

Tips

Cutting-Unit Maintenance

The best tip we can offer has nothing to do with any gears or gadgets. It has everything to do with good communication

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

We want to provide you with tips for cutting-unit maintenance from the golf course technician's point of view. After talking with a few technicians, however, we learned that the best tip has nothing to do with the tools or techniques for improving cutting-unit maintenance.

For a golf course's green department to function soundly, the superintendent and his crew of equipment operators must work in tandem with the course's technician. Too often, the two sides aren't in sync.

"A good working relationship between the green department and a technician is beneficial for both parties," says Brandon Gayle, technician at Cheviot Hills GC in Raleigh, N.C.

Technicians say the key to working together is not just strong communication with a course's superintendent and equipment operators. It's also about respect for each other's roles.

This philosophy pertains to topdressing, which can have a tremendous impact on cutting-unit maintenance. Gayle says the superintendent at Cheviot Hills, Ray Autry, informs him in advance when he and his crew will topdress greens. Because Gayle knows in advance, he has time to install an older set of lapped reels on the greens mowers. The mowers with the older reels are used to cut the greens for a few days after the topdressing. When most of the sand is off the greens, Gayle places the newer reels, which he ground

while the older reels were being used, back on the mowers.

Craig Cassaday, technician at Merion GC in Ardmore, Pa., jokes that he and his peers view topdressing as evil.

When there's frequent topdressing applications, a technician is always grinding reels, Cassaday says. "It's a never-ending battle and leaves you little time to do other things, especially if you're a one-man show."

But with the proper communication and planning between the technician and crew, topdressing is not so bad, Cassaday adds. Merion superintendent Matt Shaffer doesn't topdress the greens regularly, but he gives Cassaday plenty of notice to prepare when he schedules the greens for topdressing.

"If I know we're going to go through a heavy topdressing, I'll open the reel to bedknife gap a little to allow sand to pass through," Cassaday says. "We're not going to get a great quality of cut with sand on the grass anyway. By opening the gap a little, the reels won't get damaged too badly."

After a few days and the topdressing had dissipated, Cassaday tightens the reel to bedknife gap on each greens mower.

Because he has a good relationship with operators, Gayle knows when there are problems with equipment. The operators inform Gayle when a mower is streaking or there's an odd sound coming from the cutting unit. Then Gayle can examine the problems and make repairs. "Operators must have good knowledge of how equipment works so

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they can relay information to us about what's going on," Gayle says.

While it sounds textbook-simple, this type of communication is not a given, Gayle and Cassaday say. Cassaday says some superintendents and equipment operators view technicians as ogres. Not surprisingly, they communicate poorly and don't respect each other.

Gayle says he once worked with a technician with a bad temper. If an operator reported he had accidentally damaged the cutting unit on a mower because he ran over a rock, the technician would yell at him.

"It got to the point where operators wouldn't tell him anything," Gayle says. "They were afraid to tell him things."

Gayle and Cassaday say they strive to be approachable and fair.

"I've never gone off on someone for damaging a piece of equipment," Cassaday says. "I don't want operators to be afraid to tell me of any problems."

Cassaday discovered that explaining to operators what he does has helped their relationship. "The better they know your job and how difficult it is, the more careful they'll be with equipment," he says.

Cassaday politely instructs operators to "stop, look and listen" while using equipment. He tells them to look for abnormalities in striping and any dark marks or streaks that might signify a cutting-unit problem. ■

