

SPORTS TURF MOWING TRENDS: MANUFACTURERS' ROUNDTABLE



Walker mid-size rotary mower at work on a soccer field in Israel.

Mower technology has come along way since the horse-drawn reel gangs of years gone by. Now there are host of alternatives—lightweight fairway mowers, multi-deck rotaries, hydraulic reel gangs, fine-cut flails, mulchers—but the objective remains the same: To cut grass efficiently and cleanly.

Nowhere is this more important than on athletic fields, golf courses, and other recreational turf areas, where time and turf quality are of the essence.

Advances in mower technology are created by designers and engineers, but born of the needs and desires of end users. Successful mower manufacturers listen carefully and attempt to build and improve the products requested. End users, in turn, let the manufacturers know how they've done. Without this relationship, the technology might stand still.

Here's a look, from the perspectives of several major mower manufacturers, at a few of today's trends in user preference and mower technology for cutting large turf areas, and some possibilities for the future. They don't agree on all points but one thing is certain—they're listening.

Jacobsen's Light Thrust

"Right now, it seems like sports turf managers want their fields to be as finely manicured as a golf course, and to look and play as well as a golf course," says Dave Buchanan, marketing specialist for Jacobsen/Textron. "You can really see that in the precision striping of professional baseball diamonds. Sports turf managers are going to things like the Turf Groomer, a reel in front of the mowing reel which 'stands up' the grass before it is cut.

"Professionals want less compaction, so they're going with lightweight mow-

ers, better quality of cut, so they're going with higher quality reel mowers," he continues. "They want it done as fast as possible, so riders are becoming more popular, and they want a machine that's comfortable. Creature comfort in mowing is not as important on a baseball field as it is on a golf course, where you have acres of turf to cut, but it's still nice to have comfort if you have to mow something every other day. That means more comfortable seats and ergonomic design, so people can reach and see everything they need to."

Excel Industries: Tough, Durable, Safe

"It seems like people are having to maintain turf in rougher and rougher areas, so tougher, more maneuverable equipment is becoming increasingly important," says Don Consolver, com-

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munications writer for Excel Industries. "We're fortunate in that our equipment is built to handle tough mowing conditions."

"Mulching machines, like the Turbo Shredder, provide a real convenience for superintendents and turf managers in that they don't have to collect the grass and dispose of it," he continues. "Quite a few universities are doing studies on what happens to those short grass clippings left on the grass, and it seems that they help retain moisture and deliver nutrients back to the grass. There's a real thatch myth—certainly, it could become a problem if you mow infrequently and leave long clippings, but if you cut regularly and leave short clippings there won't be a problem."

The Toro Company: Wide Rotaries Are Cutting Edge

"For the last 10 years at least, we've been doing a lot research in wide area mowing preferences," says Rick Rodier, marketing manager of rotary products for The Toro Company. "That led us into the wide area rotary mower market, which began with the release of the 16-foot Groundsmaster 580D in 1987 or 1988. But there was more than productivity of the machine to consider. At the time, research showed us that if an operator felt comfortable after an eight-hour day mowing, then he'd be more productive."

"This lead us to consider features other than cutting width. How well does a wide area rotary maneuver? How easy is it to transport? With these and other questions, we put together a computer program called "Value Analysis" which helps customers compare wide cut mowers and figures out how much it will cost per acre to mow a site with a given machine."

Kubota: Reel Performance

"One of things I've seen at the university level is people becoming more knowledgeable on field quality and mowing products," says Doug Fencl, Kubota products manager. "Some sports fields have actually hired golf course superintendents, and that's pulled the golf course mentality into the sports turf mentality."

"The sports turf area, I think, is moving toward better quality, in both practice and playing fields, where they have

the budget. That may create a tendency to go with more reel equipment."

National Mower: Standing By Simplicity

"In sports fields and parks, I see people going with incredibly expensive and sophisticated equipment, and I question whether it's needed," says Stan Kinkead, secretary/treasurer for National Mower. "Who would have thought that people would be mowing grass with machines that cost \$50,000? Wishfully thinking, I would love to see people getting back into reel mowers and gang reels, but I don't see that happening."

"Cost-conscious people who appreciate simplicity and don't think they need all the technological sophistication tend to be the users of our products. All of our reels gangs are PTO-driven, which is what everybody wants in this day and age. We don't even make friction drive reel gangs anymore, but as far as I'm concerned, they were easiest, simplest, cheapest, and best way to cut large areas. And they would last so long—that may have been their strongest feature. They provided a good return on investment."

Walker Manufacturing: Mid-Size Versatility

like ours, are primarily used as companions to large field mowers, which can be limited in the areas they can enter," says Bob Walker, president of Walker Manufacturing. "In areas involving intricate landscaping, the usefulness of a mid-size mower ties right in. For example; I've been told that now our machines are being used to mow the entrance way at Pinehurst golf course in North Carolina."

"Recently, a magazine publisher predicted to me that five years from now there wouldn't be any vacuum decks—they'd all be replaced by recyclers. But we've seen no decline in the sales of our vacuuming machines."

Gravely International: Going Big

"If there's anything that comes to mind from talking with parks and recreation departments, people that take care of really serious areas of quality turf, it's that bigger is better," says Craig Neuhardt, Gravely customer service manager. "Years ago, 60-inch mowers were considered huge. Now, with the wing-deck units, you can cut 10 feet and beyond."

"In the actual mowing end of large areas, grass collection has never been a

big issue, but safety is. Side-discharge decks, even with chutes, have the possibility of throwing objects. What we're finding, almost universally, is that people are asking for rear-discharge or mulching type decks. They reduce the incidence of thrown objects. In many markets, like New Orleans, we couldn't even consider presenting our product if we didn't offer rear-discharge decks. Safety is a big issue. We just flat cannot let anything out the door if there's even the beginning of a question mark on safety."

John Deere: Diamond Focus

"In the baseball market, we definitely see some changing trends, particularly if it's a professional field. In a professional sports complex, one that will appear on television, a very clean, striped appearance is becoming a requirement," says Bill Chestnut, marketing coordinator for the golf and turf division of the John Deere Company. "Even from the infield to the outfield, you see different mowing patterns and different widths, depending on what the park wants the attending and television audience to see."

"Another thing you see in professional baseball fields or complexes are team managers and grounds care managers strategizing for upcoming games. They look down the road at the team that's coming in—look at its hitting and field characteristics—and decide how high they want to cut the grass to control the speed of the roll of the ball."

Ransomes America Corporation: Middle Weight Possibilities

"For larger areas such as golf course fairways, I believe people are going away from 'ultra-light' mowers, depending on what part of the country you're in," says Peter Whurr, director of sales and distribution for turf products for Ransomes America. "Some are still going with ultra-light mowers and others are using hydraulic reel gangs. But there seems to be an area of need between the two—sort of a mid-weight mower that is light in terms of ground compaction, but more durable than an ultra-lightweight machine."

"We will continue to build our machines to what our customer base requires. Of course, legislation also governs a lot of what we can do. But we're a market-driven company. What comes out of the focus groups we conduct will determine much of what we do. We depend on end users." □