



Prime cut

Rotary, reel, and the quest for a better natural surface

BY JOHN KMITTA, SENIOR EDITOR

Making a major purchase requires a lot of thought, comparison, and questions asked. Selecting a mower is no different. Comparing brands and features is one issue, but a bigger question for the buyer might be reel vs. rotary.

"It's hard to pick reels and rotaries, because the companies out there are great and the products are improving every year," said George Toma, playing field consultant and one of the STMA's founders. "I'm a reel man all the way. I like the reel even for bluegrass, fescue, and ryegrass. I like to have a rotary as well, because sometimes the reel lays the grass down and you need the rotary to pick the grass up."

According to Toma, however, the buying decision often doesn't come down to the user's preferences. Sometimes you have to take the mower that you are given or what

is in the budget, he said.

Kevin Vos, CSFM, athletic facilities manager, City of Muscatine, IA, echoed Toma's views about the impact of a funding. "Our athletic complexes are operated under the City of Muscatine, Parks and Recreation department," said Vos. "Municipal tax dollars fund our operations, so decisions sometimes come down to dollars, not necessarily what's best for the turf."

Proper use

"The most important thing I try to teach people is that if you don't have time to check the sharpness of the blade, you just don't have time to cut grass," said Toma.

Advantages and disadvantages

Reel mower advantages:

- * Provides the highest quality of cut, wet or dry leaf surface
- * Can adjust the mower height in very small increments
- * Mow at lower heights
- * Striping capabilities to create a variety of mowing patterns
- * Equipment is lighter weight
- * Minimal scalping

Reel mower disadvantages:

- * Higher maintenance machine
- * More man-hours needed to mow fields

Rotary mower advantages:

- * Fewer man-hours needed to mow fields
- * Lower maintenance
- * Larger overall cutting width
- * Chops up clippings better for recycling

Rotary mower disadvantages:

- * Lower quality of cut
- * Usually cannot mow at low heights
- * Heavier equipment weight
- * Not all machines have striping capabilities

- Kevin Vos

"Check the rotary blade and sharpen it all the time. And before you use a reel mower take a piece of newspaper or cashier paper to check the blades to make sure they cut. The most damaging thing to turf is a dull mower, because it will bruise the grass."

According to Toma, when buying a mower for a bermudagrass, don't use a five-bladed, belt-driven reel mower because it chews up the grass. For bermudagrass, use a seven-, nine- or eleven-blade mower. When mowing bluegrass at 1 1/2 inch cut, a seven- or nine-bladed mower is not going to do anything because it's just fanning the grass. Users have to learn which lawnmower to use, said Toma. For Bermuda, get a nine-bladed. For bluegrass, users can go up to a six-blade, but not a nine-blade or eleven-blade.

"Most high schools or colleges, based on budget, have to go with a good rotary mower," said Toma. "But they will do okay if they keep it sharp, and use a bag attachment."

"The majority of the mowing of our athletic fields is done with rotary mowers," said Vos. "A typical, non-tournament week consists of mowing 110 acres of athletic fields and 175 acres overall per week. The reel mower is used for tournaments and during high school/college soccer and softball season. This allows us to mow at a lower height of turf, achieve a higher quality of cut, and create a variety of mowing patterns during the games/tournaments. If I had the hours and equipment available, I would mow all of our athletic fields all season long with reel mowers."

Looking to the future

According to Toma, no matter what type of mower is purchased, groundskeepers need to maintain high standards.

"One of the best groundskeepers in the game is Alan Sigwardt in Miami. He has baseball, soccer, football, and concerts, and he also has to put up with about 90 inches of rain per year," said Toma. "He told me that if we groundskeepers don't straighten up that we're going to be out of a job, because everyone will go back to synthetics."

Toma said that fields are getting so bad that a lot of colleges and universities are changing to synthetics. For example, \$7 million was spent during the past 3 years on the field at The Meadowlands, and yet players again voted it the worst playing surface in the league.

"We have to work on it and do a better job," said Toma. "If you don't have the right equipment it just won't work. Sometimes we expect too much from natural grass and in return give it too little. The cheapest insurance for an athlete is a good playing field."

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