

Off The Fringe

Business briefs

Ohio Superintendents Tee-Off with Conference

The golf season officially arrived for Ohio superintendents in mid-March with the fourth-annual Ohio State Golf Turf Spring Tee-Off Conference in Columbus. They talked turf maintenance for two days at the conference, organized by Todd Voss, superintendent of the Double Eagle Club in Galena, Ohio. Many of the speakers were from Ohio State's turf department.

Jason Straka, a golf course architect with Hurdzan-Fry Golf Design, spoke about golf design with maintenance in mind. Straka pointed out a scary trend tied to his topic — that there's more money spent to design, build and maintain bunkers than there is to design, build and maintain putting greens.

Bob Brame, director of the United States Golf Association Green Section's North-Central Region, talked about the use of wetting agents when watering greens during a panel discussion on "Proper Watering Techniques."

"There is no question that there are a number of golf courses in the state and the region that wouldn't be able to keep up with dry spots if they didn't use wetting agents," Brame said.

That said, Brame warned superintendents to be careful when using wetting agents with applications of other products.

"Every year I see a half-dozen cases or more where there are certain issues, such as thinning or phytotoxicity, on greens that have some tie to applications that include wetting agents," Brame said. "I didn't say it was the wetting agent that caused the issue, but it combined with other certain products to create an issue."

Brame advised superintendents to test

Briefs continue on page 16



Power Up

UTILITY VEHICLE MANUFACTURERS ADDRESS CHALLENGES

OF ALTERNATIVE FUELS **By Anthony Pioppi, Contributing Editor**

Think of cutting-edge technology in the golf course maintenance world, and, well, cutting is exactly what comes to mind. Mowers that flex, reels that can be removed easily and blades that spin thanks to electric power are just a few innovations that have been at the forefront of technology for the better part of the last decade.

All the while, utility vehicles have rolled along with little major change to their overall design. It's true that electric power has grabbed a larger share of the market, and vehicle bodies are made of durable plastic, but there has not been a quantum leap as seen with mowers. It looks as if the pattern will hold true for at least the rest of the decade, according to the manufacturers.

If changes do come, they most likely will explore alternate fuel

sources, but don't expect them to hit the marketplace anytime soon.

"I think you're seeing there has been experimentation with hydrogen technology," said Brad Aldridge, product manager for John Deere. "That's the one thing that's being looked at by everyone, but that's pretty far off."

Tim Koch, Toro's senior marketing manager of utility vehicles, agreed. "Alternative fuels is the No. 1 area," he said.

Biodiesel, hybrid electrics and hydrogen power are what manufacturers see as the logical steps.

Because the golf industry does not have a large enough presence to push the research, it will wait for another industry, such as automotive, to fuel the expansion, Koch says.

But manufacturers are helping to propel innovations already in place.

Toro has partnered with New York

Continued on page 17

Off The Fringe Down and Out

By Larry Aylward and Curt Harler

They call Tim Powell “Tim Ber” at the Charlotte (N.C.) Country Club. The nickname fits.

Powell is the golf course’s arborist.

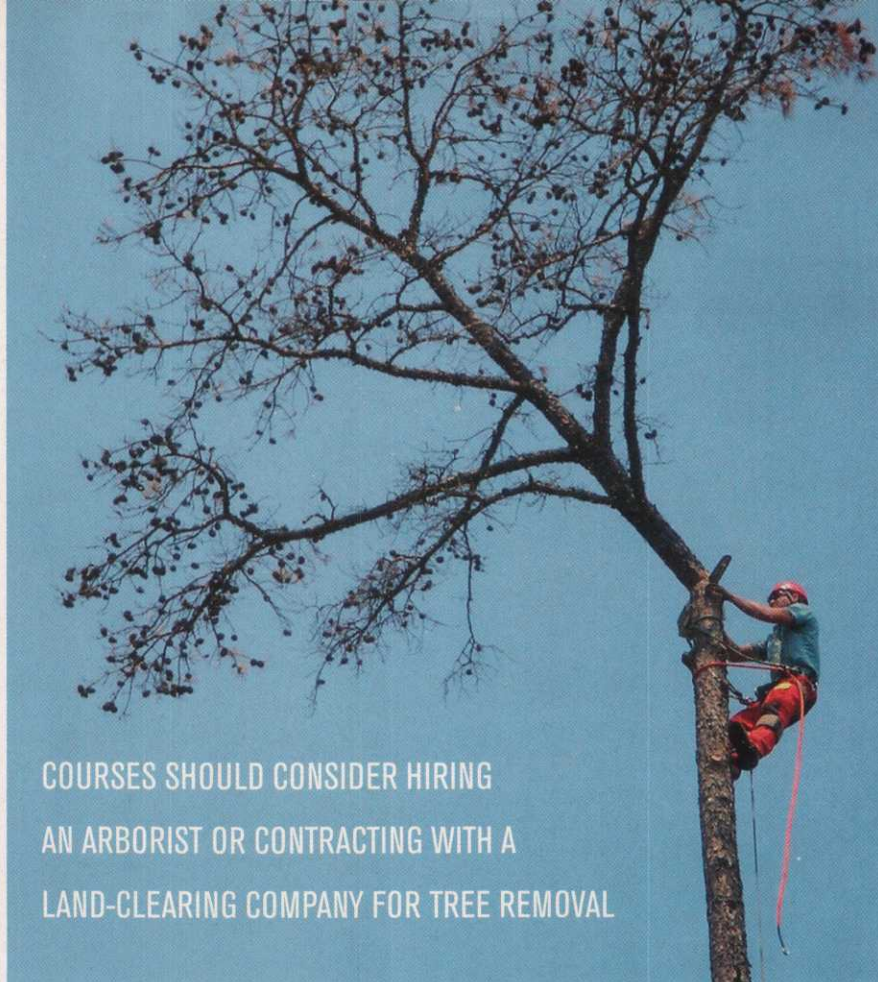
And Powell, who has a forestry degree from Clemson University, says hiring an arborist at any golf course makes sense. Powell is not trying to score one for his profession as much as he’s trying to save golf course maintenance operations a few bucks, especially if they’re contracting out their tree maintenance business for \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year.

“I believe it’s a big advantage,” says Powell, who has worked at Charlotte for about two years. “If you can afford a chipper and you have somebody who knows what he’s doing, there’s no telling how much money he can save you as far getting things done.”

Powell says he recently learned it can cost a course about \$1,500 to hire a tree company to take down a big tree and haul it away. Powell says he can do the job for less, provided there’s a place to store the tree’s cut-up wood and chips.

Powell also realizes the importance of performing such work when golfers aren’t around. He and his small crew will fell trees in the early morning while it’s still dark to keep clear of golfers’ play.

“We’ll cut down the tree using a headlight if it’s too dark,” he says. “It’s



COURSES SHOULD CONSIDER HIRING
AN ARBORIST OR CONTRACTING WITH A
LAND-CLEARING COMPANY FOR TREE REMOVAL

about giving better service to the members.”

An on-course arborist is also more familiar with a golf course property’s trees than a contractor would ever be, Powell contends.

“I can drive around and tell you what’s wrong with this tree and that tree,” Powell says, “because I see the trees every day.”

Charlotte Country Club also began a tree inventory to quantify the number of trees on the course and their condition. All of the trees are tagged with numbers. The computerized inventory contains

several pieces of information about each tree, including species, location, diameter and health. The tree inventory is an excellent organizational tool.

There are start-up costs for a course to hire an arborist, Powell notes. A course would need the proper equipment, such as a 12-inch wood chipper and a truck to catch the wood chips. A new wood chipper costs about \$30,000, Powell estimates. A used truck could be had for about \$5,000 to \$8,000. A course would also want to purchase a stump grinder for about \$25,000, he says. In addition, saws ranging from \$300 to \$1,000 are also needed.

Powell says the median pay for an arborist varies around the country. In Charlotte, an arborist makes at least \$18 an hour.

Powell believes more golf courses will begin hiring arborists. “It’s going to be a trend,” he adds, noting that golf courses will realize the money to be saved.

But golf courses must realize it will be a long-term savings, especially after

Continued on page 16



Tim Powell, the arborist at the Charlotte Country Club, is experienced in taking down the biggest of trees. (Above photo) He’s also not afraid to scale the tallest trees.

Off The Fringe

Business briefs

Briefs continued from page 14

wetting agents in an area before making widespread applications. "There are a lot of wetting agents to choose from," Brame said. "And they're different."

Dave Gardner, a professor in Ohio State's Department of Horticulture and Crop Science, spoke on herbicide use for the season. But regarding perennial broadleaf weeds, Gardner said white clover, dandelion, wild violet and others are best controlled in the spring and summer when they are hit with a herbicide in the fall.

"Springtime control is a Band-Aid for these weeds," Gardner said. "If you really want to get rid of them, put down applications in September, October or even November."

Dave Shetlar, a professor in Ohio State's Department of Entomology, spoke about recent insect control studies and new programs for 2007. Shetlar talked in-depth about some of the new insecticides coming out to battle grubs and other bugs. But he also noted that Milorganite can help in this area.

Milorganite? Apparently, grub-infested turf treated with Milorganite — a natural fertilizer — deters skunks and raccoons from tearing up turf to get at grubs for their dinner.

Old Course Welcomes McKie

A 12-year veteran of St. Andrews Links Trust, Gordon McKie has been appointed head greenkeeper of the Old Course. "It is a privilege to work on the most famous course in the world," McKie said in a prepared statement. McKie replaces Euan Grant, who is moving into a similar role at a new development in the Mull of Kintyre after three years at the Old Course.

Bayer Defends Patent

Bayer CropScience says its will "vigorously defend" its intellectual property rights in the wake of a suit filed by Etigra LLC regarding Bayer's patented use of the pesticide imidacloprid on fertilizer. Bayer said Etigra filed suit claiming that its method of formulating imidacloprid on fertilizer does not violate the Bayer-owned patent. Bayer invented the mixture of imidacloprid on fertilizer, sold by Bayer Environmental Science as Merit. ■



Seller's Market, Indeed

The face value of a ticket to the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club for Wednesday's practice round was \$36. But that Wednesday ticket, which included the event's famed Par 3 Contest, could have been sold on the street for \$300 to \$400. Augusta's entrance gate on the same day was jammed with thousands of golf fans. Well, what do you expect at a place where people go to see the golf course as much the golfers?

(Photographs by Larry Aylward)



Continued from page 15

their initial investments. "But in a couple of years or less, depending on how much work [an arborist] can get done, they will make that money back," Powell says.

Incidentally, there has been no shortage of work for Powell on the course. "For a while, I was taking one to two trees down a day," he says.

If hiring an arborist is not feasible, a golf course may consider using a land-clearing company to remove trees. Jim Skorulski, senior agronomist for the United States Golf Association Green Section's Northeast Region, told attendants of a seminar at the recent Golf Industry Show that land-clearing companies can help alleviate the cost that comes with cutting down trees.

"They work fast and they can be

much less expensive," Skorulski said.

He talked about one course that received a bid for \$100,000 for a particular job. A tree company said it would take three to four weeks to remove all the trees. A land-clearing company bid the same job at \$39,000 and needed about four days.

Skorulski also advised that courses check with loggers who might want to harvest the timber. They are interested in trees beyond fancy veneer and saw timber. There are markets for pulpwood and even firewood.

However, Skorulski cautioned that land-clearing operations and loggers are not accustomed to working around delicate turf. So be sure to define the limits of where they can run their equipment if you hire them, he added. ■

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Business Tip of the Month

Continued from page 14

State to provide hydrogen-powered utility vehicles that will be used in an experimental capacity at Niagara Falls State Park, where a hydrogen refueling station is already in place. Hydrogen filling stations are rare, which makes adoption for this type of technology a slow process.

It's not cheap, either. Currently, alternative fuel technology is "cost prohibitive" for most superintendents, says Mike Packer, Club Car's vice president of worldwide sales and service. But that won't stop the company from improving its products. Club Car is looking at different battery cell technology while improving its electric vehicles. As with other manufacturers, the lifespan of batteries is a focal point.

It is possible that batteries that superintendents can afford will be able to power heavy-duty utility vehicles such as the Toro Workman and the John Deere Pro Gator in addition to light-duty vehicles. "Technologically, it can be done today. We have to figure out the economics," Koch said.

Brian Melka, the director of product management for Jacobsen, said a shift could be to lithium ion batteries; think cell phones, laptops and now power tools. There is also the possibility of nickel metal hydride batteries.

Biodiesel is also gaining popularity. Toro has utility vehicles that meet 2008 standards, but Melka said efficiency is an issue right now. "That's the challenge," he said.

Liquid propane is another alternative. Although it has made inroads in parts of Europe, it has not caught on here.

So for now and the near future, manufacturers of utility vehicles for the golf course market will continue to concentrate on fuel savings and noise reduction.

But in the long term, manufacturers envision the day when gas and possibly electric power will be energies of the past.

"Maybe not in five or 10 years, but by 20 years, we'll have another technology come into play," Aldridge said. ■

Maintenance Is a Profit Center

Superintendents and their maintenance programs are the keys to financial success at most golf courses. In fact, course operators would be well served recognizing the maintenance operation as a profit center rather than a cost center.

A 2003 National Golf Foundation (NGF) study noted that course conditioning is the most-important reason avid players (25-plus annual rounds) select a facility, far outdistancing price, speed of play, name designers and proximity to home. In fact, the study states that course conditioning has become even more important over the past five years.

Among the most enthusiastic of golfers, a group the NGF calls "course connoisseurs" — avid players expecting top-notch playing conditions who are willing to travel and spend to find them — course conditioning is their top priority. This group tends to be the much-sought-after players in their 50s with particularly high incomes and low scores (nearly 30 percent average under 80).

Pinehurst Golf Course and Grounds Manager Bob Farren notes that at this time of year, with The Masters and Augusta National conditioning still fresh in golfers' minds, expectations run even higher.

"If players' expectation level is that a course be weed-free, then it is likely necessary that pre-emergent herbicide treatments, even though they may run \$20,000 to \$25,000, are necessary to meet that expectation," Farren said.

That idea is especially true at upper-end facilities, generally those charging around \$100 or more, the Pinehurst manager adds. "You must invest money into course maintenance to show customers they are receiving value for what they are paying."

That's why owners who try to raise green fees 5 percent while requiring superintendents to cut back 10 percent on their maintenance budgets dumbfound Farren.

That's why superintendents need to educate owners and others that they can't cut back on maintenance practices and deliver the product golfers have to expect. Superintendents need to show owners studies that state how important course conditioning is to profit. Hopefully, the owners will hear the sound of cash registers ringing from the maintenance facility.

The "Tip of the Month" is provided by Syngenta to support superintendents in their agronomic, business and professional development. To comment on this column, submit a lesson from your own experience, or suggest a topic to be covered in a future issue, please visit www.golfbusinesslips.com.

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Off The Fringe

102 And Still ... *Golfing*

THE GOLF INDUSTRY SHOULD USE ELSIE MCLEAN'S HOLE-IN-ONE FEAT TO HELP GROW THE GAME

By Larry Aylward, Editor in Chief

We should put her I-just-got-a-hole-in-one-smiling face on the cover of our magazine. Heck, all of the golf magazines — business and consumer alike — should have her beaming face gracing their covers. The golf industry needs her like Nike needs Tiger.

She should be the featured speaker at the Golf Industry Show next year. TaylorMade Golf should offer her an endorsement contract now. And if Augusta National is ever to bend its rules and let a woman play its hallowed grounds ... well, boys, this is the woman.

I'm talking about the energetic Elsie McLean, the 102-year-old Chico, Calif., lady who did the golf industry a gigantic gesture in April by making a hole-in-one. As if living past 100 isn't grand enough, McLean now has another claim to fame: She is the oldest golfer ever to earn an ace on a regulation course.

Most of us hackers have never even made a hole-in-one at the local miniature golf. Hence, we as an industry should revel in McLean's feat. And we should parade her around the country and celebrate her as an ambassador to help grow this flat-as-a-flounder game.

If you work in this industry, you know that golf rounds have been like "Groundhog Day" the past few years. They don't change. Oh, they might rise as high as Bluto Bluntarsky's grade-point average from time to time, but not much higher.

The player issue is even shakier — as many people who begin the game each year as new players leave the game as ex-players. But enter McLean, who scored her hole-in-one on a 100-yard par-3 at Bidwell Park in Chico. She can help us turn the tables on golf's stunted growth.

Why do people quit golf? For several reasons, one being that they think it's too dang hard. So they give up shortly after debuting their fledgling games.

McLean can teach us many things — patience for one. She's still playing the game at 102. God bless her. And prior to that hole-in-one, she was still looking for that great shot.

"Well everybody wants a hole-in-one, and I said, 'Why can't I have a hole-in-one?'" McLean told a television station.

Not to sound disrespectful, but McLean is ancient, and she's still out there having fun while beating around the ball. What's that say for the seniors who are 40 years her junior who claim they are too old to play the game anymore?

Quotable

"Oh, I didn't know the national conference was outdoors this year."

— Dave Ertl, equipment technician for Traverse City Golf & Country Club, greeting the course's superintendent Steve Hammon, who was returning to his job after spending 12 days "working" in California at the Golf Industry Show.

"If there's a dream team in basketball, there's a dream team in Congress as far as environmental activities go."

— Allen James, president of Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment, on the threat that certain Congress members pose to the pesticide industry.

"Even the fringe is rolling 11 on the Stimpmeter."

— Bill Bryant, president of Bryant Marketing Communications, after watching a player's golf ball roll swiftly off the No. 15 green's fringe and into the water during a practice round of the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club.

"I thought I'd see John Daly enter Harvard before I ever saw Tiger leave a big birdie putt short."

— Sports Illustrated columnist Rick Reilly on Tiger Woods leaving a putt 5 feet short on the 12th hole of the last day of the Masters.

"For an old lady, I still hit the ball pretty good," she said. And that's another thing about McLean. She has obviously dismissed the stereotype that states that women and old people must be lousy golfers.

You go girl ... I mean, ma'am!

Incidentally, McLean appeared on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" on April 24. Hopefully, she'll soon appear at a "growing the game" seminar near you. ■