

Why Are We Using Walking Greensmowers in 1990??

By Monroe S. Miller

When I attended the first Jacobsen School for College Students in Racine in 1968, we were able to operate a prototype riding triplex greensmower. All of us (students) were very excited and extremely impressed. "What a tremendous advance in golf course management," we commented aloud. The future was right in front of us; barely a handful of golf course superintendents in America had seen this wonderful, riding, wide-cutting machine. Anticipation reigned! The day of the dreaded walking greensmower was setting.

Twenty-two years later, I'm nearly that excited about the newest trend in putting green management — walking greensmowers! One of my employees charged that I was excited, in part at least, simply because I wouldn't have to do any of the walking!

The issue of walking mowers was initiated by our Green Committee last summer when they asked, "what else can we do to improve our putting greens?" We already are using the best fungicides, modest amounts of plant nutrients and lots of hand watering to complement our sparing application of water from the irrigation system. We cut at a height of 0.130 throughout the season, double cut when appropriate for events and tournaments and try for consistency in speed among the greens. Like others, we aerify our greens once a year, removing cores; we topdress when possible and verticut as required.

But there were a few things we hadn't started doing. We only cut a cleanup pass (clear to the green's edge, at least) twice a week. Three days of a week, no cleanup at all is cut. The other two cuttings of the perimeter are done by mowing in 12" from the edge. Our players have noticed this for years and don't particularly like it. My argument has been "you'd like a triplex ring even less." The next step we were considering was cutting the cleanup with a . . . walker.

We hadn't bought into the turf groomer program. We will do that also in 1990.

Since our golf course is 70 years old, the green surrounds of almost every green are very steep — dangerously steep. Three triplex greensmowers

have been rolled from them in my time at the club; no injuries, but safety is a constant concern. These slopes have precluded any cutting of the greens at a right angle to the direction of play. Over time, not having that option does take on some significance.

In addition to severe sloping in the target areas of our golf course, bunkering and a general lack of room create a lot of travel for turning the triplex mowers. The turf in those surrounding areas takes a beating and shows excessive wear, especially in stress periods. Players have noticed this, and commented on it.

Two committee members remarked on something golf course superintendents have seen for years. While looking across a putting surface in late afternoon when the sun is lower in the sky, they were almost always able to see the three separate heights of cut of each cutting unit on the triplex greensmower. No amount of effort, using a micro scale gauge which measures accurately to the thousandths, can eliminate those differences. In reality, three heights of cut exist on each green. Does it matter? Well, if you can see it. . . . Each golf course has to answer the question for its own players. Our committee said, "Yes, it does."

We've been mowing more and more tees on our golf course with walking mowers. Older golf courses, designed for times of significantly less play, traditionally have small tees shaped inconveniently for triplex mowers. Most of ours have the same steep banks our greens have. Many are extremely narrow, further limiting mowing directions. Even those golfers at our club who are only slightly conscious of what's going on around the course have noticed the dramatic improvement handmowing has brought to those tees.

Then, as always, the speed questions came up. We have a "base" speed of 8'6", and Pat and I work to see we never go below that. Most often, the ball is rolling around 9'. But the decision was made to have us increase the base to 9'. Most in the know will tell you two safe factors to help speed greens up are the turf groomer and the walking greensmower.

I've been fortunate over the years in dodging the hydraulic oil leak bullets

on our golf greens. But we had a beauty late last summer. It was healing by mid-fall, but we'll still see it in the spring. The fact that walking greensmowers don't leak hydraulic oil didn't escape our Green Committee Chairman's notice.

The time to start (or return to) using walkers on our golf course was right for another reason. We've lagged behind the other private clubs in our area in adding employees to our staff. We essentially had 10 people in 1989 and wanted to move to 14 for 1990. This labor increase fit nicely with the increased need for man-hours the walkers will bring. A little coincidental good luck never hurts.

I'm looking forward to their use when Memorial Day arrives, not only because of potentially better playing conditions over time, but for several other reasons. I've mentioned oil leaks — walkers have no hydraulics. They are far easier to maintain (even though there are more of them) — no flat tires and no dead batteries. The engines are smaller and less complicated and cheaper to replace.

The safety factor is a big one for me — lessened opportunities for rollovers. Also, since the machine is simpler, training operators should be much easier.

What about costs? Labor increases are significant, but we are doing that anyway. The cost of the machines is significant also. But they have at least a ten year life expectancy (in my experience), and will extend the life of our two triplex greensmowers. Since those big machines run about \$12 grand a copy these days, the cost of the walkers may actually be a smart investment and not just an extravagance. We are buying six walkers, one fitted with a turf groomer. We're also outfitting one of our triplexes with a set of groomers.

A couple of years ago, I purchased three new walkers — an orange one, a red one and a green one. Dave Noltner and I have watched these three different machines for level of maintenance each requires, number of repairs, dependability, quality of cut, how easy (or difficult) each is to work on, and popularity with operators. The red one cuts nicely but has a lousy, miser-

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able and undependable engine. It was also poorly assembled — sort of a K-Mart mower. The green one is popular with operators, but is a mechanic's nightmare. The orange one has had the fewest problems, probably because it is essentially unchanged from the ones we used at Nakoma 25 years ago.

All of these machines must have been designed for use by dwarfs or ten-year-old kids. They are uncomfortable for anyone over 6 feet tall. None wins any ease of operation competition. The red company has a new walker coming into the marketplace. We tried it and it seemed fine. But we have been burned too often by new introductions. A tractor, plow and combine company is selling a walking greensmowers, but I refuse to buy a Japanese repaint. So by process of elimination as much as anything else, we decided to buy the orange walking greensmower.

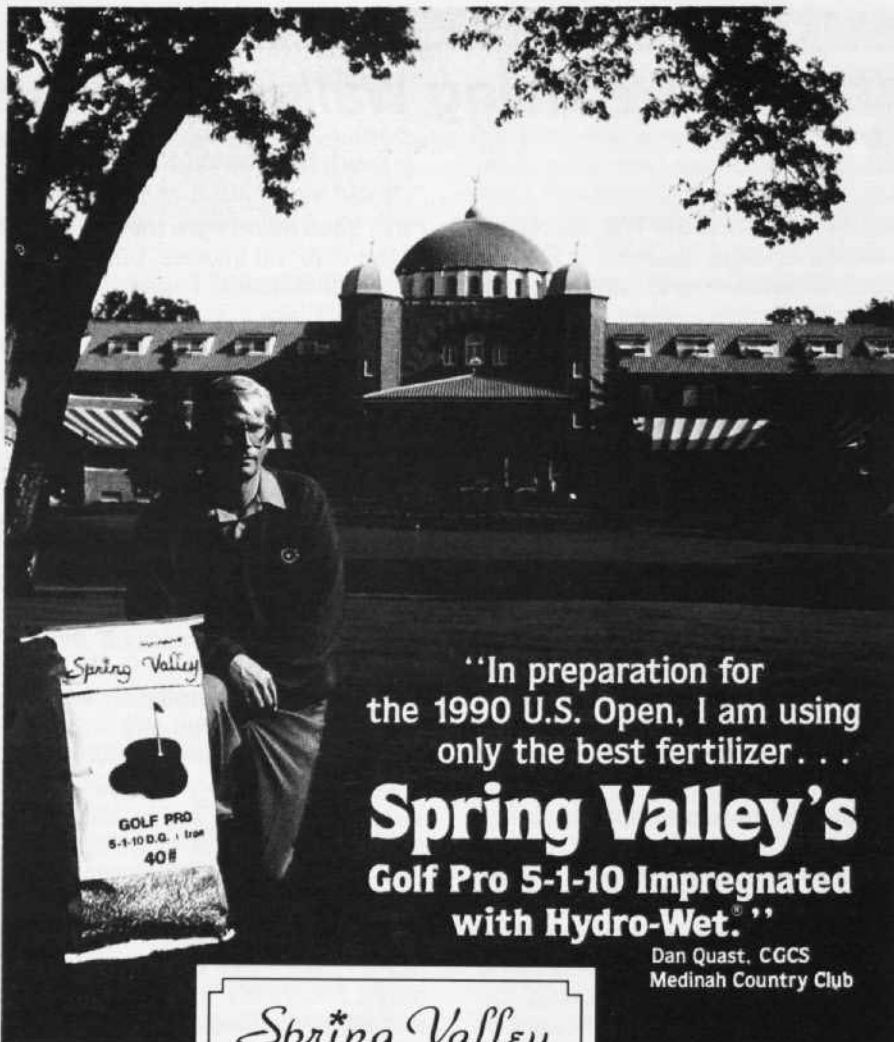
We aren't going to park our triplex greensmowers or relegate them to fairway mowing. We're going to use them before Memorial Day and after Labor Day, when there just aren't enough of us around to operate walking mowers. My guess is that we'll use a triplex for the first couple of mowings after aerification, and I could see using the triplex with groomers for each Monday mowing. And who knows — maybe they'll be used for the first cut on those days when we do double mowings. They are, indeed, a useful labor saving machine that probably will never be absent from any golf course's equipment inventory.

The decision to start using (again) walking greensmowers wasn't based on economic factors, other than the basic "can we afford to do this?" Rather, it was steeped in agronomic issues; the essential question was "what else can we do to improve our putting greens?"

I think it's worth noting that not once did the topic of narrow striping come up. Nary a single member of our committee expressed a thought about the aesthetics the walking greensmower gives a putting surface. That's about how important "cute" is; it isn't worth mentioning when trying to make a deliberate, well thought out decision.

Now that the machines have been delivered, we are casting around to find the employees to operate them. It won't necessarily be easy, but it will be rewarding because of the results. It is going to be just like it was for me 25 years ago.

Back to the future, guys!



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