

## Walk Mowers vs. Triplex Mowers

Which one is better? At one time, that was a debatable topic. However, things have changed. When one thinks about how time-consuming it is to walk mow greens, it is hard to justify walk mowers in today's market at a lot of clubs. With that said, one needs to sit back and evaluate the pros and cons of each of these methods very carefully to see which one best fits your budget, design, and situation and how walk mowers and triplex mowers can effectively be integrated into one's operation - especially with labor inflation and shortages squeezing the marketplace to death.

Let's start with quality of cut with a triplex mower compared to the walk mower. It is a wash. The bed knives, reels, and setup on a triplex today are equally as good as the walker and allow you to achieve the same quality cut as compared to the triplex. The triplex will follow the contour of the greens just as well - if not better in some cases than the walker. As for attachment accessories, the walker and the triplex are close equals. I would give the triplex an edge when it comes to utilizing them for auxiliary practices in combination with mowing.

Flexibility. Triplex mower wins hands down. One or two operators can mow all 18 holes with a triplex. Plus, triplexes give you the flexibility to double-cut greens at will and do it faster and more efficiently than a walk mower setup, i.e., back track mowing, left to right, right to left, transportation, vertical mowing, etc. This is a triple bonus. Triplex mowers also present you with the opportunity to use retired individuals that may not be able to walk mow like younger personnel. That is a big deal in our present environment! Walk mowing also takes anywhere from 4 - 8 operators for an average 18-hole course. And if you decide to double-cut with walk mowers, good luck in keeping your operators happy. They will start to drop like flies in the middle of the summer. Of course, if you are hosting a tournament and have lots of volunteers, then walk mowing is a no brainer. Otherwise, lets send out the rider.



Economics of Walk Mowing. Using walk mowers is a recipe for eating up man hours - especially when man hours are so tough to come by this day and time. Have you ever been complimented by a golfer for walk mowing your greens???

Probably not. Golfers only care about one thing when it comes

to greens. Playability!! So, when we think of mowing greens, don't become obsessed by those pretty stripes. Think about man hours. If you see a bunch of road stripes, you probably have too much grass anyway. Triplex wins big - time on economics!!!

Ease of cut. It is far easier to achieve a quality cut with a triplex than a walker. Some of you might say, wait a minute! Walkers are better. Well, that might be debatable, until it is not done right. The raising and lowering of the reels on a riding mower is initiated through ease of automation. Lowering and raising of a walker requires a lot more focus, endurance, and effort coming on and off the green. Once your operator has mowed a few greens in the heat, he or she may become physically stressed or exhausted depending on his or her stamina level. Tired employees usually are not productive employees! This is where walk mowing can lose its edge. There is nothing worse than a crappy walk mowing job since a lot of golfing experts view walk mowing as the "Cat's Meow". When there are chop marks all over the edge of the green through operator tiredness or error, the triplex becomes a very attractive go too. However, that does not mean the triplex is idiot proof; it still requires a lot of talent to maneuver a triplex when making turns. How many

times have we seen a triplex end up in a pond or bunker? Even with these challenges, the triplex still gets a “Big Thumbs” up because of quality cut and versatility.

Wear and tear. The walker gets first place in this category. Turning on the outside edge of the greens can be a major pitfall for a triplex mower where bunkers or water hazards are extremely close to the greens. This can force the operator to make 360 degree turns with the triplex that can result in the twisting and tearing of the turf. In other cases, the triplex may make a 90 or 45 degree turn respectively and travel on and off the green to an open area and then turn around and come back over the same ground twice. This creates compaction and thinning of turf between the green and the hazard. Also, exposed sand from the bunker shots can accumulate on wheels of a triplex and create a grinding affect when the mower turns. This applies to walkers also, but not to the same extent since they are smaller and lighter compared to the triplex. Walkers minimize this situation due to their low compaction ratio. Also, one can use lattice, thin plywood, or plexiglass as an interface barrier for the walkers if needed to turn on. This can be an effective measure against turn damage for walkers if necessary.

During the slower growing seasons of the year like fall, winter and spring, some superintendents utilize walkers seasonally on all their greens to protect their surrounds. This can be an effective measure to prevent wear and tear if it fits into one's budget situation.

In addition to triplex wear and tear on the edges, wheel tracking may be an issue if greens are too moist in the morning. The tires on the triplex can exacerbate a wet condition by exposing tire tracks compared to a walker depending on one's conditions. This can be especially noticeable with a heavy due.



**The above picture is Wear and Tear from a Triplex turning.**

Hydraulic leaks are one of the most dreaded things that can happen to a green and a superintendent. This is where walk mowing gets a big “Thumbs up”. When this damage happens, it is heartbreaking and tough to stomach and hard to recover from if not addressed promptly and effectively. Plus, it always brings up questions from golfers. Were operators paying attention, etc.? How could you let this happen? Well, until industry advancements in electric mowers become more proficient, walkers will still be the best way to prevent oil leaks when mowing greens. However, hybrid triplex mowers have come a long way as of recently. The chance of hydraulic leaks with these units are not nearly as great as they once were with the older units. However, there are no guarantees.



## **Hydraulic leak on Green with overseeding from triplex**

Design constraints are another big plus for walk mowing. There are a lot of courses with features that make it very difficult or darn near impossible to use a triplex on greens with any degree of comfort. Sometimes, the only option is to walk mow if a green is surrounded by a feature or features that restrict maneuverability. When that is the case, even the most talented operator may find it difficult to negotiate turning. The green complex below is an example of when not to use a triplex. This has trouble written all over it with a capital “T” if a triplex is used.





As we ponder the pros and cons of Walk Mowing vs. Triplex Mowing, it is very apparent that design and budget criteria are two main factors for deciding which mower to use and when. Certainly, economics plays the biggest part in this decision followed by design. However, if one can't afford the labor to walk mow, then the rest of the points on walk mowing are irrelevant.

If someone were to set up a program today for mowing greens, they might consider ride mowing all the greens, use walkers for cleanups, and use walkers where the designs are not conducive to using bigger units. To me, there must be diversity in how one approaches mowing one's greens to get the best result. This can be the key to agronomic and economic success in mowing out greens.

If labor challenges continue to manifest throughout our industry, we will have to become more creative in how we think about mowing out greens. What will this look like in the future? Time will tell. But if things change in the next 40 years like they have changed over the past 40 years, a lot of our labor issues today may be managed through remote control.

The good news is that golf courses will always need a good superintendent to orchestrate maintenance – even with technological changes.