

# Who's minding your shop?

*Finally, somebody is doing something about the growing shortage of skilled turf/grounds care equipment mechanics and managers.*

By RON HALL/ Managing Editor

If you've got a good mechanic in your golf course or landscape maintenance facility—keep him happy. If you've got a good mechanic that's also a good manager—keep him *really* happy.

The supply of good grounds care equipment mechanics is far short of demand, and the shortage of mechanics who can also manage a turf or grounds care maintenance facility is even greater. In fact, the word "mechanic" hardly seems an adequate title for these valuable employees anymore.

Turf equipment technician or manager, depending on the level of responsibility, are more accurate titles.

Last year 23 people graduated from the one-year Turf Equipment Managers program in Lake City Community College, Lake City, FL. Upon receiving their certificates they faced the welcome prospect of having 80 different employers seeking their services.

For good reason, too.

"Turf equipment has gotten so sophisticated with hydraulics, electronics and computers that the industry is screaming for skilled equipment technicians," says John Piersol, Chairman Golf Course Operations/Landscape Technology at Lake City CC.

#### **Not just fix-it specialists**

In fact, mechanical repair is not the number one function of a grounds care equipment mechanic anymore. Preventive

maintenance is. An equipment technician, at least a good one, maintains mowers and other grounds care equipment to minimize repairs and downtime. If the technician is spending most of his time rebuilding engines, says Piersol, he's probably not doing a good enough job on the PM side.

"The industry, and especially the golf industry, needs people who can design a shop, organize and set up a shop, keep a parts room, use a computer, establish a PM (preventive maintenance) program on each piece of

equipment, train an assistant mechanic, help train equipment operators and, yes, fix things too," says Piersol.

"That's asking a lot," he admits, especially since, until recently anyway, being a "lawnmower mechanic" carried little prestige, and brought few financial rewards. That's changing fast.



**John Piersol: industry needs talent, skill.**



Attended Advanced Turf Mechanics Program at SUNY Delhi in April: (l. to r.) Roger Baker, Gerald Dabien, Brian Tindal, Steve Lucas, Mike Marshall, Bud Bruce, and instructor Paul Zellner from Jacobsen/Textron. The Seminar is an annual event on Delhi campus in the NY Catskills.

### Nice opportunities

Continued strong golf course construction is thinning the pool of trained, skilled grounds equipment technicians and managers. The starting salary for promising, if not particularly experienced, equipment technicians is in the \$18,000 to \$30,000 range. New hires with good organizational and managerial skills can increase their worth substantially in a few short years, says Piersol.

That's because not just any mechanic has what it takes to maintain and service turf and grounds care equipment, says Steve Lucas, veteran turf equipment specialist at the Weston Golf Club, Weston, Mass.

"I suppose you could get an automotive mechanic to step in, but he would be hard pressed to know how to adjust reels, or the proper greasing and maintenance schedules," says Lucas, former president of New England Turf Technicians Association.

"A turf equipment mechanic does so many different jobs, from welding and fabrication one day to painting the next, to working with a computerized irrigation system on another day. A golf course mechanic is a unique breed."

James Roche, National Service Manager, Scag Power Equipment, says the shortage of mechanically trained technicians is complicated, but also multi-layered.

### Dealers feel the pinch

In addition to the need for skilled mechanics at the professional user level (golf and landscape maintenance shops), equipment dealers/distributors are also pinched for trained technical people. Turnover is typically high in dealers' shops. More troubling, there isn't a stream of young mechanically trained youngsters to fill the void.

"We as manufacturers are all building more sophisticated machinery every year, and it's getting more technical, like the automotive industry did. We need people to service this product," admits Roche

But, how many moms and dads aspire

## Turf mechanics' Web page a 'hit'

You might call them two average working Joe's with a great idea, a Web site for turf equipment mechanics. But, actually there's just one Joe. His name is Joe Dawkins, and his partner is Scott Martin.

By day, they are turf equipment mechanics at The Falls Country Club, West Palm Beach, Fla. By evening they're in front of their personal computers, expanding and updating their Web home page ([www.turftec.com](http://www.turftec.com)) which dispenses turf equipment maintenance and repair information to other turf mechanics worldwide.

TurfTec is just eight months old but already registers about 1,000 "hits" a day. (A "hit" is recorded anytime, anybody accesses the site.)

"We found out that there is a big need for this kind of information," says Martin. "We wanted to provide a source for turf mechanics to get updated manufacturers' service bulletins."

While it hasn't been easy to convince equipment manufacturers or equipment distributors to provide them with service bulletins to post on their home page, cooperation is increasing, says Martin. That's because the two turf mechanics strive to keep the information on their site practical, accurate and impartial. For instance, in April TurfTec featured valuable maintenance information about products from Toro, Honda, Briggs & Stratton, Kohler and Tecumseh.



Since unveiling their home page in August 1996, Dawkins and Martin have been adding features like discussion pages for: power equipment, agronomics (thanks to Agronomist Michael De Pew), job classifieds, new product information and links to related sites.

"The web site is for anybody to use. We think it's to everybody's advantage to get this information in the hands of people who can use it," says Martin. "I think most of the people who use it are glad that the site is run by two working turf equipment mechanics." R.H.

for their sons or daughters to grow up "to fix lawnmowers"? How many high school guidance counselors suggest careers in outdoor power equipment repair to students?

Indeed, how many counselors or students are even aware of such a career opportunity? Extremely few. But, equipment manufacturers want to change that.

A good place to start is with selected vocational/technical schools, believes Bruce Radcliff, director, customer education, Briggs & Stratton.

"We need to go out and identify those vocational schools that have an existing program that would fit the needs of the group," says Radcliff.



Ed Combest, right, coordinator and one of three instructors of Turf Equipment Management program at Lake City CC.



Between 80-100 employers are seeking the services of the 26 graduates of the 1997 Turf Equipment Management program, says John Piersol.

*'A turf equipment mechanic does so many different jobs. . . He is a unique breed.'*—Steve Lucas, Weston Golf Club

To that end, people like Roche and Radcliff, have begun working through the relatively new Engine & Equipment Training Council (EETC). One of the goals of the EETC, along with supporting an industry-sanctioned certification process, is to inform young people of growing career opportunities in the maintenance and repair of outdoor power equipment.

"Our initial response would be, to the best of the ability of the various OEMs (original equipment manufacturers), to supply the schools with information and product and anything else they would need to maintain a more viable program," says Radcliff.

#### Training needed

While the shortage of technicians is cause for concern, neither power equipment suppliers nor professional end users like golf courses or landscape companies have the resources to train a new generation of technicians themselves.

"Give us a person that understands how to use a volt and ohm meter, who understands basic hydraulics, and we will take it upon ourselves to train that person on using the diagnostic tools that are used on our products," says Rich Smith, commercial service education Manager, The Toro Company. "But nobody has the time to bring somebody in and teach them what they should have learned in high school or trade school."

The stakes are high. That's why equipment suppliers like Toro, John Deere, Jacobsen, Ransomes/Cushman/Ryan and others donate products to qualified trade schools like Lake City College and The State University of New York SUNY (State University of New York) Delhi, in the Catskill Mountains.

Sensing a growing industry need, Dominic Morales, Chairman of the Golf Operations Department at SUNY Delhi, fashioned Delhi's Turf Equipment Management program after Lake City's successful one-year program. (Both schools also offer more extensive Golf Course Operations courses. The Turf Equipment

Management program comprises the first year of study at both.)

"While the Lake City program is serving the Southeast, our program will be serving the Northeast," says Morales. "We're confident that our students will be very marketable because while we want to train good mechanics, we want to develop good managers too."

Morales says today's turf equipment technicians and managers need a higher level of training because of the increasing responsibility they shoulder.

"A riding greens mower can cost as much as \$15,000. A riding triplex fairway unit can be anywhere from \$25,000 to \$35,000. A good frontline rough mower is just as expensive," says Morales.

"A new golf course might have \$600,000 to \$700,000 in new equipment. And, if you count the maintenance facility too, the turf equipment manager could be responsible for managing over \$1 million in equipment and facilities," he says.

Asks Morales, with that kind of investment in equipment, would you as a golf course superintendent or a landscape business owner be comfortable with just a lawnmower mechanic? **LM**



Dominic Morales: Delhi program ready.