

Utility Vehicles...

Defining your utility vehicle needs, such as towing a topdresser, is critical to successful selection. Photo courtesy: Ransomes America Corporation.



... Meet Your Needs

Consider the classic “utility” player in professional baseball. He can handle both infield and outfield chores. He can hit competently, though is far from a batting champ. His foot speed is not blazing, yet he runs well enough. His is not “the best” at anything. Instead, he is good at a number of things, and that versatility makes him invaluable.

The same can be said for many of today’s utility vehicles. While no one unit, light-, medium-, or heavy-duty can meet *all* your needs, utility vehicles are among the most versatile sports turf management tools. Getting from point A to point B is the least of their capabilities. Utility vehicles can be used to haul cargo, from tools to materials like fertilizer and topdressing. They can be used to tow implements, such as aerators and spreaders. Outfitted with the proper equipment, they can serve as sprayers. The possibilities are unlimited.

Transforming those possibilities into realities begins with choosing the best utility vehicle for your needs, and that starts with defining them. Before you even begin to look for a vehicle, you’ll want to sit down and make a precise list of your needs. Are you looking for simple transportation? Do you need a vehicle that not only moves people, but also has some hauling capacity? Will the vehicle constantly carry heavy payloads, or pull implements for hours on end? Just as buying something too light for heavy use is a mistake, so too is overspending for a heavy-duty model that will never see anything

but light use — that’s an inefficient use of financial resources, and these days those resources are tough to come by.

There are three basic categories of utility vehicles. In general, light-duty utility vehicles have a payload capacity of 500 pounds or less. Medium-duty utility vehicles have payload capacities up to 1,000 pounds. The toughest and most powerful utility vehicles have up to 2,000-pound payload capacities.

From the Ground Up

Whether a utility vehicle is light-, medium-, or heavy-duty, it must be at least sturdy enough to stand up to the workload its manufacturer says it can handle. For example, a heavy-duty utility vehicle may be advertised to hold a certain payload and number of passengers, but if it “bottoms out” over small bumps when fully loaded, it’s not doing the job properly.

Light, medium, or heavy, a utility vehicle must be built to withstand its designed use. That means you have to consider every aspect of it, from tires to steering wheel.

The best way to begin your research is to ask around. Contact other sports turf professionals in your area about their utility vehicles, keeping in mind that their needs may be different than yours. “Word of mouth” is a powerful tool, and if something is unreliable, poorly constructed, or even badly designed it won’t last long on the market. If you’re having trouble finding end-users to speak with, ask your local dealers or distributors. They

should be able to provide you with a list of references. But remember that no sane dealer or distributor is going to hand out the name of an unsatisfied customer, so as you contact these references, don’t be afraid to ask blunt, hard questions about performance, reliability, dealer support in case of breakdowns, and so on.

Once you’ve narrowed your choice down, there are a couple of key elements to consider. They include:

- **Vehicle construction** — Both the vehicle’s body and chassis should be constructed of materials appropriate to its designed use. In the case of heavy-duty utility vehicles, that means heavy-gauge steel, properly welded. (Welded frames are believed by a number of utility vehicle manufacturers to be superior to bolted frames.)

- **Power** — Today’s utility vehicles come with a number of high-performance engine options. Regardless of powerplant, however, your needs are fairly simple. First, the engine must provide enough power to do the job. Of course, as any vehicle’s load increases, available power (speed, torque, etc.) will decrease, and you shouldn’t expect the same snappy power response from a fully loaded utility vehicle that you get in one carrying only a driver. Plus, you probably wouldn’t want to travel at top speed with a fully loaded utility vehicle. However, that’s not an excuse for a vehicle rated to handle a certain load to “crawl along” when that load is applied. Power should be *sufficient* to the task.

Therefore, it's crucial to test drive the vehicle you're considering, not only empty, but fully loaded.

Reliability is equally critical. An engine that performs like no other, between frequent breakdowns, is worthless. Ask both your dealer and the references he provides about the service records of engines offered in utility vehicles. Also, ask about service intervals, and don't be put off if they're regular. The best engines in the world will fail if improperly serviced. That means paying attention to the "little" things, like clean oil and oil filters, as well as major tuneups.

Engine noise can be another consideration. If you work in a residential area and you begin work at dawn, a noisy engine will be not be well received by your neighbors. Here again, a test-drive can be invaluable.

•Drive-train durability — The drive-train transfers the power of the engine to the wheels — that sounds, and is, fairly basic. Yet problems in the drive-train are often serious and involve significant downtime, so asking your utility vehicle dealer about drive-train construction is worthwhile. Protection is one element. Reliability is another.

•Suspension system — Payload capacity, and how that load is carried, is in large part determined by a utility vehicle's suspension system. Shocks, struts and springs can determine the smoothness of ride, ability of the vehicle to handle difficult terrain, and can enhance stability. The suspension system itself should also have adequate ground clearance, so that it is not damaged by obstacles as the vehicle travels. Suspension systems vary in sophistication from vehicle to vehi-



Test drives or "demos" are a must before you buy. Photo courtesy: John Deere Company.

cle. Your dealer should be able to explain, in plain English, the advantages of various suspension systems on the vehicles he carries.

•Maneuverability and stability — Utility vehicles often operate in tight quarters, which makes maneuverability yet another element to consider. Maneuverability, in general, is determined by the steering and suspension systems of a given vehicle, combined with that vehicle's length and wheelbase. Wider wheelbase vehicles tend to be more stable, particularly on angled terrain, than those with narrower wheelbases. They are less prone to roll-overs. They also tend to be more maneuverable.

Tires are the third portion of the stability equation. Wide flotation tires not only reduce compaction of surfaces over which they travel, but enhance stability simply by the increased surface area they apply to the ground.

Here again, a test drive is immeasurably valuable. Approach the test drive with a mental picture of the area in which you operate. As you put the vehi-

cle through its paces, picture it working in the confines of your facility. Can it make the difficult corners? Does it "feel" stable in both straight lines and corners? How will it feel when fully loaded? (You may want to ask the dealer to load the bed before you test drive it.)

•Operability — Have you ever set out to buy an automobile when a certain model looked spectacular and its engine hummed, but once you got behind the wheel it just wasn't comfortable to drive? That's operability, and while it's important in your personal vehicle, it's doubly so in a utility vehicle an operator may use for hours on end. The good news is that today's top manufacturers have designed their utility vehicles with ergonomics in mind.

Start by examining the operator area of the vehicle, and trust your eyes. If a particular lever, knob, or peddle looks difficult to reach, it probably will be.

However, just because a vehicle looks like it will be comfortable and convenient to operate, doesn't necessarily mean it will after several hours. And while a short test-drive may be useful, it's an inadequate gauge of how operator will feel after a long day of using a given vehicle. If your dealer has a "demo" program, which enables you to try a vehicle for a couple of days, take advantage of it. Short of that, you'll want to ask owners of the kind of vehicle you're considering about operability characteristics of those vehicles.

•Versatility — In general, utility vehicle versatility goes up with the rating (light, medium, heavy) of the vehicle. Utility vehicles move you and your personnel around your facility. That, and perhaps carrying 500 pounds or less of cargo, may be the limits of a light-duty utility vehicle, and if that's all you need from the vehicle, you've made the right choice. If perhaps, you still need to move workers but require a bit more payload capacity, a medium-duty vehicle might provide all the versatility you need. However, when it comes to heavy

Utility Vehicle Manufacturers

American Suzuki Motor Corp. Brea, CA (800) 447-4700	Deere & Co. (800) 544-2122	Kent Manufacturing (813) 485-8871
Club Car Augusta, GA (800) 643-1010	E-Z-GO-Textron Augusta, GA (800) 241-5855	Mitsubishi Motor Sales of America Cypress, CA (800) 366-6487
Columbia Par Car Deefield, WI (800) 222-4653	Haulmaster Mendota, IL (800) 848-4285	Smithco Wayne, PA (215) 688-4009
Cushman Lincoln, NE (402) 475-9581	Jacobsen Racine, WI (414) 637-6711	The Toro Company Bloomington, MN (612) 888-8801
Daihatsu America, Inc. Los Alamitos, CA (800) 777-7070	Kawasaki Motors Corp. Irvine, CA (714) 770-0400	Yamaha Golf Cars Cypress, CA (800) 447-4700

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UTILITY VEHICLES

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hauling, towing implements, or converting a utility vehicles into spray vehicles, heavy-duty utility vehicles are the norm.

There are two equally important reasons for this: power and construction. If a vehicle is rated for a payload capacity of 2,000 pounds, the engine is sized accordingly. You might be able to overload the bed of a mid-duty utility vehicle, which would be a serious and dangerous error to begin with, but when it comes time for the engine to actually move the vehicle the power wouldn't be available. Aerators and other implements require power to tow — the kind of power generally found in the heavy-duty utility vehicle range.

If a utility vehicle is rated for a payload capacity of 2,000 pounds, the construction of the vehicle must support that without the compromise of structural integrity. An overpowered medium-duty utility vehicle might be able to handle overloading, again a mistake, from a power standpoint, but at what long- and short-term price to body and chassis of the machine itself? Construction strength is required of the utility vehi-

cles that tow aerators and other implements, and that kind of strength is generally found in the heavy-duty utility vehicle range.

•Dealer and manufacturer support — As previously mentioned, machines break down. Even with the best design, engineering, the most conscientious operation and care, it is inevitable that at some point your utility vehicle will go off-line for service. When that happens, all the promises made to you on the showroom floor must be kept.

From the manufacturing standpoint — how well your machine is designed and built — there is a certain amount of safety and comfort in going with a "name" manufacturer. The utility vehicle world is fairly small, and manufacturers that put out junk don't last long. After you've done your utility vehicle homework, including talking to other end users and taking test drives, and the choice comes down to a well-known brand or something less well-known, you're probably better off going with the "name" model, even if it means spending a few more dollars. In general, the manufacturers you've heard of didn't get well-known by ducking problems or putting out inferior products.

Size or volume is something to look for

in an equipment dealer in terms of selection, but it guarantees nothing when it comes to maintenance and support. The best manufacturers are selective in who they let sell their equipment.

Come to the lot armed with plenty of questions, and expect direct answers. How responsive is the dealer's service department to your immediate needs? What about the parts department's inventory? Is it adequate? Does the dealer provide loaners, and at what cost if any, should your utility vehicle be in the shop for a couple of days? These and other questions, beyond things like finance options, are critical to ask before you buy or lease. If you don't feel comfortable with the answers, move on. There's probably another dealer who can meet your needs.

Whatever choice you make, be sure it's an *informed* one. Nothing makes less sense than "impulse buying." The investment required for a utility vehicle, light, medium or heavy is substantial and should be considered carefully. That means talking to other sports turf managers, comparing all manufacturer literature, and taking as many test drives or "demos" as possible. Investing time and effort now is cheap insurance for choosing the most versatile tool to meet your needs today and tomorrow. □

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