

LAWN MOWER MANUAL

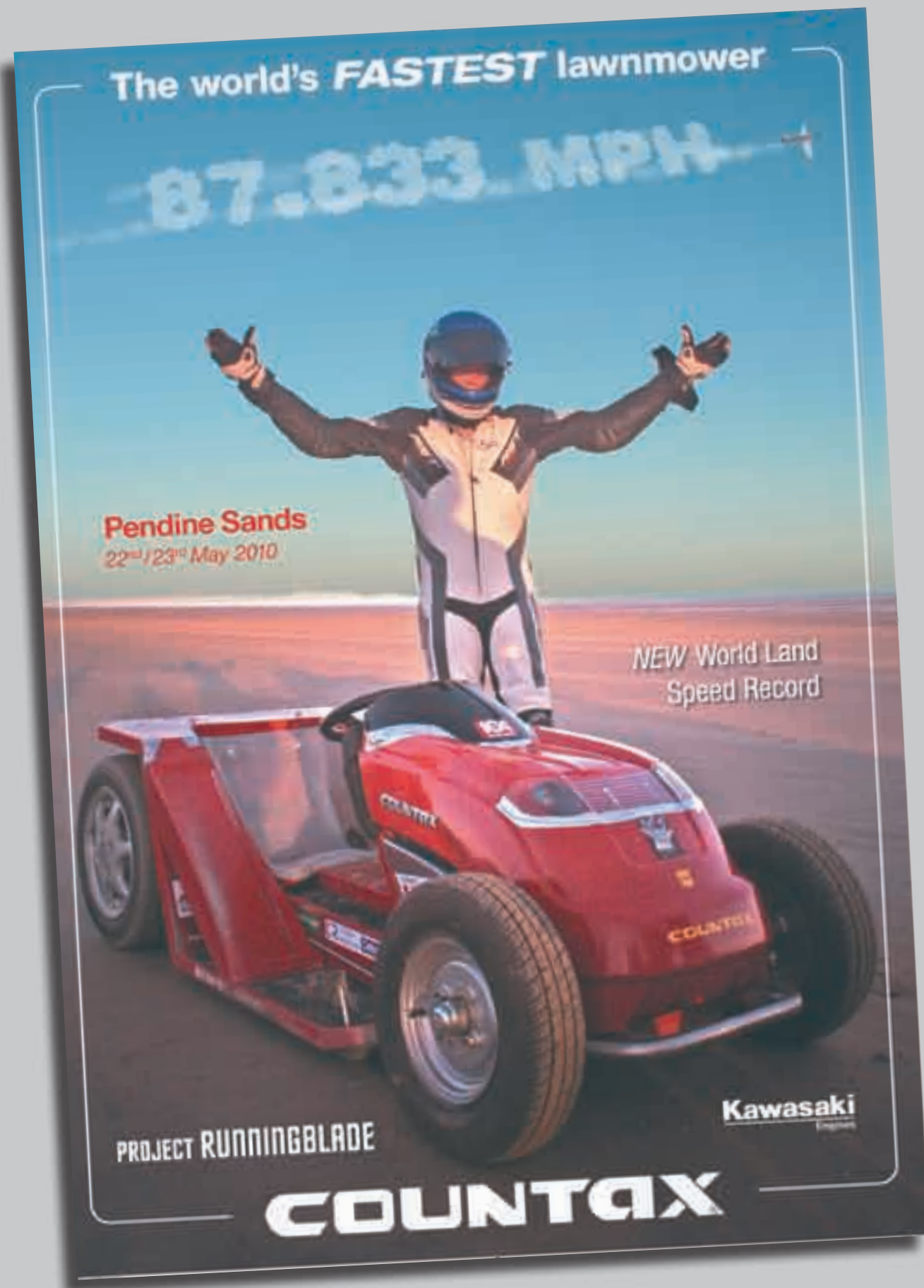


A practical guide to choosing, using
and maintaining a lawnmower

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Brian Radam



Chapter 13

Lawnmower racing – the alternative motor sport

During the early 1970s, when author Brian Radam could be found testing his modified garden tractor around his Lancashire back garden, hoping to enter it into *The Guinness Book of Records* as the fastest lawnmower. Meanwhile, an Irishman called Jim Gavin returned from a car rally in the Sahara. Soon afterwards he was chatting to some mates in a Sussex pub, bemoaning the huge cost of motor racing, and said, 'Isn't there another way of motor racing without the enormous expense, but with just as much excitement?'

So the lads in the pub started talking about the alternative sport of bar stool racing, which soon escalated to wheel barrow racing. After a few beers, careful consideration and debate, they ended up deciding on racing combine harvesters, the only minor problem being that there were only three in the county, and the farmers were very reluctant to lend them. So they finally finished up by saying, 'Everyone's got a lawnmower, so let's race them!'

In 1973 the first Grand Prix race for lawnmowers was held at Wisborough

Green in Sussex, England. The sport attracted numerous excited lawnmowerists, and 35 types of mower of all shapes and sizes turned up on the starting grid. The machines ranged from a 1923 vintage ride-on lawnmower to run-behind mowers and garden tractors. Nowadays if you get 50 bucking racing lawnmowers revving up next to each other on a starting grid, it's an awesome sight and can be quite frightening.

Remembering that lawnmowers have been designed to travel only up to a top speed of 6mph, once they're

'Lawnmower racing doesn't cost an arm or leg unless you mow over yourself, but it's really great fun and very British.'

Sir Stirling Moss, 1976

► A gaggle of Group 2, grass-roots-level racing lawnmowers.

◄ The world's fastest lawnmower.





▲ Group II racing lawnmower. A racing Atco 20in.



▲ Group II racing lawnmoo-er – only for the brave!



▲ Flymo-ing, a common lawnmower race manoeuvre.



▲ The *Gadget Show* TV team finding out that 'it's a lot more bover than a hover!'



▲ Group II racers. A gaggle of racing lawnmowers cutting a dash.

pushing over 30mph they can have a mind of their own, and can be a bit of a sod to handle. Add to this that most lawnmower racing drivers are at the cutting edge of being absolute lunatics with nerves of steel, equates to a motor sport unequalled in providing a unique and exciting concoction of extreme excitement, fun and skill.

After that very first race, the present-day classifications and regulations were drawn up, and lawnmower racing is governed by a simple but strict set of rules that includes a thorough scrutineering check of each mower before it's allowed to compete, very similar to the system followed in Formula One. Anyone not adhering to the rules is turfed out.

Unbelievably, lawnmower racing isn't yet recognised as an Olympic sport,



▲ 'Cool Cuttings' in Finland.

▼ Group II duel – twin-cutters racing at the cutting edge.



▼ Group II orange. All you need to mow!



▼ The British 'Upper-Cut', cutting a swathe.



▼ Cutting a dash in the Le Mans-start 12-hour race!





▲ **Group III Westwood Racing Lawnbug. Many attain over 50mph.**



▲ **'Let's kick grass!' Another Lawnflight.**

but they're working on it...we hope. Certainly it's often the star attraction at all sorts of sport and charity events, as well as being great fun to watch – although after an event people may have a different opinion, when they find they're covered in grass, mud and any other substance that's been churned up, depending on what was deposited in the field prior to the event (especially when the racing's on farmland...).

There are three racing classes:

■ **Class I – Run behind:** This class is the grass roots of lawn mower racing. Mainly cylinder lawnmowers with a powered rear metal roller and smaller rollers at the front. The machines are modified to go just a bit quicker than you can run and are often raced by relay teams – particularly amusing

to watch, especially when drivers try to swap over without losing control and falling flat on their face or losing engine speed. This class is ideal for the budding enthusiastic athlete. The speeds of these machines are governed by the ability of the perspiring runner to keep up with the lawnmower without doing themselves serious injury.

■ **Class II – Sit behind:** This class uses cylinder lawnmowers with a trailing seat. The geometry of these machines is modified to achieve the lowest centre of gravity, with the handlebar and steering lowered to match and balance the rest of the machine. Once adapted, the driver has more control, creating faster cornering and stability. The class is a creative engineer's dream, and it's a soul-

stirring sight to see a full field of Class II sod-stomping machines, grassbox to grassbox, exhausts bellowing, powering round a tight circuit at 50mph. When competing, this class is definitely not for the faint-hearted, especially when on full lock your brakes are starting to wane, and the machines in front, alongside and to your rear are almost out of control whilst dicing on the fastest corner of the circuit, with an unavoidable hay bale looming ahead with an already up-turned lawnmower beached on top of it, its engine bellowing smoke while still on full throttle!

■ **Class III – Sit-on:** This class uses the common ride-on domestic garden tractor. Once attention is given to tweaking the gearing and steering geometry these machines are the fastest class, and the best fun you'll have without your eyeballs dropping out. It was a member of this class of mower that in 2010 attained the accolade for the world's fastest lawnmower, at over 95mph.

Upon official inspection the machines should be able to revert to their original grass-cutting capabilities.

And how fast can they go? Well, scary speeds of 60mph are often achieved, but once driven above 30mph they can become a bit of a handful and a sod to control. However, on 23 May 2010, on Pendine Sands in South Wales, Donald Wales – grandson of Sir Malcolm Campbell and nephew of Donald Campbell (who between them broke over 20 land and

water speed records) – attained the amazing speed of 87.833mph and mowed into the *Guinness Book of Records* with the world's fastest lawnmower, at a speed only 49mph slower than the first land speed record achieved by his grandfather Sir Malcolm in 1926 – in a vehicle that didn't even cut grass (Don's mower, codenamed 'Project Runningblade', was filmed cutting grass before its record attempt). Before Don attempted the speed record, the course, being next to an army training ground, had to be cleared of live ammunition, otherwise the speed attempt might also have achieved the Guinness World Record for the first person to blow himself up on a lawnmower.

Later the same year, on 25 September, Bobby Cleveland set a new world lawnmower land speed record of 96.529mph on a Snapper Racemower on Bonneville Salt Flats, USA. Who knows what the record will be by the time you're reading this? In 2013 Honda engineers were racing to build another world's fastest lawnmower, called 'Mean Mower', at a cost of £50,000 and capable of attempting a speed of 130mph plus (209kph). The machine was derived from a Honda HF2620 garden tractor, fitted with a 1,000cc Honda Firestorm superbike engine, resulting in a lawnmower that can accelerate from 0–60mph in four seconds – almost a second faster than a Porsche 911. One of the test drivers was 'The Stig', from BBC's *Top Gear* programme.

Amongst the many lawnmower races that take place all over the country each year, one annual event that draws huge crowds is the sod-stomping bladeless Mow-down at Wisborough Green in Sussex, normally around midsummer's day, starting at 10pm on a Saturday night and ending 12 hours later at 10am Sunday morning. With a thrilling Le Mans-type start, this famous endurance race often attracts over 50 entries.

Other big events on the international lawnmower race calendar include the Two-Day World Championships, which attracts teams from all over the world, from New Zealand to Zimbabwe, with a Hong Kong team entry winning a superb marble trophy in an early race in 1980.

Lawnmower racing has often been described as 'an enjoyable insanity', with truly insane rules, but it could



▲ **Donald Wales (right) and author Brian Radam in 2010, with the world's then fastest lawnmower, a Countax A Series model assembled 90% from standard Countax components and powered by a 999cc Kawasaki FX1000V twin-cylinder engine and cutter deck – truly a cut above the rest. Don holds nine UK land-speed records.**

well be the answer for many would-be motor sports competitors who've been deterred by the huge cost of the many other forms of motor racing. We're not saying it's a perfect substitute, but once you're sat behind a screaming, bucking and almost out of control lawnmower at speeds of over 50mph, while in close contact with a dozen similar machines roaring around a bumpy, muddy, stubble field, you can't argue that it's not a bad alternative.

For further information on lawnmower racing see the useful contacts appendix. A comprehensive guide and manual called *Build your own Racing Lawnmower* is also available for speedy lawnmowerists.

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THE GRASS ROOTS REGS

- 1 **The mower must originally have been designed, manufactured and sold to mow lawns, and not the rolling prairies of America or the steppes of Russia.**
- 2 **The blades must be removed (for safety).**
- 3 **The machine must be self-propelled and petrol-powered (as mains cables aren't long enough).**
- 4 **You can't fit a bigger engine than the manufacturer intended (like a V8).**
- 5 **The mower must still look like a mower, and not like a Ferrari.**

Murray Walker, the famous Formula One commentator, has occasionally done the race commentary, and the celebratory Champagne for the winner is always Moët.

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Brian Radam has asserted his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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Every effort has been made to give the most up to date information currently available. Bear in that mind models and manufacturers are constantly changing their designs and specifications, especially in regard to environmental and technological advances.

When this book refers to a 'lawnmower' it intends what would be classed as a cylinder machine. When it refers to a 'mower' it intends what would be classed as a grasscutter or a rotary mower.

When parts are referred to as the 'left' or the 'right', this view is always quoted from the operating position.