

THE *Golfdom* CONVERSATION:

David Withers

NEW JACOBSEN
PRESIDENT
PROMISES TO BUILD
RELATIONSHIPS
WITH CUSTOMERS
AND DISTRIBUTORS.

BY SETH JONES



"It's encouraging for people to see a guy work his way up to the top of a company," David Withers says. And that is what Withers has done at Jacobsen.

Promoted to the position of president last fall, Withers had been serving as managing director of the Ransomes division of Jacobsen, located in the United Kingdom, since January 2005. Withers, who first joined Jacobsen's parent company, Textron, in 1992, succeeds Dan Wilkinson. Wilkinson retired from Jacobsen after 14 years with the company.

Golfdom had the opportunity to chat with Withers recently about his background as a mechanic, his immediate goals for Jacobsen, and if ghosts of the late '90s still haunt the company.

Golfdom: What's the difference in the European market and the American market, for both Jacobsen and golf in general?

David Withers: Golf customers want pretty much the same thing all around the world, and that's good products and a nice relationship with their dealers. I'm unsurprised by that.

I will say there seems to be a little bit of a difference in getting financing here (in North America) than what I've experienced in Europe. The lending institutions seem to be viewing golf less favorably here

"Whenever you make a decision, keep your eyes fixed firmly on the customer," Withers says, "and you'll make the right decision."

than they are in Europe. I'm not used to getting an order, then seeing difficulty in getting it financed.

Golfdom: Is there a difference in the perception of Jacobsen here than the perception in Europe?

Withers: There's probably been more dealer stability in Europe than we've been able to enjoy in North America. Generally where we've had a lot of dealer changes, our brand is less well regarded than where we've been more consistent. You could probably say we've had more dealer changes in North America than we have had in Europe.

Golfdom: I was talking to a superintendent on the west coast, and the Jacobsen name came up. He told me he loves to see equipment, but Jacobsen was just not a company that's been to his course to give him demos. Is there a plan to change that?

Withers: Absolutely. One of the things I think about dealers, generally speaking, is that they're pretty good at looking after their existing customer base. The difficulty is, you really do need a partnership between the manufacturer and the dealer when you're going after conquest sales, people who aren't using your equipment at the moment.

I'm very interested in working a partnership with dealers to really go after conquest accounts and show people the Jacobsen product, people who haven't seen the product in maybe 10 years. We really have an opportunity if we can get that right. The product is good, the backup is good, it's just a matter of building relationships.

You'll also see, over the next few



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months, we’re putting additional sales guys out there, actual Jacobsen employees. I’ve also added a new position, vice president of customer care. I believe it’s important that we have one point of contact to look after our customers post-sale.

Golfdom: Back in the late '90s, early 2000s, there was a lot of confusion surrounding Jacobsen. There seemed to always be a new name, there were problems getting parts to customers... is that shadow still cast on Jacobsen?

Withers: I think it’s patchy. In some places, we are definitely out of that shadow. I think for some people, we let them down so badly in the late '90s and 2000, even though it was 10 years ago, the scars are still there.

It’s all sorted and it has been for a few years now. It’s about getting the perception right. We want to look to some thought leaders, people who are looked up to and respected. Maybe we can’t get them to buy our equipment right now, but we definitely want to be to the point where they’ll look at our equipment as a credible alternative.

We know if we can get into a golf course and sell them one bit of equipment, we’ve got a very good chance of selling them a second piece. They’ll be

surprised not only by our performance, but also our support.

It’s all about getting out of that shadow, as you rightfully put it, and saying, ‘That was 10 years ago, we are a very different company now.’

Golfdom: So let’s talk about today. What excites you about the Jacobsen line right now?

Withers: Our riding greens mowers are a great story. The 322, they’re scientifically shown to give a superior cut and superior playing conditions. But obviously you pay for that. But we also offer a value end, and that’s something we want to continue. We still sell the Greens King IV, I wonder how many thousands of those we’ve sold? We want to be relevant to both markets, premium but also value.

Golfdom: I read that you were once a mechanic? Do you still like to get under the hood?

I’ll tell you a story. My granddad owned a big Volvo garage. When I was 10, I’d go and muck about with cars and motor-

bikes. In high school, I went and worked in Kenya for two-and-a-half years, fixing equipment, helping build schools, hospitals, things like that. When I came back (to the UK), my friend and I started a little business buying and selling cars and used equipment that we fixed. We sold that business to a subsidiary of Redexim. So I worked for Redexim for two, three years. Then I joined Jacobsen. So I’ve always wielded a spanner (wrench). Though I do less of it now than I used to, but I certainly know how our products work.

Golfdom: Any parting shots?

Withers: I have a clear message to our group on how to succeed, I call it the three Bs: Build a relationship; Build a good product; Back it up for the whole of its life. If we do those three things correctly, we’ll be in the game and we’ll win. But if we muck it up we’ll be in trouble.

Ten to 12 years ago, we weren’t doing any of these things well. We’ve since sorted out the last two, the back-up and the machinery. Now, our focus is on building relationships with customers. That’s what (Jacobsen) brought me in to do, and that’s what I’ll be concentrating on in the next weeks and months. ■