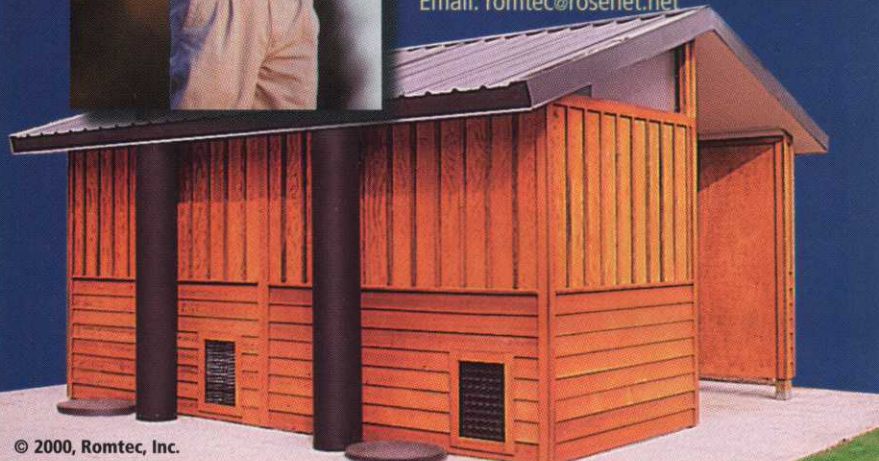
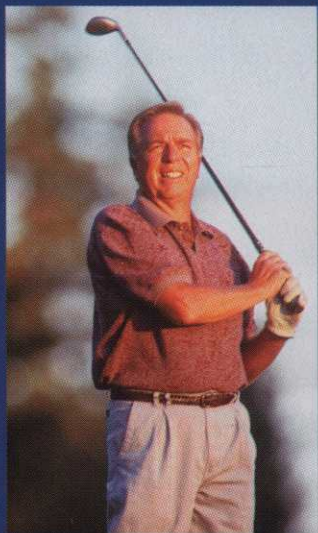
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