By PETER BLAIS

If the name Williams sounds familiar when it comes to the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America presidency, well, it should.

Incoming President Bruce Williams' father, Robert, 82, was president of the GCSSA in 1958 and is considered one of the major players in elevating the superintendent profession to the prominence it enjoys today.

Bruce, 46, who has been on the GCSSA board of directors since 1991, not only follows in his father's footsteps as GCSSA president but also succeeded his dad as head superintendent at Bob O'Link Golf Club in Highland Park, Ill., back in 1979. Together they are the first father/son combo to ascend to the top post.

"When your dad is considered an icon in the industry, you’re often treated somewhat differently when you take over for him," the younger Williams said.

An icon. High praise, but well deserved.

The Williams family has been involved in the golf business at their parents’ course, which they developed in the 1920s as part of a residential development. The entire family began working on the course when the Depression struck in 1929. By 1937, his parents had to sell the course, but Robert had fallen in love with the golf industry and determined to remain a part of it. He enrolled at the Massachusetts State Agricultural College and went to work for the state with a focus on turfgrass research.

When TGIF joins World Wide Web — perhaps as soon as January — its material will be exclusively turfgrass-related, while USGA’s site is multi-faceted.

"We’re getting a lot of people logging on," said Dean Knuth, USGA’s senior director of handcrafting who, with Members Program Manager Chris Law, oversaw implementation of the computer package which went on line Nov. 13. "We’ve got 75 people today alone who have come to the USGA every day over this."
College (today called the University of Massachusetts) in 1936, 1937 and 1939, where he was a classmate of former Tom Morris award winner Sherwood Moore. During that time, Williams worked at Chicago's Merchants Golf Club under Norman Johnson (GC-SAA president in 1954). He later worked at Ohio State University's course and spent three years in the service during World War II before taking over at Beverly Country Club outside Chicago. Robert spent 12 years at Beverly before being offered the job at Bob O'Link while finishing out his presidency in early 1959. "I got a call during the 1959 conference from the people at Bob O'Link asking me if they could get some advice on how to go about selecting a new superintendent," Robert remembered. "I talked to them, but never had any intention of applying for the job, nor did they intend to hire me. I gave them my sales pitch about how the superintendent's profession was advancing and what a club could be with the right person in charge. They weren't aware of how the profession had progressed. They didn't have anyone in mind like the person I was describing and asked if I'd be interested." The elder Williams said his career has benefited from the fact that he and a handful of others were among the few university-educated superintendents who were stressing the need to operate a golf course as a business back in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. "Superintendents tended to be hands-on guys back then," he said. "Many became superintendents after selling their farm to a developer who built the golf course. Few liked to work in an office. They rarely went into the clubhouse or attended board meetings. There were a few of us who were giving educational seminars on budgeting, long-range plans, and office systems. It was largely an era of trying to take guys out of overalls and into the office.

GC-SAA experienced a shakeup at the staff level when the executive secretary resigned under pressure during the elder Williams' term back in 1958. The association underwent a similar shakeup in 1967. A new automated irrigation system had been installed that first automated irrigation system in 1970. Prior to that he had helped his father manage the courses. Over the years he worked at several golf properties, including the Highland Park District, Fort Sheridan, Onwentsia Club in Lake Forest, Ill., Sharon (Ohio) Golf Club and Glen View Golf Club in Golf, Ill. But after seeing the demands his father's profession made on his family life, Bruce originally thought a superintendent's career wasn't for him. He earned a bachelor's degree in English and earned a bachelor's degree in English and speech at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, and taught for a couple years. "I enjoyed studying English," Bruce said, "but I knew I couldn't make a living teaching or that it was a career I could do the rest of my life. I kept thinking about the things I'd done, the areas where I had experience, and what I enjoyed most. I kept coming back to golf course superintendent." With his parents' help, Bruce enrolled in Michigan State University's two-year turf management program, where he studied under Dr. Ken Payne and received the outstanding student award in his second year. After graduation, he worked for his father for a season and was ready to move onto another course when his father decided to retire. "Dad's recommendation wouldn't have been to hire me, his sense of fair play wouldn't have allowed it," Bruce said. "But the members wanted someone in the same mold and offered me the job." Continued on next page
Membership tops bylaw decisions

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Lawrence, Kan., and was approved by the national board of directors at its October meeting.

“We’re trying to strengthen the local and national associations by doing this,” said GCSAA President Gary Grigg. “Of the 95 chapter delegates at the Lawrence meeting, 90-plus were in favor.”

There was opposition to the original Chapter Relations Committee proposal that would have required all head superintendents to hold dual membership rather than grandfathering existing members, Grigg said. “The initial idea that everyone be required to join GCSAA was a problem for many of us,” said Bob Mitchell, head superintendent at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., and delegate of that state’s local chapter. “But pretty much everyone agreed on the July 1, 1997, compromise.”

Sandy Queen, past president of the Kansas GCSA and head superintendent at Overland Park Golf Course, said he was one of several people named to the Chapter Relations Committee two years ago who was likely to question any GCSAA efforts to extend its reach.

“I was skeptical at first,” he said. “But eventually we came to the conclusion that if we wanted a strong national association it was in everyone’s best interests for everyone to be members of both organizations.”

As for the second proposed bylaw change, Grigg noted that GCSAA’s 2,000 assistant superintendents currently pay the same $210 annual fee charged the 10,000 Class A and B head superintendents. This is a hardship for many assistants since clubs are more likely to pay GCSAA dues for their head superintendents rather than their assistants and the $210 is often a financial strain on an assistant’s salary, he added. “In theory, reducing dues to $105 for assistants would attract more of them to the association.”

“We’ll take a hit on our budget over the next few years,” Grigg said. “But we could eventually see twice as many assistants join. That will help us in the long run.”

Meanwhile, GCSAA lawyers have been inspecting the association’s often-ignored chapter affiliation agreements. To remain affiliated with GCSAA, local chapters must now:

- Legally incorporate.
- Purchase directors and officials liability insurance (between $300 and $600 annually if purchased through GCSAA).
- Require that the majority of local chapter board of director members be superintendents.

“We want to keep this a superintendent’s organization,” Grigg said. “Otherwise, the affiliation agreement will remain pretty much the same.”

Beginning in January, local chapters will have two years to comply with the new affiliation pact — a one-year reaffiliation period, followed by three-month grace and nine-month probationary periods. If a chapter ever falls out of compliance, it will have a year to get back in line or lose its GCSAA affiliation.

As for Grigg, he will turn over the presidency to Bruce Williams of Bob O’Link Golf Club in Highland Park, Ill., at February’s annual meeting. It has been a hectic year for Grigg, who began his term last February on the same day he was appointed head superintendent at Royal Poinciana Golf Club in Naples, Fla. The course is just finishing up a 36-hole renovation that included rebuilding all the greens, constructing new tees and bunkers and installing additional drainage.

“My message all year has been that superintendents need to become part of the decision-making process at the local and national levels,” Grigg said.

He said he has spent much of his term carrying on the efforts to improve chapter relations initiated by his immediate predecessor, Randy Nichols of Dunwoody, Ga. A chapter relations department headed by GCSAA staffer Don Breithauer and a regular newsletter for affiliated chapters are among the fruits of those labors, Grigg said.

Williamses

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Inevitably, there have been comparisons between the father and son who have observed Bob O’Link the past 40 years.

“It’s part of the deal,” Bruce said. “For the first six to eight years I was referred to as Bob’s son. That started to change between years eight and 10. After that, he was referred to as my father’s son. He always told me to just bide my time, be patient and my day would come. It’s different when you take over from anyone who has a reputation like my father’s. You’re not trying to walk on water, you’re just trying to keep your head above water.”

January 1996