

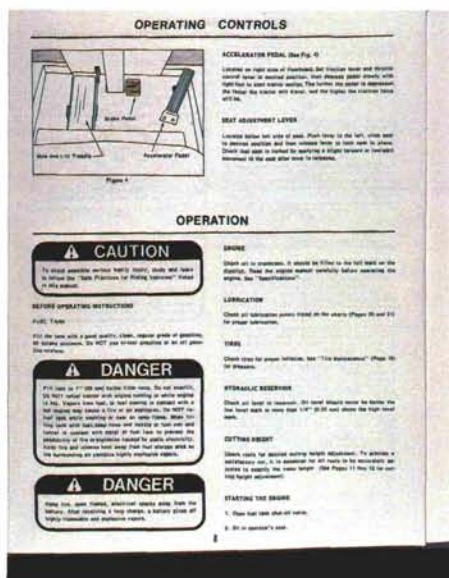
# Hi-Tech Equipment Calls for Higher Skills and Better Training

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**A**T TODAY'S PRICES for golf course maintenance equipment, can any golf club really afford minimum-wage operators? And are you, the golf course superintendent, constantly sharpening your teaching skills and training techniques? Of course the answers should be "no" to the first and "yes" to the second question. But honestly, is this reality? Too often, perhaps, the answer is "no" to that question.

Careless operation and haphazard maintenance can cost a golf course thousands of dollars each year in repair and replacement. Expensive, sophisticated equipment requires high operating skills and sound mechanical maintenance. What can be done to protect the club's investment and the superintendent's reputation?

A number of surveys have shown that operator abuse of equipment can be

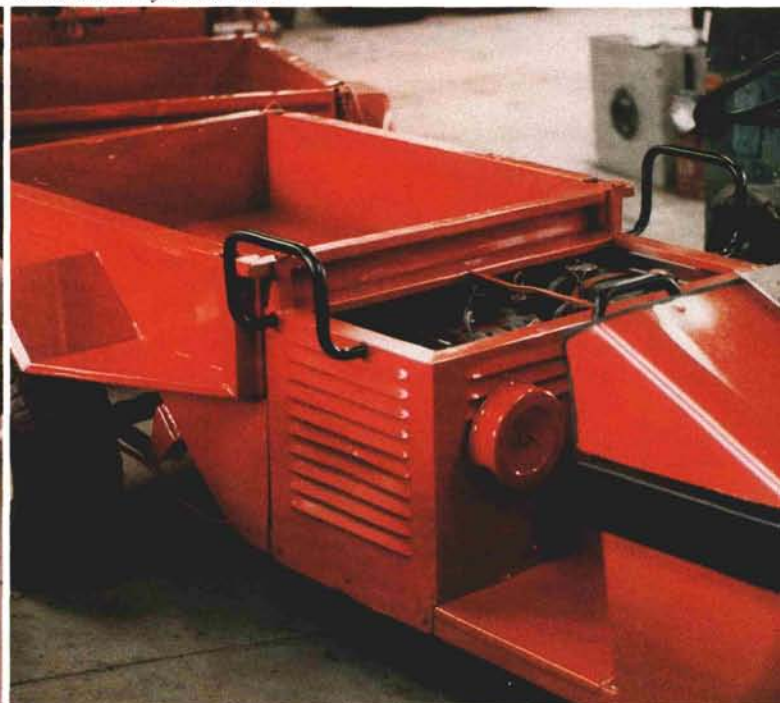


Put "hands-on" the operating manual before "hands-on" the machine.

traced to several factors: 1) low wages, 2) temporary nature of employment, 3) inadequate training, and 4) little or no communication between operators and supervisor. It was not uncommon years ago to find permanent employees who could be responsible for operating, adjusting, and maintaining a piece of equipment strictly on their own. This gave them a sense of pride and a feeling of belonging to the organization. It frequently resulted in a consistent, safe, and efficient operation. At many courses today, employees are expected to operate all kinds of equipment, but they have no responsibility for maintaining any of it.

If a superintendent was ever offered a brand-new hydraulic greens mower for \$300, he would probably think twice before accepting the offer. At that low price, something must be wrong, stolen, or missing. Yet that same superintendent is expected to hire reliable, permanent

The better the care . . . The better they'll take care.



help for \$5 an hour or less. Most qualified people laugh at that salary. The first step in hiring a capable crew is to offer a wage commensurate with their abilities and responsibilities. Remember, these people are going to be maintaining your golf course, worth millions of dollars, and they will be doing it with equipment that costs tens of thousands of dollars.

**WHAT KIND OF** people do you look for when hiring? Running a greens mower, in many ways, is more complicated than operating an automobile. Don't assume that if someone can drive and maintain a car, he can run and maintain a greens mower. Furthermore, experience on another golf course doesn't mean the person knows what is expected of him on a new job. The most important qualities to look for are maturity and common sense.

When new employees are hired, how much time should be allotted for training? Is one week enough? Is three weeks too much? Is enough time allowed for training before the person is needed as an active participant on the course? Too often an employee is expected to properly mow greens after only verbal instructions.

To begin with, a new employee, or old employees dealing with a new piece of equipment, should read the operator's portion of the equipment manual before ever turning a key. Once confident that the person understands the manual, the mechanic should go over the book and the unit with the employee. The mechanic should let the employee know what ongoing daily maintenance procedures he (the operator) will be responsible for. This step makes the operator understand that he plays an active role in the operation of his machine.

Having the operator work closely with the mechanic will also help prevent operation of a piece of equipment whose performance is not up to par. The operator needn't know how to replace an engine or restore a hydraulic system, but he should be responsible for and know how to clean filters, check tire pressures, oil levels, hydraulic lines, and steering cables before operation. The operator should know what weight oils go into what machine, and he should check these levels often enough to avoid damage to the hydraulics and the engine. For this portion of the training program, the superintendent and the mechanic must thoroughly know about the piece of equipment themselves. This

means reading the manuals, studying the machine, and attending training seminars.

**A**WORD ABOUT safety. We should never, under any circumstances, allow an employee to alter or bypass safety stops on equipment. If the machine does not work properly, it should be thoroughly checked out by the mechanic. An hour in the shop is considerably less expensive than a maimed operator. Always have a downed piece of equipment repaired properly. Showing the employees that you are concerned with their well-being will make them more conscious of their own safety.

After the employee has completely read the manual, it is time to move the machine. Depending on the circumstances, the actual trainer may be the superintendent, assistant, or foreman. The first step is checking out the machine. The employee should check tire pressure, oil levels, and hydraulic lines. He should check for signs of leakage where the unit was parked. Safety features should also be checked, and the mechanic should go over the complete check list. The employee should then start the unit and be shown the proper driving pattern from the shop to the yard and to the golf course. If all employees know the traffic patterns, accidents can be avoided in the shop area. Time should be spent practicing starting, stopping, and parking the units. Also, by assigning each unit its own parking spot, it is easy to tell if that piece of equipment has an undetected leak.

Show the employee what to do when he brings the unit in for the day. If there is an equipment log or a service form to be filled out, he should be instructed in the proper procedures. He should check to see if the unit is due for routine maintenance and, if so, inform the mechanic. Keeping up with preventive maintenance on equipment can prevent costly repairs and engine replacements before their time.

When the employee feels comfortable with the operation of the machine, it is time to move him to the course. For example, let's assume the person is learning how to mow greens. The best place to practice would be a nursery or practice green. Show the employee the proper speed and angle of approach, then park the machine. Follow this with a walk through, explaining when to slow to mowing speed, when to lower or

engage the cutting units, when to disengage the cutting units, and where to turn. Then, have the employee start the unit and drive through the mowing process without actually mowing. Tell him when he will begin to cut, stop cutting, and turn. By using a dry-run approach, turf and equipment damage caused by inexperience can be avoided. Now is the time for the employee to establish the habit of constantly checking what work he has done. Explain how the reels and bedknives work. Show him what a proper cut looks like and what to watch for when a cutting unit is out of adjustment. Tell him also to watch for hydraulic fluid on the green and show him pictures of this problem so he can identify it. By constantly checking his work, the mower operator will soon discover a leaking hydraulic line well before six greens or more are mowed. The employee should be told, at this time, what to do in the event of a hydraulic leak. He should know whom to contact and where the proper materials are stored in case of trouble.

**ONLY AFTER** the employee is thoroughly comfortable with the mechanics of mowing should he actually move to the real thing. Send him out with an experienced person the first three or four times to show him the most effective way around the golf course and to help him with any problems. This can be a critical point in an employee's career. While he doesn't need the careful watching he needed while learning, he should feel free to come to the supervisor and mechanic whenever he has a problem. He should also be told when he is doing a good job. This builds his confidence and makes him a more valuable employee. At the same time, the employee should understand that he will be accountable for the job he does. This will also improve his performance.

Without a doubt, the most valuable assets in any golf course maintenance operation are the personnel on the crew. Therefore, it stands to reason that, if they are treated and trained properly, they will gain great respect and pride in the job they do. Quality personnel will significantly affect equipment operating costs and productivity while minimizing expensive machine down time and repairs. But selecting and training personnel is not easy; therefore, it is one of the qualities found in great golf course superintendents.