



Quality (of Cut) Control

Manufacturers know just what superintendents want in a greens mower

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

With golf rounds clocking in about flat for 2007, the competition among golf courses to increase their businesses has become fiercer. There's no doubt this battle could be won on the hallowed turf known as the greens, where golfers demand fast, consistent and carpet-like conditions.

Realizing that a big reason golfers return to a course to play is because of the quality and condition of the greens, golf course superintendents have turned to technology to help them manage their turf better. That technology includes mower manufacturers, who are listening to superintendents' ideas on how to make a better greens mower.

That said, representatives from the Big Three — Jacobsen, The Toro Co. and John Deere — agree that superintendents aren't looking for any new out-of-this-world features in a greens mower.

They are, however, looking for improvements in current features.

"They want to be able to do all the things they're doing today easier, faster and bet-

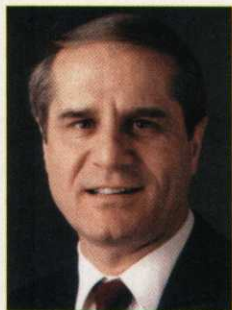
ter," says Brian Melka, director of product management for Charlotte-based Jacobsen. "A resounding message we hear is to build more flexibility into the machines. Superintendents want to be able to adapt machines to certain conditions."

Last year, Jacobsen unveiled a new electric greens mower — the Eclipse 122F — which addresses the flexibility issue, especially in terms of a new cutting head attachment with more float to eliminate scalping and provide a consistent height of cut on undulating and contouring greens. "We set out to create a machine to give the absolute best quality of cut," Melka says.

Ahh, those magic three words — quality of cut. The mower manufacturers realize quality of cut is at the top of their collective lists in regard to giving superintendents what they want.

"Quality of cut is the main issue superintendents look at when purchasing a new greens mower, whether a walking mower or a riding mower," says Helmut Ullrich, The Toro Co.'s senior marketing manager for greens mowers and greens cultivation. Ullrich says he recently completed a market

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Helmut Ullrich

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research study that reveals superintendents are "very satisfied" with greens mowers on the market and their quality of cut.

Toro's Greensmaster FLEX 21 addresses the quality-of-cut issue head on. The cutting unit of the FLEX 21 not only flexes from side to side around the bedknife centerline, but also forward and backward around the reel centerline.

Tracy Lanier, product manager for John Deere Golf & Turf, says his company introduced the 2500E Hybrid Riding Greens Mower, which features an electric reel motor, with quality of cut in mind.

"Superintendents continue to expect the highest quality of cut on greens, and with electrical-drive cutting units they get a more consistent clip ratio than with normal hydraulic-drive units," Lanier maintains. "While hydraulic systems are good, we think that electric-drive cutting units answer our customers' demands for the next step in greens mowers," he says.

Service and support are also vital issues. Replacement parts for greens mowers need to be easily obtained, and equipment needs to be easily serviceable.

"That comes down to your relationship with not only the local dealer but your relationship with the OEM manufacturers," Melka says. "That's a big focus for us."

Relationship building is a priority for Toro, too. "Price is one thing, but price is not everything," Ullrich says. "Service goes along with it."

Going electric

Electric technology with greens mowers has never been more prevalent. Jacobsen is investing heavily in the technology. Ryan Weeks, Jacobsen's vice president of engineering, says the company doubled its spending on new product development in 2007, with 50 percent to 60 percent going to next-generation technology, which largely involves electric technology.

While Jacobsen has pursued the electric technology for several years, Melka stresses the company didn't set out to be a trailblazer in the technology. It did so because the company

thought superintendents could benefit from it. He says the technology has progressed.

"While there's often a higher initial cost for electric mowers, the total cost of ownership for them is much lower," Melka says. "Operating costs go down, service costs go down, productivity improves and flexibility improves."

In terms of future technology, Lanier says Deere continues to examine ways to advance the benefits that come with the 2500E.

"The electric drive cutting units on this machine have helped address numerous issues our customers face, and we are exploring ways to possibly use this same technology in other areas," he says.

Ullrich says there's room for improvement in the electric mower technology. "How many greens can you mow without having to recharge the battery?" he asks.

Ullrich also says "there's a false impression" that electric reels cut better than conventional reels. "A reel doesn't mind if it's driven by a belt, a shaft, a pulley, a hydraulic motor or an electric motor," he says.

Ullrich says the future will bring more electric technology to the mowing industry. "But I also sense some hesitation because the technology today still has flaws in it with regard to reliability," he adds.

With golf course construction down from the 1990s and early 2000s and rounds runnings flat, it might be assumed the competition between mower manufacturers is similar to that of the Dallas Cowboys versus the Washington Redskins on a fall Sunday afternoon.

"The golf market has always been very competitive. We operate assuming it will always be that way," Lanier says.

Ullrich points out that business has a lot to do with relationships. That said, he agrees competition is intensifying.

But competition often breeds innovation. And while mower manufacturers have made tremendous technological strides with greens mowers, there's still plenty of innovation out there to be had, Melka says.

"If you create an artificial boundary that says, 'This is the best we're going to be,' then somebody is going to pass you," he says. ■