



Guidelines for Summer Mowing



Highly maintained and well-irrigated professional sports fields, such as Yankee Stadium in New York, may require only minor adjustments in mowing frequency and height of cut during the summer.

By Joe McDonald

Like the changing of the seasons, the transition from spring to summer mowing can be gradual. In northern regions, cool-season grasses ease back on the frantic growth triggered by warm days, cool nights and plentiful rainfall. In southern areas, warm-season grasses assert their dominance as temperatures rise.

On highly maintained and well-irrigated professional sports fields, seasonal changes may require only minor adjustments in mowing frequency and height of cut; but summer mowing can be very difficult on the practice and game fields of municipal sports complexes, schools and park systems.

Whatever the summer weather conditions — hot, humid, wet or dry — one thing is certain: Sports turf fields face a constant barrage of activity in summer, often with multiple practice sessions and games six or seven days a week. Turf is subjected to heavy wear, frequently during less-than-ideal conditions.

As the summer workload accelerates, extensive activity brings more people, both players and spectators, to the facilities. Mowing schedules must be adjusted around this activity yet still keep turf in top condition and allow maximum field use. In addition, summer staffing often includes less experienced seasonal and part-time operators.

Safety Factors

An employee-training program can cover the basics of machine operation and safety procedures. To reinforce proper procedures, arrange for returning seasonal employees and long-time personnel to help with these sessions. Emphasize how to operate equipment properly to ensure safety, including directional mowing that channels discharge away from vehicles and how to travel around public gathering spots.

Make sure all safety systems are working properly. Pay special attention to the operator presence systems. With the added debris summer use brings to facilities, operators will be on and off machines more frequently. Make sure all shields are in place. Discharge chute shields are especially important with the combination of debris and people. Caution all workers to check these safety details before operating mowers.

Safety and efficiency are increased by assigning operators to specific units for the season. Operators can hear or “feel” operational changes in machines they use day after day.

As employees move up to more complex equipment, instruct them on operational and safety procedures for that unit. Arrange for the operator to work with the machine initially in flat, open areas so that a comfort level is achieved before moving to difficult terrain or tricky trimming.

Less experienced operators may be tempted to push ride-on units to top speed, posing a safety hazard as well as affecting the quality of cut. Faster speeds make spotting debris and other ground-level obstacles more difficult. Traveling too fast over uneven terrain or on hillsides can affect the stability of the machine. Supervisors may need to set speed limits for certain units or specific areas.

Heat and humidity can be hard on crew members. Remind employees to wear proper clothing, including hats. Suggest sunscreen. Remind employees, especially those operating walk-behind units, to watch their personal body-fluid levels and drink plenty of liquids. During extremely dry conditions, machine operators may need dust masks.

Quality of Cut

The basics of mowing remain the same throughout the year. Adjust height of cut and mowing frequency to remove no more than one third of the grass blade with any mowing. Match height of cut to the natural growth patterns of the grasses, weather conditions and turf use. Alter directional patterns with each mowing to maintain upright growth. Avoid mowing overly wet grass. Use equipment suitable to the size of the area to be mowed that delivers the required quality of cut for the desired aesthetic appeal.

Some things change with the seasons. As general conditions gradually change from wet to dry and the lushness of the grass declines, the ground speed of mowing equipment will increase. With walk-behind mowers, the ground speed is limited to the walking speed of the operator and generally remains at an acceptable level. With riding units, ground speed is limited only by the capabilities of the machine.

Mowing too fast for turf conditions can reduce the quality of cut. With thick grasses, the equipment engine may signal excessive stress by engine lug or heavy grass may plug the mowing unit. With slower-growing summer grasses, the mowed area may appear uneven or ragged.

Turning corners too fast is detrimental to wet or dry turf. Slow down on turns so that the inside tire doesn't spin or tear up turf. Wheels slip and spin on wet grasses, which in turn ooze more slippery juices. The grass will be flattened, compaction will be increased and skidding may damage the crowns of the grass plants. During dry conditions, the turf is more fragile and rooting less secure. Fast turns may break, rather than cut, the grass blades or uproot the entire plant.

Spotting deficiencies in the quality of cut is fairly easy when grass is lush. Dry conditions, however, make quality harder to judge. Operators must pay close attention to the results of mowing, especially with wider mowers and multiple-deck systems. Problems can develop along a section of the cut swath of a wide mower. Multiple-deck units can operate unevenly. Big bumps or hill shock load may even stop operation of one of the decks. Checking the swath just cut can prevent a poor-quality cut across an entire field or section of a park.

Because smaller mower decks traditionally deliver a higher quality of cut, mow high profile areas with the smallest practical deck size. Use larger decks for a faster cut in less heavily used areas where aesthetics are not quite as critical. Schedule mowing of difficult and high-profile areas early in the day when operators are fresher and efficiency is highest.

Keeping mower blades sharp is as important in hot weather as it is in the rapid-growing spring season. Ragged blade tips are unsightly to even the casual observer and may provide an entry for disease organisms.

Clean rotary mower decks frequently to ensure proper movement and dispersal of clippings. Check rotary deck height adjustment from side to side and front to rear. Improper adjustment will affect cut quality and produce extra "drag" on the machine.

Traction aids such as additional weights used in wet conditions probably will not be needed during dry periods.

Equipment Care

In dry, hot weather, airborne dust and grass clippings can pose a hazard to liquid-cooled machines. Other potential air intake blockers are the "fluff" produced by such plants as dandelion, milkweed and cottonwood trees. Clean intake screens frequently to allow proper air circulation and prevent the engine from overheating. Make sure machines are well-lubricated.

Remind employees that improper operating procedures can damage valuable equipment. Toward the end of a long, hot day, operators may be tempted to push or lift that picnic table or bench with the mower deck rather than get off the machine to move it properly. Some may succumb to the tendency to mow closer to obstacles and trees or underneath shrubbery rather than take the time for proper trimming. Unnecessary downtime for the machines costs everyone.

Establish a post-use equipment maintenance routine. Set up a system for operators to inform the maintenance staff of any operational problems with their machines. Allow equipment to cool before cleanup. Washing down hot equipment with cold water can cause damage. If possible, avoid high-pressure washers that force water into the machine. Always follow the washdown with greasing to force water out and reestablish grease levels. As always, follow the guidelines in the operator's manual for routine maintenance. If necessary, shorten maintenance intervals to compensate for heavy use.

Summer mowing sets the stage for both athletes and spectators. The competency and efficiency of your staff will be judged by how well this supposedly simple task is performed. Proper planning and attention to detail will ensure positive results. □

Joe McDonald is the product manager of market development for commercial mowing for John Deere. He is based in Horicon, WI.

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