

# Clear-Cut Conclusion:

## Sharp reels are an essential component to assuring proper turf management

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ  
Managing Editor

**A**rmed with dull blades, the mower with the Mercedes-like price tag isn't worth much more than the clippings left in its wake. The freshly cut grass survives, but its striking luster quickly turns ashen; its uniformity becomes irregular. The damage is done, even if every other aspect of turf management is faultless.

Guilty is the simple reel or bedknife that wasn't half as sharp as will

be the tongue of the perceptive golfer.

As basic and essential as it may sound, blade sharpening — even in the complex and detail-oriented golf industry — can still be underemphasized or even overlooked. A survey performed by Bernhard and Co., a British manufacturer of reel grinders, indicates that, while superintendents are appreciative of sharp reels, only 18 percent of them associate the method of sharpening as a process specific to the health of their grass.

"A lot of superintendents, they look at their grass and just say, 'That doesn't look right,'" says Jay Rehr, the owner of Turf Equipment Consulting in Grovetown, Ga. "They don't know *why* it doesn't look right. They just know it doesn't look right."

Don't count Terry Bonar among the unenlightened. The superintendent at Canterbury Golf Club in Beachwood, Ohio, likens mowers with dull blades to "having a house without a roof."

"It's gotta be done," Bonar

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**The best-laid plans  
can turn to ruins  
if mower blades  
are less than  
sharp.**

MIKE KLEMM



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says. "And you gotta do it right."

Bernhard and Co. is one of more than a half-dozen blade sharpening companies that aims to ensure that the task is performed accurately.

"You need to regularly resharpen," owner and president Stephen Bernhard says. "And don't wait until the reel becomes so dull that the grass starts screaming at you, 'I'm being torn! I'm being damaged!' Sharpen it before it reaches that stage. This is simple, common sense, but people don't seem to realize it. They wait until things are showing signs of damage, and then they rectify it."

Bernhard analogizes the superintendent's mowing responsibilities to the relationship shared by a physician and patient.

"What's the very last thing that we do to our patients — to our turf — every day before we let the judges, or the golfers, loose on our turf? We cut it," he says. "So we better do that in the best possible way we can. Otherwise we're just presenting patients to our customers that are dying and are troubled and bleeding."

Often an accurate diagnosis depends on a thorough examination of the damaged turf, says Rehr, the former maintenance facility mechanic at Augusta National.

"The first thing we do is look at the grass because the grass will tell you a lot," he says. "You're going to drive up to it, get a feel for it from afar. You're going to walk it. You may even get down and look at it on your hands and knees. You're going to look at it from the 6-to-12 (clock) position, then the 3-to-9, then the 12-to-6, so you're going to get all the different looks at how that mower is doing."

A dull mower blade will tear away the tip of the grass, causing it to immediately bleed and eventually turn a brownish-gray.

"A trained eye can see a brownish cast looking out across the turf," Bonar says. "Maybe the members don't know, but a trained eye can see it. And it doesn't look good. It's not a clean cut."

At this point, Rehr says, it's important

## TIPS ON SHARPENING

Bernhard and Co., a reel grinder manufacturer based in Rugby, England, offers these technical tips to keep mower blades sharp:

- Grind groomers regularly for sharpness and uniformity to ensure the health of the crown and horizontal stolons.
- For the same reasons, sharpen verticut reels to reduce load and minimize mechanical damage to rhizomes and root hairs. The side edges of groomers and verticut blades should be dead square. That's where the cutting actually takes place.
- Consistency across the green is as important as consistency from green to green. Imagine a triplex greensmower with one set of rollers square, one egg-shaped, and one properly round. One unit would hop-hop-hop across the green, the middle one

would wobble-wobble-wobble and the third would roll-roll-roll.

■ Reface bed bars to align new bedknives properly. Truing up a bedbar can save half the life of a tournament bedknife.

■ Reconsider the timing of your reel sharpening. Sharpening reels just prior to high stress periods can reduce disease conditions.



STEPHEN BERNHARD

**Blades must be sharpened regularly for sharpness and uniformity to promote the health of turf.**

to take the mower into the shop and clean it so the machine and reel blades can be inspected in a variety of ways. "Does it look sharp, feel sharp and sound sharp?" he asks.

Exactly how sharp is sharp enough? If the answer is commensurate to the ever-falling cutting heights and the desire for increased green speed, there may never be such a thing as "too sharp."

"We're mowing at between a third and a quarter of the height of cut that we were at 15 years ago," Bernhard says. "We're now cutting grasses somewhere between 90 and 120 thou,' with 100 thou being a 10<sup>th</sup> of an inch."

Kim Stegh, Canterbury's horticulturist and designated blade sharpener, says green speed is a never-ending concern at Canterbury. "I'm always asking Terry what the greens are Stimping."

In turn, Bonar's crew opts to use its cutting equipment more often than many courses.

"We double-cut greens every day. So we cut them 14 times a week and 60

times a month," Bonar says.

Trying to increase green speed isn't the only obstacle that superintendents face in their quest for sharp blades and ideal cuts, according to Bernhard.

"We're using different fertilizer programs. We're using sand, I'm guessing, at six to 10 times the volume and frequency of distribution that we did 10 years ago. And we're using grass varieties that are dramatically different than those we used 10 or 15 years ago," he says.

As owner of a reel grinder company, Bernhard advocates spin grinding as opposed to the more traditional method of backlapping (or lapping). "It is a very, very controversial subject," he says.

Rehr corroborates, saying there are "five or six controversies out there" specific to blade sharpening.

"What I tell people is, 'You do what works for you.' A lot of guys in Florida, they strictly grind. There are golf courses in Ohio that strictly grind. And if you

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have the manpower and the budget and the equipment, that's fine," Rehr says. "But if you don't have some of those things or all of those things, you have to look at lapping. I'm not going to say it's quicker, because that's an old argument, too, but it's more efficient."

Canterbury has moved toward grinding. "Spin grinders are the way to go for us," Bonar says. "Some people don't like them, but we like them. The way we're doing it now is definitely more efficient."

As a testament to how delicate the issue is nationwide, Bonar is quick to note that he does not want to sound like he is "preaching" the benefits of grinding.

"One of the things we want to guard against is coming off as though we know it all," he says. "But we're passionate about what we do, and we think we're good at it. But everyone has their own way, and it's probably just as good for them. But we think our way is the best for us." ■

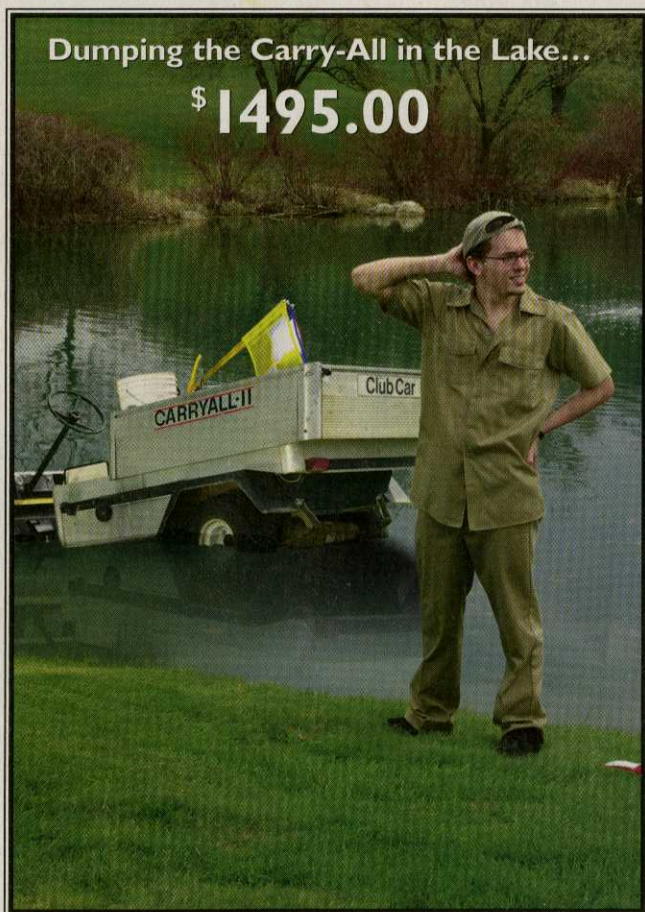
Superintendents face many mowing obstacles, including falling greens heights, increased sand usage and new fertilizers and grass varieties.



MIKE KLEMM

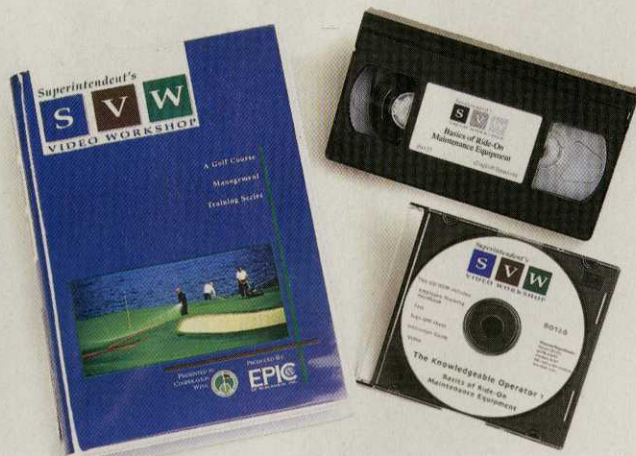
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