

Fine-Cut Fairways



PHOTOS BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.

Golfers' expectations for improved conditioning between tees and greens are forcing superintendents and mower companies to meet them

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Call it expectation creep. First, golfers watched professionals putting on the glass-like greens at Augusta and clamored for the same conditions. Now, they see fairways mowed lower and demand the same. Jeff LeFever, senior marketing manager of golf for The Toro Co., says superintendents can't escape the spiraling expectations game.

"The conditioning demands that used to exist only for the greens are now moving into the fairways," LeFever says. "Expectations continue to rise for all aspects of course maintenance, and it's really putting pressure on superintendents to meet them."

With the price of golf rising, players are more focused on overall course conditioning, which means more scrutiny of fairways, experts say. Golfers demand lower mowing heights to increase ball roll, which allows even high-handicap golfers to hit the ball farther.

But the heavy fairway-cutting units, which produced a high-quality cut with greens-style

reels, led to compaction and produced turf problems.

To meet those problems head on, mower companies produced lighter machines to meet changing superintendent needs. Golfers will never allow conditions to revert to where they were 10 years ago, says Dan Pierson, superintendent at Wilmington (Del.) Country Club.

"The appetite for better conditions never ends," Pierson says with a sigh. "If it's not one thing, it's another. It's just the next evolution of what's expected of superintendents."

How things have changed

Ralph Nicotera, vice president of sales for Jacobsen turf products, says the industry started a shift in fairway mowing practices in the late 1980s. Large, heavy machines, designed to mow fairways as quickly as possible, were in use before that time. But the heavier machines, though cutting with greens-style reels, exposed other issues in fairway maintenance.

"Superintendents were concerned about compaction on the fairways and the trend toward green-like conditions on fairways," Nicotera says. "Then they started coming to us and asking for lighter fairway mowers."

Not only did superintendents want lighter machines, they also asked for machines that could cut lower, LeFever says. Superintendents could get away with mowing fairways between 1 inch and 1.25 inches 10 years ago, but golfers won't accept that any longer, at least at the high-end clubs, LeFever says.

"We're at the point where golfers expect fairways to be mowed at .5 inches or lower," LeFever says. "Superintendents have to work much harder to keep fairways in perfect condition all the time."

Pierson says members at Wilmington expect him to keep the fairways between .4 and .45 inches.

"If we had cut them that low in the past, we would have had complaints from the high-handicappers who believed they needed longer grass to get good loft on the ball," Pierson says. "Now

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with better equipment and more influence by the low handicappers, we have no complaints."

But lower mowing heights have produced other problems for superintendents. Just like the greens, fairways mowed at lower heights demand more maintenance. Nicotera says superintendents started shifting some of the greens-style maintenance practices to the fairways in the mid-1980s.

"More superintendents than ever are aerating fairways more often and top-dressing to reduce compaction," Nicotera says. "Superintendents are being forced to focus as much attention on the agronomic conditions of their fairways as they do on their greens."

The shift toward lower fairway heights isn't happening everywhere, says Gregg Breningmeyer, director of sales and marketing for John Deere Golf & Turf One Source.

"The movement hasn't trickled down to the municipal courses and lower-end clubs because the expectations aren't nearly as high," Breningmeyer says. "If you're paying \$30 for a round of golf, you expect \$30 fairways. If you're paying \$120 for a round, you want \$120 fairways."

Mower companies adapt

Nicotera says Jacobsen redesigned its fairway units in the late 1990s. The machines are lighter with higher horsepower tractors and smaller reels, which allow superintendents to mow lower, similar to greens' heights. The smaller reels follow the contours in the fairways more closely and provide a finer finish.

"The heights of cut can now go down to between eleven-sixteenths of an inch and five-sixteenths of an inch," Nicotera says. "With the old machines, those heights would have been unheard of. Even our larger fairway units, the 3800s, can get down to three-eighths of an inch."

Reels have narrowed from 30-inch cutting-deck widths in the past with 7.5-inch diameter reels to 22-inch cutting-deck widths with 5-inch diameter reels, Nicotera says.

"We've essentially taken the greens reel



Despite new mower technology, Dan Pierson, superintendent at Wilmington (Del.) Country Club, says some superintendents are mowing fairways in the old style – up one side and down the other like a Zamboni – to create a split fairway effect like this one on No. 18 at Whistling Straits Golf Course in Sheboygan, Wis.

frames and added fairway steel stock to the blades," Nicotera says. "It's what our customers wanted."

Toro added front and rear rollers to its fairway units to improve fairway conditioning, LeFever says. The company will also add a groomer option in January.

"The lower heights of cut mean that superintendents need to pay more attention to after-cut care," LeFever says. "We want to give superintendents the amount of customization necessary to help them meet the new golfer needs."

Mike Koppen, group product manager for John Deere Co., says different regions of the country need different fairway mowers. Southern courses with coarser bermudagrass fairways need heavier-duty machines that hug the turf more closely. Machines designed for Northern golf courses don't take as much abuse from bentgrass fairways, so they can be lighter.

"We developed our Extra Strength and Precision (ESP) cutting units for Southern golf courses," Koppen says. "The ESP system makes the blades more durable and offers [fewer] chances for the reel-to-bed-knife adjustment to loosen, meaning the blades stay sharper longer. In the North,

you don't need that kind of technology because you're cutting bentgrasses, which are easier on the machines."

Superintendents also want mower companies to provide more comfort for operators, Koppen says. To that end, Deere has added floating seats that cradle the operators while they mow, even over bumpy terrain.

"Mowing undulating fairways can take a physical toll on the people using the machines," Koppen says. "When they get fatigued, they don't concentrate as well, leading to mistakes that damage the turf."

Nicotera says the new, lighter fairway units don't last nearly as long as the older models. He said the lighter mowers' average life is six years.

What the future holds

Pierson expects demands for perfect fairway conditions to grow as golfers visit courses and compare conditions.

"It's the same process we went through with greens," Pierson says. "As golfers play other courses, they'll come back to their home courses with new ideas about what the fairways should look like. We'll have to manage those expectations carefully." ■