



Light Weight Fairway Mowers (and related thoughts)

By Thomas R. Harrison

The current popularity of mowing fairways with some type of light weight equipment has added a new dimension to the care and maintenance of our equipment. Many different styles and configurations of equipment are being tried with no one particular type of mower standing out as being the best, most cost efficient, and longest lasting type to use. Several interesting facts have been learned so far.

Initial selection of equipment is important. There are so very many different pieces of iron being touted as "light weight mowers". Some work, some never will. The superintendent needs to thoroughly field test and inspect any potential purchase for quality of cut and, of equal importance, how long will it last. There is a lot of extremely light duty equipment available that will cut great but its life is short. There are larger more durable pieces available but they have trouble with their quality of cut in the hot, humid months of the summer. They are useless parked for 6-8 weeks. (I ought to know - I own one.) When you are purchasing, it is important to know these limitations and not have to go back after your equipment distributor when your superlight weight fairway mower won't hold up and the life expectancy is 3 years instead of 10.

No matter which type of equipment you buy, the level of preventive maintenance has to be higher. Our old tractors and gang mowers needed little daily maintenance to go through the season successfully. These new mowers need more frequent oil and lube intervals plus a much higher level of reel maintenance. The cost of these new mowers is extremely high, which when coupled with a shorter life expectancy make it imperative that we carefully extract every hour of life we can out of these machines. Compared to tractors and gang mowers, light weight mowers cost a bundle to purchase, maintain and repair. The per acre cost to maintain fairways today is tremendously greater than 10 years ago.

This push to "improve our fairways" has been accelerating at a faster than necessary pace. Too many superintendents seem to be on a drive to outdo the next person. Money is sometimes too readily available to buy more equipment to make playing conditions "better". It's really a vicious circle we are creating for ourselves. Improvements are fine for the sake of improvements, but I firmly believe that too many superintendents are on a bent to one up their neighbors for ego's sake or whatever. The use of light weight mowers has brought on a tremendous improvement in fairway conditions but at a very hefty price. The race for improved fairways, I fear, is not over. For I suspect that there are superintendents out there who are plotting to go one step further. Some superintendents are using riding greensmowers on fairways which do a super job of fine cutting turf, but the drawbacks are initial cost, durability and equipment life. Nevertheless they give a good finished product. But when will someone try to better his neighbor and put walking greensmowers on fairways? I can see two superintendents at a monthly meeting discussing this. One says to the other, "Did you hear what Monroe did? He put walking greensmowers on his fairways." The other fellow says, "That's nothing, I hear he hired the entire Village of Waunakee to run 'em." Not so funny really, because given enough time someone will do it. Top dressing fairways and using the stimp-meter on fairways is already being done.

The fervor to have slick greens is also getting out of hand. We are stressing turf well beyond its limits, in order to roll the ball on the green much faster than it really needs to. The final degree of fast greens will be a top dressing consisting of 10% portland cement, coupled with a 40% latex medium green paint, and 50% medium sand. That ought to cut down on rolling resistance to the ball. We certainly don't need any grass blades in the way.

This race to have faster greens, lower cut fairways, and fast fairways is leading the golf turf industry into a much more complex and expensive era of course maintenance. I for one am not convinced that it is entirely necessary. We are racing to outdo one another and not thinking about quality. In all this talk about fast and low cut turf, no one talks about quality, healthy turf. Likewise people seem less interested in buying quality, long lasting equipment and taking care of it. We complain about U.S. automakers building a poor quality product yet we, as golf course superintendents, are beginning to follow the same path. We are putting too much stress on the plants and we are not willing to look at a turf area and say, "My greens may not be the fastest but more important, they are healthy and they look good." That is quality. Equipment maintenance is the same way. We shouldn't look at the care of these expensive machines and say that's "good enough". Good enough is when we service the equipment on schedule and sharpen the reels properly. Here again it's too easy to spend a lot of money replacing equipment earlier than necessary because we didn't take care of it and it's too easy to spend large sums of money on reel grinders that are fast but do a poor job in the long run. Quality is disappearing from our work place, but only because we are all in too big a race to outdo the next fellow and pump up our egos about how fast this is or how low cut that is. The question "Where does it all end" is answered very simply when we all shift the emphasis from fast and low cut to "quality".

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