

OPERATING ON A NEW LEVEL



Taking on Campey Contracting will enable Souters Sports to expand its pitch renovation service, offering a range of techniques using Koro equipment, says contracts manager Robert Heath.

The acquisition of the contracting arm of Richard Campey Ltd has given Souters Sports an opportunity to expand its renovation service.

The directors of Souters Sports were already well-versed in the merits of the Koro range of turf renovation equipment, when the opportunity to purchase importer Richard Campey's contracting operation came along, as contracts manager Robert Heath explains.

"We have used a Koro Fieldtopmaker for a couple of seasons and it has been very popular with high profile clients such as premier league football clubs.

"Plus, we were looking for opportunities to expand our operation in the north west to meet increasing demand for annual renovation, so taking on Campey Contracting as a division of Souters met our needs ideally."

With the acquisition came the goodwill and the customer base that Richard Campey had built up in the north west before deciding to concentrate on importing and distributing machinery, not to mention a selection of kit in tip-top condition.

"We have gained one 30hp and three 100hp New Holland tractors, which, as Richard is a main dealer, are in outstanding condition," Robert says.

"There is also a second Fieldtopmaker, a Koro Recycling Dresser and a Koro Top Drain, so we can confidently expand our renovation workload."

Up to now renovation has made up about 30 per cent of the work, with sports-field drainage and construction the other

major services. But Robert anticipates that demand will escalate for the Stirlingshire-based company, which also has depots in Cheshire and Sunderland.

"Many leading clubs and local authorities employ consultants and increasingly, they are specifying Koro equipment.

"There is such a short window for pitch improvement that having two Fieldtopmakers will enable us to double the amount of clients that we can work for and make us less likely to be caught out by the weather."

The Fieldtopmaker works by removing the top layer of the pitch surface so

that new soil ameliorants can be worked into a clean surface before reseeding.

"It looks drastic, but groundsmen are getting more familiar with the process and they know that they can produce a new surface in six to eight weeks. While removing the old turf does cost a little more than older techniques there is the opportunity to use new cultivars and get a better result rather than trying to overseed into the existing sward," Robert explains.

In subsequent years, the Fieldtopmaker can be adjusted for shallower work to remove a 'maintenance' layer.

When fitted with a scarifying reel, it can also be used for economical renovation where budgets don't run to taking the surface off.

"There is some good scarifying equipment on the market already, but this collects the debris so there is no need for a second pass. We scarify in three



Construction works include primary drainage.

directions to improve the existing turf and the extra expense of total reseeding is avoided," Robert says.

"An increasing number of football and rugby clubs are installing Desso Grassmaster pitches, which use polypropylene fibres woven into natural turf to create a more resilient surface," he explains. "But these can be difficult to renovate without tearing out the fibres. We spray off the turf, spring tine rake to loosen the thatch and then use the Fieldtopmaker on a high setting to 'brush' the fibres and lift them. This leaves clean sand and rootzone with the fibres standing up, ready for overseeding.

"It is a highly versatile machine and has given us the opportunity to expand the customer base – this technique is ideal for school outfields and with a mid-mounted roller fitted to help follow the ground contours without scalping, could be an economical option for golf course fairways."

The Recycling Dresser is another machine offering cost-cutting renovation. Knives dig into the surface and flick material onto a conveyor which is then brushed back in.

"This is useful on pitches constructed from new with a sand-based rootzone,"



Using the latest techniques such as laser levelling is essential to win the confidence of consultants and high profile sports clubs.

Robert explains. "In cutting out and recycling the sand, it aerates, relieves compaction and top dresses all in one pass."

Local authorities and league football clubs may find the Top Drain useful for installing secondary drainage in as little as a day. Another one pass machine, it cuts 20cm by 40mm slits, removing compacted soil, and backfills with sand.

"This is a machine that we've got to get to know, and it should compete with other sand slitting and gravel banding machines," Robert comments.

Using the latest techniques and up to date machinery is essential to attract premier league clubs, Robert says, but points out that visibly high standards also mean repeat business for less high profile clients such as local authorities and golf club committees.

This approach extends to staffing – as former head greenkeeper at Gleneagles, Robert prefers to employ groundsmen and greenkeepers as opposed to tractor drivers, particularly for ongoing maintenance contracts at venues where Souters have carried out construction work.

"Experienced groundsmen can set up the machines, identify potential problems with the turf, operate equipment in a manner that reduces maintenance requirements and generally produce a high standard of work," he says.

"Of course you need to pay experienced operators more, and ambitious groundsmen may only stay for a short period of time as they wish to continue their career development, but it means we can offer a better service."

The acquisition of the Campey business and expansion of the maintenance side has led to a recent recruitment drive, and Robert admits that the right calibre of employee is highly sought after, and that due to the demanding nature of contracting work, there are less new entrants to the industry.

However, with generous rewards and opportunities for advancement part of the package at this progressive company, which had a turnover of £3.5m in 2004 and to which it expects the Campey business to add up to a further £500,000 this year, there can be few better places to develop a career. ●



Specialist services for crown green bowling are another offshoot of Souters's business.

In 2001 Souters purchased J & FR Associates, a small contracting business specialising in one particular sport – crown green bowling.

Services include construction and renovation of greens and installation of irrigation, supply of materials, soil sampling equipment, and routine and seasonal maintenance. In autumn 2004, the company renovated 70 greens.

Overseeding is a vital part of the regime as the grasses used for bowling greens do not seed at the cut length used in normal mowing. A Sisis Rotorake 6000 is used to linear aerate the green before seed is applied using a BLEC Uniseeder.

Following this, top dressing and fertiliser is applied. Equipment more commonly associated with larger playing surfaces, such as a tractor-mounted vertidrain, can be deployed to deal with severe compaction.

The company is run as a division of Souters, retaining its own identity with Robert's former Gleneagles colleague Leo Calahan at the helm.

"Crown green bowls is not a huge market, but there is a requirement for specialist techniques and equipment, so it is an opportunity to do the job well and make a good business out of it," Robert says. ●