

Made to Order

Custom solutions for utility vehicles pick up speed among manufacturers

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

You thought you could only customize the cars you drive to get to work. But now you can dress up the vehicles you drive on the golf course.

Utility vehicle manufacturers offer superintendents the chance to spiffy up their riding machines with extras. OK, we're not talking chrome wheels or fuel injection. We are talking cargo boxes, hose reels, sprayers and other useful additions to help superintendents perform their jobs more easily.

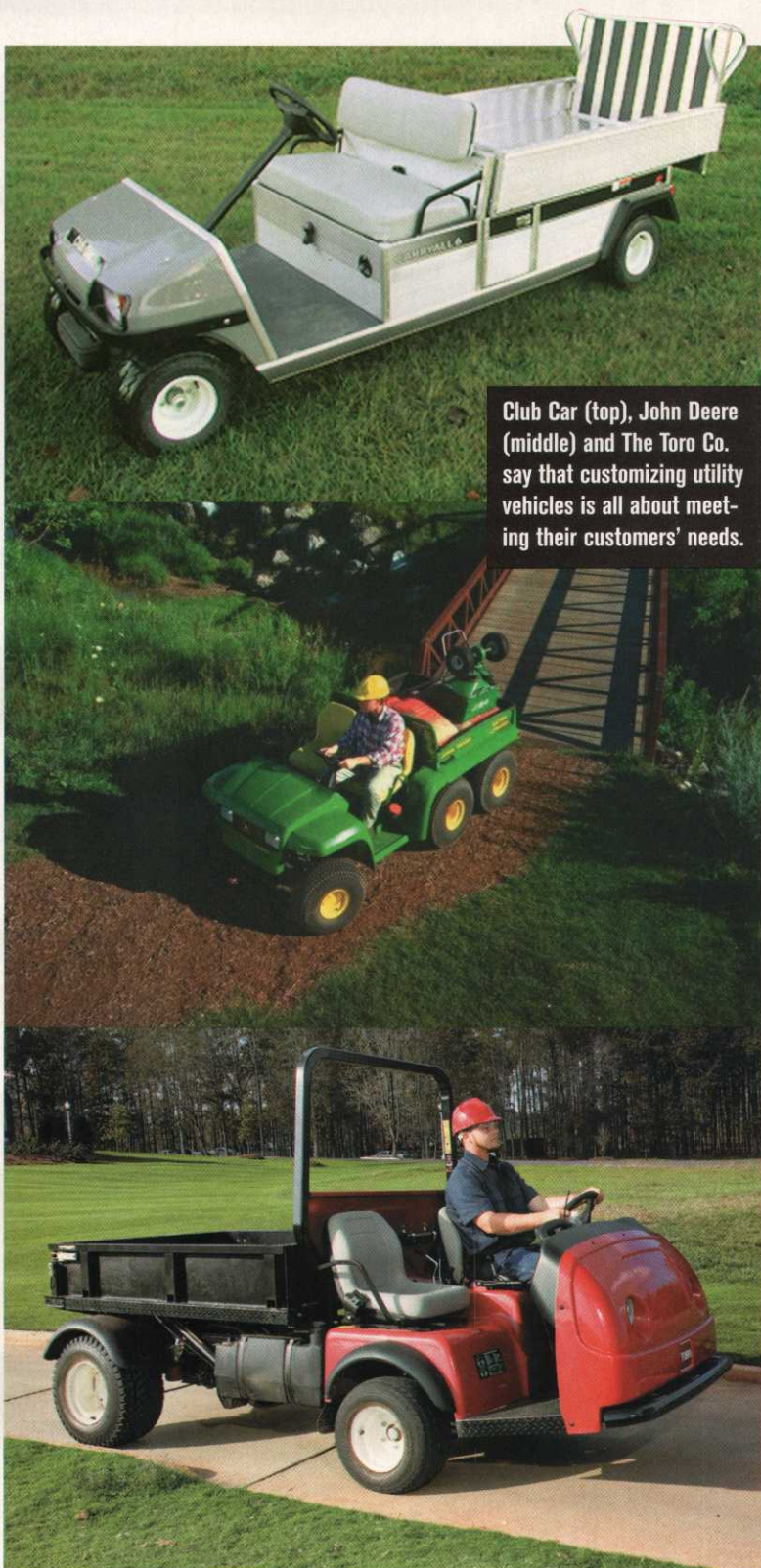
Augusta, Ga.-based Club Car began its custom solutions business in the mid-1990s, but not in the golf industry. Club Car's customization business began with ... would you believe ... cartoon characters. In 1994, Club Car was requested by a major U.S. theme park to drum up something so its popular cartoon characters could fit their large, cumbersome feet on the vehicles' floorboards. Club Car met the park's needs with a few revamped vehicles.

"We made a conscious business decision to put together a small team to meet [the theme park's] needs," says Randal Crook, Club Car's manager of custom solutions.

But that small team kept busy and customized about 100 vehicles for the park in a year. That's when Club Car's decision makers got to thinking about creating a division dedicated to custom projects.

"It has taken off leaps and bounds, and grown far bigger and broader than we had ex-

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Club Car (top), John Deere (middle) and The Toro Co. say that customizing utility vehicles is all about meeting their customers' needs.

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pected it to," Crook says. "I guess you could say meeting a customer's needs turned into a business opportunity."

Club Car is also extending its customizing services to the golf course maintenance industry, Crook says. The company realizes superintendents desire multipurpose vehicles.

"We want them to know that we're capable of doing most anything they need us to do," Crook says. "We have the engineering resources on hand and can turn around these things quickly."



This Club Car vehicle (above) was customized with a ramp. The vehicle below features a fold-down cargo box.



Jon Bammann, marketing manager for Newnan, Ga.-based Yamaha Golf Car, says the company doesn't get many requests from superintendents about customizing utility vehicles. However, it's something he says Yamaha would like to do more of. Bammann knows there are superintendents who want such items as retractable hose reels and generators mounted on their utility vehicles.

In fact, Bammann says he's been working personally with a local superintendent to customize his utility vehicle. The superintendent wanted to know if he could have a sprayer mounted on the vehicle as well as a few racks to hang tools.

Ron Skenes, manager of communications and media relations for Augusta, Ga.-based E-Z-GO, says the Textron company does customization on a limited basis.

"Most of it is done for us at the local level by our dealers and distributors," he adds. "It's difficult for us to do a lot of customization the way our manufacturing is structured."

E-Z-GO does offer several options and accessories to make it easy to customize utility vehicles, however. Skenes says a vehicle has recessed threaded inserts in the walls of the cargo bed. "So if you want to mount racks or carriers or tiedowns, the inserts are already there," he adds.

Neil Borenstein, senior marketing manager for utility vehicles, sprayers and debris products at The Toro Co., says he gets customizing requests frequently from superintendents. But most of the requests are handled at the distributor level.

"Certainly, if they want one of our accessories installed and it's not a standard accessory, and they're ordering a number of units, we will try to install them on our line when the units are going through production," Borenstein says. "It's the least-expensive method of doing it, and the best way to guarantee quality."

Aaron Wetzel, group product marketing manager for John Deere & Co., says customizing requests from superintendents have been on the rise the past five years.

"We've found that a lot of [superintendents] really want their products customized to their needs," says Wetzel, noting that most projects are handled by John Deere's dealers.

Kept it quiet

While their requests for customized projects are on the rise, many superintendents may not realize that utility vehicle manufacturers offer the service outright. But some of the companies, such as Club Car, haven't marketed the service much in the golf course maintenance industry.

But Club Car is stepping it up. At the GCSAA show in February, the company displayed a customized utility vehicle for all superintendents to see.

Here's how the process works at Club Car. A request is called in and analyzed by professionals who decide if it's feasible. Safety is a huge issue in regard to the request. If it's anything that jeopardizes the safety of the vehicle, it will not be accepted. If it is accepted, a de-

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sign of the request will be sketched up within a week or less and forwarded to the customer. The project could be completed in a week or it might take two months. "We try to work within a four-week window," Crook says.

The cost of the customizing project depends on its nature and complexity. Of course, the cost is passed on to the customer, but there's no additional markup on the price, Crook says.

Club Car has had to say "no" to requests before. One superintendent asked Club Car to raise the height of a vehicle's body and speed it up so it could run 25 miles per hour.

"He wanted to be able to go anywhere on the course, and he wanted to be able to get to and from places quickly," Crook says. "But those are two things we felt he couldn't have."

Going mainstream

It makes perfect business sense that utility vehicle manufacturers are interested in the possibility that a superintendent's customizing idea could lead to mainstream production. It's sensible because it's a low-cost venture from a research-and-development standpoint.

"We don't have to go through a labor-intensive process to find out if something is a good idea," Crook says. "It's a launch pad for new-product development at a very low risk."

For instance, Crook says superintendents will soon see increased functionality on the platform of its Carryall Turf 6 utility vehicle. The platform will feature drop-down sides so the vehicle's cargo box can be converted into a flat bed. This custom solution originated with a Club Car customer.



Yamaha has developed a new line of utility vehicles "with the superintendent in mind." The line is called UMAX.

Bammann says Yamaha would consider a superintendent's customizing idea if there was an audience for it. "That's what we're all about," he adds.

Along the theme, but not exactly customizing, Bammann says Yamaha has developed a new line of utility vehicles "with the superintendent in mind." It's called the UMAX

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line, and its vehicles contain cargo boxes, headlights and larger tires, among other things.

Skenes says E-Z-GO also introduced a line of utility vehicles — the Multipurpose Truck line — that are targeted specifically to superintendents. The vehicles feature cargo beds with heavy-duty bedliners.

The customer

In the end, it's all about customer service — and in this case, satisfying superintendents' needs.

Borenstein says Toro representatives are constantly seeking feedback from customers by talking to them and observing their operations. They also listen to superintendents' unsolicited opinions about particular products. Borenstein says Toro's new Heavy-Duty Workman has many features on it that customers requested, such as a place to plug in their cell phones, a larger glove box area and a new location for the parking brake.

Wetzel says the group's associates talk to customers on a regular basis about utility-vehicle attachments.

"We look at how they're using utility vehicles, and we talk to them about what they would like to see on them," he says. "We ask them what they need to make the vehicles more versatile."

Adds Skenes, "We're constantly listening to the voices of our customers about the things we can do to make the vehicles more useful to them in their day-to-day operations." ■