

# Reliable Help

To make the cut at Bethpage State Park, equipment must show up to work...and work...and work.

By Joe Barks, Editor



The sign is posted on a fence overlooking the first tee of the Black Course at Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, N.Y. It has WARNING at the top, in large red capital letters, followed by this message: "The Black Course Is An Extremely Difficult Course Which We Recommend Only For Highly Skilled Golfers."

At the park's maintenance facility, there isn't any sign intended for suppliers seeking to sell

Golf Course Superintendent Craig Currier and his staff equipment needed not only to maintain Bethpage Black, but also the park's four other courses. But if there were a sign here, too, it might read something like this:

"WARNING. We have to take care of five courses where 275,000 annual rounds are played in an eight-month period. The first tee time is at the crack of dawn, and people play non-stop until dusk. All of our courses have been sold out for over 50 straight years—and oh, yes, we have also hosted two U.S. Opens on the Black Course during

this decade. So if we can't depend on your equipment to *always* provide the quality and performance we need, please don't try to sell it to us."

Over the years, Bethpage has acquired a large fleet of course maintenance equipment (everything is owned, rather than leased) representing a select group of manufacturers that has been able to deliver on these unyielding expectations. Included in the group is Jacobsen, a Textron Inc. company.

One of the most recent opportunities for Jacobsen equipment to show how it can stand up to the rigors of working at Bethpage came when Currier's department ordered eight new SLF-1880™ lightweight fairway mowers. Like everything else, as soon as the mowers arrived, they were immediately deployed into full-scale action.

"We send them out in groups of four or five, to cut the courses in backwards direction [of hole order]," Currier says. "We don't have a lot of time to cut fairways, but



Bethpage's five courses have sold out for over 50 straight years, with 275,000 annual rounds played within an eight-month season.



Course maintenance equipment, and the staff headed by Golf Course Superintendent Craig Currier (left), rarely take a breather at Bethpage State Park.

because of their light weight, [the Jacobsen mowers] can really zip through each hole.

“And the 18-inch reels [on the 1880s] give a very good quality of cut—even on the holes that undulate, [the reels] follow the contours very well. Even when the courses have been really wet, we haven’t had any trouble with tracking, because the tires, and mowers overall, are so light.”

### Shining Performance

Reliable performance in wet conditions is a key requirement for all course equipment at Bethpage—not only because of the need to work as soon and as quickly as possible in any available window around the large, steady volume of play, but also because the park is located in the middle of Long Island, where “nor’easters” like to settle in for extended stays.

And working well when it’s wet is an especially critical need for Bethpage’s greensmowers, most of all in a year when the park is hosting a U.S. Open. That’s the test that the newest Jacobsen additions to the Bethpage fleet—Eclipse™ hybrid walk-behind greensmowers—were put to immediately this year.

“We got 12 of [the Eclipse mowers] this past spring—nine with 22-inch reels and three with 18-inch reels,” Currier reports. “They are equipped with the electric generator set, and while electric can sometimes present problems with shorts and other issues, especially in wet conditions, [the Eclipse mowers] never failed us. Also, because they’re electric they’ve run very clean and ‘green,’ with no problems with seals or oil leaks that can streak the greens.”

Keven Doyle, an Assistant Superintendent at Bethpage, says the Eclipse greensmowers earned especially high marks for proving to be so instantly user-friendly, as he assigned them to some of the 125 volunteers who came to help with U.S. Open course preparations.

“We had help from all over the world, and many of them hadn’t used that type of equipment before,” Doyle reports. “But they had no problem immediately learning how to operate them or make needed adjustments to change the speed or reel settings. The [digital] display screens were especially helpful, to make sure everyone used them the same way and that

we always got consistent frequency of clip.”

As the various operators used the Eclipse mowers on and around Bethpage’s greens, ease of control was another valuable attribute, adds Assistant Superintendent Brad Chamra.

“They’re easy to keep on line and you don’t have to struggle to slow them down, while still maintaining reel speed, when you need to turn them or do the edges or around bunkers,” Chamra says. “Just as importantly, that [ease of control] also makes it harder for someone to put them into a bunker.”

### Round-the-Clock Demands

In the first two weeks of June, as the 2009 U.S. Open approached and got underway, Bethpage State Park was deluged with nearly eight inches of rain. Once they could get them dried out enough, Currier’s staff had to mow Bethpage Black’s greens to the USGA’s specifications in extremely trying conditions, sometimes as early as 3:30 AM.

The Eclipse mowers, helped to maximize his staff’s productivity during this period. “We could adjust them easily, just by changing a couple of bolts, to slide the motor and get more weight over the reels, so we could get a more aggressive cut while still controlling the frequency of clip,” Currier says. “Many times this helped to eliminate the need for a double-cut. That was big, to be able to get everything done in time for the double-shot-gun starts that were going off first thing in the morning, as they tried to catch up from the previous day’s delays. Plus it

helped to reduce wear on the greens and make sure we didn’t beat up the collars.”

Currier and his staff received high marks for all they did to ensure another successful Open at Bethpage. “Our whole goal was to make the best of a bad situation,” he says. “[The USGA] was ecstatic that they were able to finish the tournament on Monday. We feel good about how we helped make that happen—and we want to have another one.”

It’s likely they’ll get that chance—and that when they do, the right equipment will be on hand to help them handle the job, even if more (storm) warnings are in the picture. **C&RB**



Bethpage’s “standing caduceus” logo belies the non-stop pace of activity within the park.