



I CAN'T HEAR YOU

By Monroe S. Miller

I guess some things come with age. You know—bifocals, a few extra pounds around your waist, a receding (or receded) hairline and a little less endurance than you had only a few short years ago.

And the fact is that we all lose some of our hearing as we grow older. Even golf course superintendents. Maybe especially golf course superintendents, as I thought about it yesterday.

Columbia ParCar brought an electric utility car to our golf course to try for a while. It has exactly the same body as our ten gas utility cars have, and you cannot tell this one from any of the others just by looking. That's why it was so startling to use a golf course implement that is absolutely

dead quiet. The silence of this vehicle, as the old saw goes, was deafening.

No wonder. Sometimes the last thing a golf course resembles is a peaceful and quiet sanctuary away from the hustle, bustle and noise of society. Too often mine sounds more like an industrial park.

The worst of it may be in the early morning in the shop yard. There are upwards of twenty of us, all operating an internal combustion engine of some sort. There is the deep, full clatter of big tractor diesels, the shrill scream of backpack blowers, and the vibrating drone of single cylinder engines. Put that all together with the racket from a crowd of young males and music from BIG stereo speakers in the shop, and

the last thing you can imagine is peace and quiet.

And it's 5:30 a.m.!

How long has golf course management been in the age of the internal combustion engine—sixty or seventy years? However long that is, that's how long it has been since those of us working in the field have enjoyed the quiet golf players might enjoy at a late afternoon hour.

It would be foolish to wish for the times when all you heard while mowing fairways was the pleasant singing of a well adjusted reel passing over a sharp bedknife. Or the clickity-click of a horse drawn sickle mower trimming rough areas. It is even silly to wish for
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the relative quiet of a Ford 8N drawing a set of Worthington Airfield Blitzers—that job is now relegated to high horsepower, diesel, multiple-deck rotary mowers. Noisy rotary mowers.

The high power-to-weight ratio of engines mean they will be with us for a while. At least as long as the fuel lasts. Less time and less effort were good reasons to have embraced them in the first place and good reasons to keep them yet today.

Sound loudness is measured in decibels, and like the pH scale, it is logarithmic. So a sound of 100 dBs is ten times louder than 90 dBs, and 100 times louder than 80 dBs. For reference, a watch ticks at around 30 dBs and a Remington deer rifle registers sound in the 140-170 dBs range.

Engines that power our golf course equipment fall into the 80 to 110 decibel range. Unfortunately, injury to our ears begins in the 80 to 85 decibel range. Clearly, our hearing is at risk daily unless some precautions are taken.

Times change, and so do attitudes. Twenty years ago, few wanted to wear " earmuffs " to protect their ears. They weren't "cool" and no one wanted to look silly. I was guilty, too, opting to let our big Homelite chainsaw roar away while using it without ear protection. Sometimes the pitch and decibels literally hurt my ears, but still I didn't put anything over them for protection.

These days are saner. We insist on proper protection and get no argument from anyone. We have lots of pairs of earmuffs and we buy the small throw-away ear plugs by the gross. Earmuffs are more effective, offering an equipment operator a noise reduction range of somewhere between 15 and 30 dBs. And you can use them in combination with plugs and achieve another 10 to 15 dB reduction over using either one alone.

When you buy ear protection, you should look for the decibel noise reduction rating (NRR) somewhere on the package. You will be able to judge the quality of what you are buying.

No one could deny that progress is being made in noise reduction. That Homelite chainsaw I mentioned, which years ago Dave nicknamed "McBarker", wouldn't pass muster today. Our new chainsaw, which is even bigger, runs far quieter. Not that it is

silent, but it is greatly improved. And the engines that run our new generation walking greensmowers are so silent that we can mow next to the neighbors' homes and not worry about disturbing them at our early hour of work.

When we demonstrated large area rotaries last fall, we noticed that the one we liked best was also the noisiest one. We mentioned that to the salesman, and he said "why don't you choose the European model? It has extra sound deadening insulation and is noticeably quieter." We did, and it is.

So we know manufacturers are aware of noise and are trying to do something about it. Insulation, reduced sheet metal vibration, improved airflow and new technology mufflers are all helping. My guess is that they are more worried about emissions—changes are necessary there or they won't be able to sell in many states, most noticeably California. There will be some tagalong help, like that electric utility vehicle we tried or the electric greensmowers we saw in Dallas. But once emissions are controlled, maybe the manufacturers will face the gun on noise control and

develop some real solutions.

And then, maybe, we'll have that peace and quiet on our golf courses we all want. The American Medical Association has reported that ten million Americans have suffered noise-induced hearing loss. Another twenty million among us are regularly exposed to noise that is loud enough to damage our hearing. No doubt we are found in both groups. Fortunately, golf course attitudes now allow us to wear hearing protection. Arnold Palmer has made it acceptable to wear a hearing aid, confessing that he hasn't heard a lot of things for a lot of years. He may inspire others to do the same.

Imagine how it will be, at an early hour, hearing the birds singing while cutting fairways. Or how sweet it will be listening to the wind through pine and aspen while doing business with a greensmower. Once again, golf courses will distinguish themselves for their quiet.

I can hardly wait for that day. Maybe then my daughter Holly will stop sending me information on the "Miracle Ear"! 🍷

