

The Golf Course Mechanic — A Changing Image

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IT WASN'T SO LONG AGO that a knack for small engine repair qualified an individual for a job as a golf course mechanic. Specialized equipment was whatever the mechanic could jerry-rig from old equipment and scrap iron. The pay was nothing to brag about, but unlike most of the other positions at the golf course, the work was steady throughout the year.

During the last 20 years or so, the expectations of average golfers have changed significantly. The demand for more consistent, higher-quality playing conditions has encouraged equipment companies to design a considerable amount of complicated, highly specialized equipment. The crude prototypes of today's equipment probably could have been found in yesterday's maintenance buildings, designed or "invented" by the superintendent and mechanic over the winter. After all, no one really believes the concept for turf groomers or motorized bunker rakes just popped into the mind of an engineer at an equipment manufacturer.

The availability of specialized equipment also parallels the surge in the popularity of golf. Small courses that were never designed to accommodate heavy play now receive 40,000 to 60,000 rounds of golf per season. Consequently, equipment has been designed for extreme efficiency while minimizing wear and compaction on the playing surfaces. Similarly, a new generation of heavy-duty aerifiers and more efficient slicer/seeder are now available to renovate and relieve compaction in worn areas. Much of the mowing equipment is being downsized to produce higher-quality playing surfaces — and that means more mowers requiring precision adjustment.

The knowledge and abilities of the mechanic have had to keep pace with the more sophisticated inventory of equipment found on the course. A mastery of two- or four-cycle engines is inadequate — add diesels and hydraulic systems to the list. The daily duties, such as checking or adjusting the height of a mower, have become complicated tasks on modern equipment,

such as five-plex mowers equipped with turf groomers.

Think about it — some high-capacity fairway/rough mowing equipment costs in excess of \$50,000. The value of the equipment inventory at some courses can easily exceed half a million dollars. The golf course mechanic often is responsible for more costly equipment than the local "automobile technician."

Until the golfers in this country will accept less than perfectly manicured conditions for day-to-day play, the expectations for flawless greens and fairways will continue to put more pressure on the mechanic. There is little room for a bench-setting error when the greens are routinely cut below $\frac{1}{8}$ inch. Similarly, the hydraulic fluid leak that damages a green or fairway was unknown to the golfer of yesterday — when green fees were a few dollars. That type of accident on an expensive golf course today can result in a terminated employee.

As regulations concerning pesticide applications on golf courses become more strict, the maintenance of spray equipment will become more important and more complicated. The documentation of calibration, proper nozzle selection, etc., will likely become mandatory. Today's top-of-the-line spray equipment is now memory-chip assisted — so the mechanic must expand his expertise to include at least a working understanding of computers. The importance of developing a sound preventative maintenance program for sprayers, spreaders, etc., cannot be overemphasized. The negative publicity and expense of a pesticide spill cleanup, if the application equipment fails on the course, should always be considered.

Public notice of pesticide applications, called "posting," is now mandatory in many states. Consequently, the maintenance facility is more likely to receive calls from concerned individuals requesting more detailed information about pesticides than ever before. Similarly, as superintendents strive to develop better lines of communication with golfers, more calls are likely

to be placed to the shop — and who is the most likely person to answer the phone? The mechanic. The golfer or neighbor develops a first impression of the operation as soon as the phone is answered, so proper phone answering technique is quite important. A professional response can mean the difference between defusing a potentially serious confrontation or escalating the problem. No one expects the mechanic to be a trained receptionist, but sometimes he may need to assume this role.

In response to their changing role on the golf course, mechanics have tried to change others' perceptions of themselves. Much like the "greenkeeper" of yesterday, mechanics are striving for professional recognition. A number of mechanics' associations have been organized around the country. The largest in the Great Lakes Region is the Chicagoland Golf Course Mechanics Association, with over 100 members. Monthly meetings are arranged where the mechanics get together to discuss common problems and share time- and labor-saving ideas. The Chicagoland Association also sponsors an educational session at the North Central Turfgrass Exposition each year. For information about the Chicagoland Association, call Patti Maguire, Secretary, at (708) 446-5268.

In the past, the opportunity to broaden the knowledge and experience of a mechanic was limited to attending the intensive training schools sponsored by the major equipment manufacturers, such as Jacobsen or Toro. During the past few years, many more options have become available. Monthly association meetings provide the opportunity for more formalized educational sessions; specific topics can be targeted for an afternoon seminar.

Other educational opportunities are now available from several universities. Lake City Community College, located in Lake City, Florida, offers a one-year turf equipment management certification program — two semesters of classes and summer internship. This program graduates 15 to 20 students per year, and most are offered em-

ployment even before they graduate. For more information, call John Piersol, (904) 752-1822, extension 225.

Michigan State University has structured an educational opportunity for the "working" mechanic called the Certified Turfgrass/Landscape Equipment Technology Program. The candidate attends a six-hour night session, once a week, for four semesters. Two schools are offered, one located in the eastern part of the state and the other in the west. An additional school will be offered in the north if enough interest is generated. The first group of mechanics recently completed the certification process and are working in the field. For information, call Dr. Cliff Jump, (517) 355-0190.

Kishwaukee College, in Malta, Illinois, now offers a course of study entitled Horticultural Equipment Technology. It is a four-semester (64 hours) program which includes basic plant science courses, management techniques, and even Spanish language terminology and applicable phrases heard in the workplace, as well as broad instruction in the repair and maintenance of golf course equipment. Two internship sessions are required. For more information, call Carol Quenett, (805) 825-2086.

Fortunately, the wages for an experienced mechanic have finally started to become commensurate with their value to the golf course. According to Dennis Wilson, CGCS, the additional compensation needed to keep a "good" mechanic at Sunset Ridge Country Club was more than offset by the decrease in the equipment maintenance budget, parts, service calls, etc. According to a survey of mechanics in the Chicago area, their average wages were \$30,000 in 1992, up from \$28,000 in 1990. So expect to pay a bit more for an experienced mechanic — if you can find one.

Many superintendents simply cannot find good mechanics with golf course experience. High school students are not aware of the opportunities in this field, so there are few "apprentices" working under the "lifetime employee" mechanics found at many courses. The image of the mechanic is changing — but more needs to be done to promote the profession in the future. "The goal of this association shall be to enhance the professionalism of the Golf Course Mechanic. To attain this goal, we will continually strive to seek better education. We will open, maintain, and expand the common lines of communication, first with our fellow members, then at our respective places of work, and finally throughout the golf course community. We seek to attain a common goal of better, more practical, and efficient management of our equipment." (Excerpt from the bylaws of the Chicagoland Golf Course Mechanics Association).



(Top) Tim Sobleskey, Egypt Valley Country Club, Ada, Michigan, was a member of the first class of students to complete Michigan State University's Certified Turfgrass/Landscape Equipment Technology Program. The classes are taught one night per week, for four semesters, to provide formal training to the "working mechanic."

(Above) Bill Martin, Blue Mound Golf and Country Club, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, checks and adjusts the cutting height of the greensmowers. Attention to details provides consistent, high-quality playing conditions.