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GEORGE BECKETT
302 HICKORY TRACE
LYLES TN 37098-9601



JOHN DEERE

"Cordless" Riders!

By George Beckett
Irishbeckett@hotmail.com

TOP RIGHT:

Side view of the John Deere electric 90 and 96. Fewer than 5,000 of these machines were produced.

BOTTOM LEFT:

The decal for the 90 is the reverse color of the 96.

In 1970, General Electric introduced the "Elec-Trak," the first ever all-electric garden tractor. By 1972, they had already captured 4 percent of the market, and the traditional ICE-based garden tractor manufacturers were beginning to notice. Also, small riders were becoming very popular about that time. Sears, Cub Cadet, and Jacobsen had waited until 1974 to introduce electrics into the marketplace only to sunset their products after only a single season or two. Wheel Horse actually had one in R&D that year as well. In late 1974, Wheel Horse bought the entire Elec-Trak product line from General Electric and ended up with two small electric rider offerings in 1975, their own A-60 design and the Elec-Trak A-65.

Leave it to John Deere to meet a new challenge in the market head on! In 1972, John Deere introduced the Model 90 to compete with General Electric in both the newly born electric and small-rider market segments. The Model 90 was produced for three years from 1972–1974 and was followed up by a successor, the Model 96, which was produced from 1975–1976. Interestingly enough, many John Deere history lessons and tractor-model charts never mentioned that these models ever existed! It is estimated that less than 5,000 machines total were made in the five years they were in production. The Model 96 riders are extremely rare.



Cosmetically, both riders look very similar, outside of the decals of course. Barely over four-and-a-half feet long and just over three-and-a-half feet wide they are very similar looking to their gas siblings of the era, such as the John Deere Model 68. Under the hood they do not differ much either. Both ran completely off three deep-cycle, 12V batteries. They could cut about an acre of grass, and an onboard, built-in charger allowed the owner to plug them into a standard 120V AC outlet for overnight recharging. The drive motor is larger on the Model 96, and the charger has a "trickle" function on it after the charger is finished. The owner could leave it plugged in, and it would maintain the charge on the batteries while not in use. The Model 90 charger had a basic timer that completely shut off when completed, similar to those found on G.E. Elec-Traks.



Separate from the main-drive electric motor, the 34-inch mower deck sports two separate electric motors also driven off the rider's battery pack. This allowed for smooth mowing without sacrificing drive power. Other options for the small riders included a #50 cart, a lawn sweeper, a 38-inch dozer blade, a front weight, hubcaps, and a tractor cover.

These riders make excellent first "electric" projects because they are very simple machines relying on electro-magnetic switches to control the flow of electricity throughout the machine and



simple resistors to control speed. Want to slow down? Activate a resistor to reduce the amount of electricity going to the motor. Want to speed up? Bypass all the multiple resistors, and let the full current of the batteries reach the traction mower. With a little mechanical knowledge, you can have one restored in no time.

Keep in mind that most parts, particularly the motors on the John Deere 90 & 96, are no longer made. This means that if the machine you acquire has major issues with any of its three electric motors, you will be looking for spares from a very small pool of resources—and most people do not want to give up their spare parts stash! Still, most electric motors seem to run on and on, and if they begin to show signs of wear, they merely require new bearings and brushes,

both of which are readily available for the Model 90 & 96. General Electric made over 33,000 Elec-Traks, so replacement motors are readily available for them. It's still possible to find many NOS parts including motors for them.

I highly recommend that collectors try an electric restoration to add to their herd. It will be frustrating at first, but there are plenty of resources out there to help you. And the benefits include practically no noise while running, no \$4.00/gallon gasoline, no oil changes, no new spark plugs, and no multiple belts to contend with. Every collector's dream!

For more information on John Deere and other electric garden tractors and riders, visit my web site at www.myelec-traks.com. 🌱

TOP:

The two riders look very similar when placed side-by-side.

TOP INSET:

Both models run completely off three deep-cycle, 12V batteries.

BOTTOM LEFT:

The built in battery charge under the hood.

BOTTOM RIGHT:

The John Deere Electric model 96 is an extremely rare model.

