

A Quiet Walk

SHHHH!

NOT SURPRISINGLY,

SUPERINTENDENTS DESIRE

WALKING GREENS MOWERS

THAT SPORT THE SOUND OF SILENCE



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN DEERE

BY PETER BLAIS

Superintendents are looking to buy walking greens mowers that are quieter, smoother cutting and well-serviced, according to manufacturers and course managers.

The desire for more quiet-running machines is a response to the growing number of noise ordinances adopted in many parts of the country, particularly in the South and West, where residential developments often surround golf courses. Although they haven't hit the market, some manufacturers are researching walk-behind electric greens mowers that would complement riding electrics, like Jacobsen's E-Plex.

"We have electric riding greens mowers and

electric sand rakes, so we're constantly looking at the technology in the electric area," says Ralph Nicotera, Jacobsen's vice president of marketing and product management. "But we won't introduce an electric walking mower this year."

Experts say the "7 a.m. noise ordinance" is the major reason some manufacturers are studying the electric walk-behind technology. Palm Beach County in Florida has a 7 a.m. noise ordinance, and residents at some housing developments there have reportedly turned their own maintenance staffs in for noise violations.

John Deere recently introduced three walk-behind greens mowers designed to run quieter — 18-, 22- and 26-inch models — called the

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180-B, 220-B and 260-B. The 18- and 26-inch models are new, says Chuck Greif, Deere's head of worldwide market development. The 22-inch is an upgrade from an older version and replaces the 220-A.

"The noise has been reduced by changing to a larger muffler; using a

smaller pitch chain and new chain adjustments on the sides of the unit to reduce chain noise; and getting rid of the metal side covers and replacing them with a composite that minimizes noise," Greif explains. "We also reduced some parts on the machine by replacing the gear reduction into the gear box with a direct drive into the gear box through the engine."

The changes are in response to superintendent reactions to prototypes displayed during John Deere's Golf & Turf Feedback Program at the company's Moline, Ill., facility, Greif says. Another design change was in response to a reported tendency on the part of operators to rest their hands on the mower handlebar, causing the front of the mower to lift off the ground slightly and change the height of cut.

"We've changed the pivot point on the handle bar," Greif said. "Now the operator has to physically push down on the handle bar to get the front part of the mower to come up."

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THE "7 A.M. NOISE ORDINANCE" IS THE MAJOR REASON SOME MANUFACTURERS ARE STUDYING THE ELECTRIC WALK- BEHIND TECHNOLOGY.

Another popular greens mower introduced in the past year is The Toro Co.'s Flex 2100. Craig Currier, superintendent in charge of the five courses at Bethpage State Park, which hosts the U.S. Open on its Black Course in June, ordered nine new "Flex 21s" in anticipation of the event.

"The head moves with the contour off the ground and reduces scalping," Currier says. "When you cut low and get close to the ridges on the edge of the green, many typical fixed-head greens mowers leave marks on mounds and slopes. The Flex 2100 is like those floating-head shavers. It moves side to side or back to front. It lets you cut down to .065 inches or even a little lower. You've got a lot of guys cutting down to .080 to .090 inches on a daily basis. It's a little crazy, but this helps."

Kevin Ross, superintendent at the Country Club of the Rockies in Edwards,

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Colo., used his course as a test site for the Flex 21. Last June, he ordered 10 of the machines to groom his Penn A-4 bentgrass greens.

"The cutting head has some weight to it, which keeps it close to the ground," Ross says. "[Toro technicians] also kept the distance between the front and rear roller fairly short, which helps reduce scalping."

Jacobsen offers several walking greens mowers. The lightweight PGM, available in 19- and 22-inch widths, has an electronically balanced, 11-blade reel that delivers a tight .205-inch clip frequency and a choice of three bedknives for cutting down to .078 of an inch. The PGM can be equipped with Jacobsen's patented Turf Groomer turf conditioner to decrease thatch and increase green speeds. Jacobsen also offers the Greens King 500 Series walk-behind mowers, which come in 18-, 22- and 26-inch cutting widths and can be equipped with the Turf Groomer.

So how does a superintendent choose between these and other models?

"You talk to one guy and he likes Toro," says Darin Bavard, an agronomist with the USGA Green Section's Turfgrass Advisory Service in the Mid-Atlantic field office in West Chester, Pa. "The next guy likes Jacobsen and the next guy likes John Deere. It's a matter of what they try out and feel comfortable with. I don't see where there is that much difference between all of them. If properly adjusted, maintained and operated, they all do a good job."

Tim Hiers, superintendent at Old Collier GC in Naples, Fla., agrees there's little difference in product quality, but instead stresses the importance of company service.

"You want to go with the vendor who gives the best service," Hiers says. "Dependability and the ability to respond are important. That means the distributor is integral in your decision-making. It's hard to explain to golfers that the reason the greens aren't right is because you're waiting for a part. That doesn't cut it."

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Familiarity is also important, Hiers stresses. "If you have an outstanding mechanic and he's familiar with a particular brand, you might go with that brand to overcome the lack of service," he adds.

Superintendents should also listen to what their peers are saying about the

brands. Of course, they need to consider their individual needs. "You buy the mower that does the best job on your greens, that your people can handle the best, and that you can keep in the best operating condition," Hiers adds. ■

Blais is a free-lance writer from North Yarmouth, Maine.



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Double-cutting Greens Could Add Up to Double Trouble

By Peter Blais

The week of June 10 through June 16 will be quite a test for the greens on the Black Course at Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, N.Y., site of this year's U.S. Open. Not only will superintendent Craig Currier and his crew be double-cutting the greens at 90-degree angles, they'll be cutting them at least twice a day during the tournament and keeping the speeds at a minimum of 12 on the Stimpmeter.

"We'll cut as often as we have to in order to get there," Currier says. "We could be cutting four times a day."

This might be extreme and, certainly, out of the ordinary, but it's America's championship, after all. However, in their quest for ever-faster green speeds to please members, owners and customers, superintendents are walking an ever-narrowing edge between fast greens and healthy turf.

"We are seeing more pressure for green speed in general," says Darin Bavard, an agronomist for the USGA Green Section's Turfgrass Advisory Service in West Chester, Pa. "It stems from a lot of things. Golfers watching the Masters and PGA Tour on television week after week apply the main pressure. Fast greens are a nice calling card for a club."

Double-cutting, which is usually done during tournaments and special events, is one way to add speed and smoothness to a green, Bavard says. The obvious problems are that it puts additional stress on the grass and requires more labor to complete.

The greatest stress is placed on the turf during the warmest summer months, particularly on cool-season grasses.

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