



Mechanically Inclined

Extending tool life

With a Little TLC, Tools Will Last Longer

BY CURT HARLER

Kick a tractor and break your foot. Take out your frustrations on a trimmer or blower, and it's the machine that finishes in second place.

On the golf course, motorized hand tools take almost as much abuse as a duffer's pitching wedge.

Extending tool life starts with basics like reading the owner's manual and doing a daily checkup to be sure bolts are tight and cutting surfaces are sharp. But a lot of the problems are people-based.

Malcolm Stieneker, warranty manager with RedMax in Norcross, Ga., recalls a period when there were serious problems with guards breaking off trimmers. He says RedMax begin investigating the matter and the workers using the trimmers.

"We found workers would get three or four feet from the truck and just toss the trimmers in," Stieneker says. "A 12-pound trimmer doesn't generate much force. Toss it once and it cracks. Toss it a second time, and it breaks."

As a result of that informal study, Stieneker's advice to superintendents is simple.

"Use a bit of TLC with equipment, and it will last a long time," he says. "Lay things on the ground or in the truck rather than tossing them." That will cut the number of broken shafts, guards and covers.

"The idea is to get the workers to take ownership of the equipment," notes Doug Cobb, instructional designer with Kawasaki in Irvine, Calif.

He suggests setting aside two hours on a Friday afternoon and having the equipment users do some light supervised maintenance: regapping plugs, sharpening blades and cleaning the machine.

"Teach the users how to listen to a machine — you can hear when something is wrong," Cobb says. "Then they can bring the unit into the shop before it fails," Cobb adds.

Kent Hall, product manager for power tools for Stihl in Virginia Beach, Va., says manufacturers always include a maintenance schedule in their manuals, and equipment owners need to follow recommendations in it. But the smart superintendent will go beyond the book and establish a formal maintenance procedure so workers can report problems to mechanics.

"Tag and communicate," Hall says. "That keeps a simple problem from becoming a major repair."

Build relationships

A lot of successful tool management is people-oriented.

"Get to know your dealer," Hall advises. "Develop a strong relationship with the parts and service department. Send a box of candy or a thank-you note now and then."

There are in-house relationships, too. "It is important to have regular sessions with the equipment operators and the people who do the maintenance," Hall says.

A good give-and-take session between mechanics and users will help both sides better understand how to

extend the life of tools. For example, having users do simple checks to be sure bolts are tight and in place and that air filter covers are on tight can go a long way.

Cobb recommends studying a machine's performance — the quality of the trim or the way it cuts a hedge or bush. "That's often the first warning that things are not right [if it's not trimming or cutting efficiently]," he says.

Field-user preventive maintenance can help the mechanics. While that owner's manual covers a lot of areas,

Tool Tips

- Read the owner's manual.
- Perform daily checkups.
- Treat your equipment with care.
- Perform regular maintenance.
- Develop a strong relationship with your dealer and service department.

talk to your local dealer about tips that deal with local conditions. If it's dusty, accelerate air-filter changes. In tough mowing conditions, pay more attention to blade sharpening.

"If all else fails, institute a 'you break it, you buy it' program," Stieneker says. "If a tool is broken deliberately or carelessly, the cost comes out of the worker's paycheck."

A last word of advice: If the motor does sputter, don't fling the machine into the nearest water hazard. Bring it into the shop for some TLC. ■

Harler is managing editor of Golfdom's TurfGrass Trends.