

# Get a Grip

By Thomas Skernivitz, Managing Editor

In cases of mechanical mishap, Jerry Coldiron Jr. makes a pit stop at what he calls his “graveyard of handheld equipment.” There he finds just about every used doohickey imaginable.

“If one thing goes haywire, we can pull a lot of parts out of there,” says the certified superintendent at Boone Links and Lassing Point golf courses in Boone County, Ky. “We cannibalize a lot of parts, and we can rob Peter to pay Paul.”

But not every component is as replaceable as a toggle switch or carburetor. Far more susceptible, Coldiron says, are his employees’ parts, specifically their eyes and ears. And with any overview of handheld equipment — chain saws, blowers, trimmers — the heart of the matter is safety.

Superintendents and mechanics at one time were negligent of this. Coldiron mentions, with slight remorse, that his hearing isn’t so great after failing to wear earplugs during 25-plus years of operating noisy equipment.

And there’s still the mindless urge to grab a string trimmer for a simple touch-up job without donning protective glasses.

“We weren’t trained, we didn’t know, we didn’t pay attention,” Coldiron recalls. “But certainly the guys today are much more cognizant of the safety issues.”

Many superintendents and mechanics now not only purchase eyewear and throwaway earplugs, they do so in bulk. Steel-toe boots and

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heavy-duty chaps are mandatory for all course employees who operate chain saws.

Meanwhile, manufacturers have also helped to increase consumer awareness. Coldiron and his chief mechanic, Tom Woodall, swear by Stihl products, in part because of the company's informative and entertaining presentations. "The seminars are a highlight for our guys. Stihl brings in the guy who can carve out just about anything with a chain saw," Coldiron says.

Joe Fahey, the vice president of marketing at Echo Inc., says his company can't stress safety too much. Owners manuals and safety manuals are available online. Training videos accompany some products.

"If you have one injury, that's a bad thing," Fahey says. "Sometimes people try to over-

ride safety elements that have been added to the product, and we strongly recommend that that not happen."

As for technological advances, Coldiron cites the emergence of compression-release chain saws as one example of improved safety. Chain saw operators who once risked injury while trying to start the device can now expect a "smooth start" or "smooth pull," Coldiron says, instead of a dangerous kickback.

"Starting a chain saw is where a lot of injuries happen," Coldiron says. "That kind of improvement from the manufacturing standpoint is very positive for the industry."

### Less is better

When it comes to emissions, decibels and ounces, manufacturers are in an ever-present reduction mode. Unfortunately, those three objectives don't

always go hand in hand, according to Fahey. Some manufacturers, in order to meet increasingly tighter emissions standards, have moved from two-stroke engines to more complex — and hence, heavier — four-stroke and two/four-stroke engines,

"There are times when you have to compromise, and the manufacturers that have gone to the four-stroke or the two/four have compromised, because that technology just weighs more," Fahey says. "This runs counter to what the superintendents want, but it's an outcome of regulations. Fortunately, we've been able to stay with two-stroke."

Echo has continued to do so despite emissions limits that have been reduced 80 percent in the past six years. As of Jan. 1, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),

following the regional lead of the California Air Resources

Board (CARB), requires handheld equipment to operate at an emissions level of 37 grams per horsepower-hour of hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides, down from 74 grams last year.

"That's a significant mandate," Fahey says. "Manufacturers have really been scrambling the past two years over how they were going to achieve this."

Superintendents need not worry about the emissions police knocking at their doors, as their equipment is grandfathered. But the issue does dictate the look and performance of future products and is something superintendents "need to be aware of," Fahey says.

As for noise restrictions, there are no national requirements, although some municipalities are trying to ban or restrict the use of blowers.

"What we try to do as a manufacturer is educate the municipalities that there are low-noise blowers available," Fahey says. "We have several models that are rated at 65 dBA (A-weighted decibels). Some blowers go up as high as the low 70s. The dBA scale is logarithmic, so if you go down six dBA, the sound is cut in half."

Coldiron substantiates any noise-reduction claims, saying, "Certainly the engines are quieter now and the screens that they have in mufflers are quieter."

Improved efficiency is also evident, he adds, in that

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You'd have to be "whacked" out to not wear eyewear while operating handheld equipment on the golf course.



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machines now run on easy-to-mix two-cycle fuels. "They have dye in them and they have stabilizer in them," he says. "In the old days you had to measure everything out, but now you just take a small container — and they're all marked pretty well — and load and unload the fuel."

Not that there isn't room for improvement.

"If we had a wish, we'd wish that they'd (implement) electric start for some of the things we use all the time," Coldiron says. "We don't have any handheld equipment that has electric start, but I know that technology is getting close."

Fahey answers that there have been electric-start products in the past, but they were not successful in the marketplace. "The problem is that ... No. 1, it's more weight. And No. 2, it's more cost," he says.

### Fix or buy?

Blessed with a quality maintenance staff and facilities, or cursed by a substandard budget, superintendents might choose to visit the "graveyard" and repair a string trimmer themselves rather than buy a new one. Coldiron and Woodall have been using some of the same blowers for more than a decade, and one Stihl model is 15 years old.

"We try to evaluate (fixing

vs. buying) all the time," Coldiron says. "It all depends on what you paid for the equipment, how old it is, what kind of shape it's in all-around, and what it costs to fix. I don't know if there's any true answer. It just comes down to having a good understanding of what makes it work."

As repair rates increase and technology advances, superintendents may become more reluctant to repair, Fahey says.

"Various manufacturers use different technologies now to achieve these emissions regulations. So a trimmer isn't just a trimmer anymore, and the superintendents are going to have to deal with this," he says. "Suddenly, you're working on a very complex small engine with 30 parts vs. one with six. That changes the equation or it moves the (transition) point for repair vs. replace."

At Bent Creek Country Club in Lititz, Pa., comfort and familiarity go a long way in determining whether to buy new, according to Assistant Superintendent Mike Bair and Head Mechanic Tim Landis.

"Sometimes it is difficult to stop using the old standbys," Bair says. "And most of the time, the new stuff is too expensive initially, and it does not look like it is strong enough structurally. But most (superintendents) will wait a year or so, when the bugs are engineered out and the general opinion is favorable, and then we will make the change."

Other superintendents choose to bypass the fix vs. purchase debate altogether and purchase "throwaway"

equipment. They buy a lesser product with a goal of never having to worry about maintaining it.

"We've never been that way," Coldiron says. "We always try to buy a brand product and take care of it and try to make it last two, three or four seasons. But I do know some guys have different philosophies."

Adds Fahey: "It depends on what your economic model is. We like to think that professionals would buy a product they can rely on day in day out. Everyone has to decide what the cost benefit is and make their own determinations."

Jim Loke, the certified superintendent at Bent Creek, sees the continual evolution of handheld equipment as a vicious circle of sorts.

"Our members think the cost of our equipment is out of control," Loke says. "But part of the problem is the industry is looking for new gadgets to sell, and superintendents are coming up with newer and newer ideas and requests for the manufacturers to produce these tools. And I don't know where it's going to stop. The standards we are producing are kind of fueling this cycle."

"As we make improvements and improve the quality of the golf course, we're continuously looking for ways to make it even better." ■



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