



DAKOTA
TURF TENDER 440

From brushes to spinners— not just topdressers anymore

BY MARLENA CANNON

It wasn't all that long ago that sportsturf maintenance equipment always included a good old brush machine of some sort. But as many sportsturf managers are discovering, leaving those machines in the shed saves time and money since manufacturers of topdressers have upgraded and fine-tuned their equipment to meet the needs of professionals in athletic turf industry.

Logan Hamocon, owner of Sport Turf Hawaii, is a case in point. As a contractor and consultant with the City and County of Honolulu, the Kamehameha Schools sports fields, the parks on Oahu and others, he does everything from construction, design review and specification, inspection, and setting up maintenance programs.

Ten years ago as a golf course superintendent in the Philippines, he used a self-contained unit with spinners attached to it. The distribution was very poor especially when the material was wet, which was pretty much all the time. For large areas, he would go with a spinner and accept the distribution inefficiency because of the time savings. But for work on the greens, he would spec a drop type spreader with a brush. And, he acknowledges that took forever.

Now he's an avid advocate of spinner type topdressers. What made him switch?

"The advancements in the machines over the last 5 years has made an enormous difference," says Hamocon. "In the early '90s doing a fine turf topdressing without a brush was impossible. Now, that's not a problem at all. You can vary the depth of the

layer from a fine dusting to a thicker layer depending on what the field needs."

Rich Valentine, grass superintendent at Delaware echoes Hamocon's views. Eighteen months ago, he bought a Dakota 440 Turf Tender to replace his old brush type topdresser. Initially, the idea was to save time.

"Racing is such a time-sensitive operation," says Valentine. "The horses train in the morning, so our crew has only a half-a-day to get the work done. Quite frankly, we had quit topdressing because there just weren't enough hours in the day. Buying the Dakota enabled us to get back into good agronomic practices. It's all about increasing productivity. You can get more accomplished, in less time with less people, with a well-built topdressing machine."

The versatility of today's spreaders has impressed a lot of sportsturf managers. Valentine says he gets a kick out of trying to figure out other ways to use his machine, saying proudly that he probably comes up with a new idea every month.

On his race course grounds, Valentine says he uses his topdresser "to mulch beds without breaking branches or to throw pea gravel into drainage ditches. We rarely use a wheelbarrow anymore."

Hamocon agrees saying that he uses his machine for infield work, fertilizing and landscaping jobs like spreading mulch and wood chips. "I used to have to have a lot of different pieces of equipment," Hamocon adds. "Now, I would feel very confident speci-

fyng one good topdresser to do it all."

Last year, the City of Winnipeg used their topdresser for their soccer fields, baseball diamonds, and cricket fields. With the efficiencies they found there, they've decided this year to put the machine into other uses as well. One of the most showcased sections of the City's Riverwalk system is from the legislative buildings to The Forks, a national park where the Red River and Assinboine Rivers meet. Every spring, after the high waters of the rivers recede, a new limestone base needs to be put down on this high-traffic tourist attraction. This year, rather than apply the limestone with tractors and tedious hand spreading, the City will be pulling the topdresser out of the shed.

"We think we can spread it more evenly, adjust the depth of the limestone better and get it applied more smoothly than the old way," says a superintendent of parks. "The walk is a mile long and 12-15 feet wide. I'm guessing we can do the job in a third of the time."

Bob Eichert, vice president of Aer-Core, Inc., Downingtown, PA, provides aerification, seeding and topdressing services to several hundred golf courses and sports fields. He also sells equipment.

"We've seen a general increase in the sales of topdressers," he says. "But in the last 5-7 years, we've really seen an increase in the number of athletic field managers who want that service contracted. There's such a high demand on the quality of the turf and the need for the players to have a good playing surface is critical. Many sports fields were poorly built to begin with and in many cases, the construction equipment used to build them contributed to the compaction. That, combined with heavy use, has resulted in fields that are in terrible condition. Heavy core aeration and topdressing with a good compost can bring a field back to life in a hurry."

He also attributes the increase in sales and demand for service to the fact that the new topdressers are so well designed, citing those models which feature low psi tires, large hoppers, and exacting calibration features.

Hamocon's take is the same. "Some turf managers may feel like the accuracy of a spinner application is more difficult," he says. "With the fine-tune calibration capability on the newer machines, the only problem you really have is with the operator. If something goes wrong, it probably wasn't because of the machine."

Another reason for the increasing acceptance of topdressers in sports field management is economics. "Cost used to be a factor," says Eichert. "That's just not the case anymore. These machines are really material movers, that can backfill, spread gravel, lime, seed, fertilizer, and topdress all in one. Plus, some topdresser models include a front-end box scraper. When you think about all the machines they replace, the investment just makes sense."

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