

## **CERTIFICATION FOR GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENTS: AN INVESTMENT IN EXCELLENCE**

**William R. Roberts  
GCSAA, Lochmoor Club  
Gross Pointe, MI**

### **INVESTMENT**

The topic of this paper is professional certification for the golf course superintendent. I would like to give you a sense of the significance of professional certification. In order to do that, I think it's important that I share with you the historical context in which GCSAA's Certification Program has developed. Let's start with a very quick overview of how the profession itself developed.

### **DEVELOPED OVER YEARS**

For much of the game's history, individuals charged with caring for the golf course received little or no recognition for their efforts. Their work was seen as skilled labor, perhaps, but not exactly worthy of professional respect and recognition.

In the earliest years of golf, courses were merely defined through the linklands, and what "maintenance" there was, was extremely naturalistic. Greenkeepers performed multiple duties as golf course "architects," ball makers, club makers, maintenance equipment inventors/mechanics, golf teachers and tournament players. But as the game evolved, everything became more distinctly defined. Maintenance standards began to advance, and golf course maintenance became a specialization. Our immediate predecessors typically had to spend some 90 percent of their time on actual greenkeeping in order to provide playing fields that met the more advanced standards.

It took the confluence of a number of factors to transform this worthy occupation into the complex and challenging profession that characterizes golf course management today.

For one thing, maintenance standards have changed phenomenally in recent years. Televised coverage of pro tour events has had a lot to do with that. Golfers saw the impeccably manicured courses that the pros played, heard the announcers discuss the greens, and decided that was what they wanted at their home club. Of course, these golfers didn't want to hear that the courses on TV were tour stops, groomed to peak for a weekend. They didn't seem to understand that these courses weren't sustained at that level for the whole season.

The golf course superintendent responded to the club membership's mandate by employing intensive maintenance practices: coursewide irrigation systems, complex fertility and pest management programs, daily or even twice-daily mowing, and so on. Roughs started being maintained as fairways had been and fairways started being kept as greens had been several years before.

## **20th CENTURY TECHNOLOGY**

Today's golf course management standards and practices would not have been possible without the past 50 years' advances in petrochemicals, equipment technology and computers. The 20th century's explosion of technology lit the fuse for a revolutionary change in what it means to be a golf course superintendent. But even as these new technologies allowed the superintendent to become more effective in the agronomic management of the course, the superintendent's role expanded in other directions.

So now, greenkeeping is only one element of golf course management, a fact that is becoming more widely recognized as golf course management earns its reputation as a true profession.

## **MANY HATS**

Today's professional golf course superintendent does indeed wear many hats:

### **Agronomist**

The golf course superintendent directs a sophisticated turfgrass management program. Because every golf course is unique, this program must be uniquely designed to provide the playing surface that meets the club's aesthetic and playing standards, while preserving environmental integrity.

### **Scientist**

The golf course superintendent needs to know not only about agronomy, but also about meteorology, chemistry, soils, physics, mechanics, and so on.

### **Environmentalist**

Many golf course superintendents are first drawn to the profession by a love of the earth. But good land stewardship requires much more than a warm feeling. Today's superintendents must understand the complexities of the golf course ecosystem and its interrelationships with the larger ecosystem.

### **Golf Strategist**

A love of the game itself draws many more to the superintendents' ranks. A superintendent must understand the rules and strategies of the game in order to provide a course that is fair and delivers the right mixture of challenge and entertainment.

### **Educator/Communicator**

The golf course superintendent communicates with subordinates, superiors, the rest of the club management team, the club ownership, the club membership, vendors, suppliers, architects, builders, other superintendents, the media and the community. The superintendent's goal is often to educate the other party -- especially the club ownership, golfers, the media and the community at large -- about golf course management in today's rapidly changing world.

## **Resource Manager**

The golf course superintendent masterminds the allocation of the facility's resources -- including labor, equipment and supplies -- to deliver a playing field that meets agronomic, aesthetic and playing standards.

## **Administrator**

The superintendent's administrative functions include budget development, purchasing, cost control, inventory control and payroll -- plus keeping records of weather, course conditions and management practices. In addition, the superintendent is responsible for achieving and documenting compliance with the federal, state and local laws and regulations that affect the golf facility.

The way the business management aspects of the job have grown, the golf course superintendent's performance affects the organization's bottom line more and more. Obviously, the superintendent's success in providing a golf course that meets certain standards is crucial to attracting players. And players mean income: green fees, golf car rental, lunch at the grill, and so on -- not to mention membership dues at a private club. The course's landscaping and the clubhouse grounds can also help sell lots in a real estate development. Obviously, too, the golf course superintendents skill in controlling labor, equipment and supply costs has a direct impact on the club's bottom line. So do the superintendent's risk management and regulatory compliance efforts.

So our profession, and our role within the golf facility, have evolved greatly over the years.

## **PIVOTAL ON-COURSE EMPLOYEE**

Superintendents today are responsible for the care, maintenance and improvement of what is usually a multi-million dollar property. They are highly educated, highly skilled and highly professional managers -- true professionals. In fact, golf digest magazine has called the superintendent, quote, the game's pivotal on-the-course employee, unquote.

All in all, the superintendent's profession is perhaps the most dynamic one within the entire golf industry. Competence, knowledge and capability are difficult to assess, particularly when dealing with a profession as diverse as that of a golf course superintendent. That is why GCSAA's certification program is so important. It serves as a framework for recognizing the individual superintendent's efforts to stay informed about the industry and the profession, and his commitment to providing the best playing conditions on his course. It encourages self-improvement and higher levels of proficiency in all the many skills required in golf course management.

Your professional association is responsible for providing the mechanisms -- such as educational programming and professional certification -- whereby golf course superintendents may attain up-to-date standards of professional excellence. Historically, continuing education has been the cornerstone of GCSAA's program activity since the association was formed in 1926. As the profession expanded and evolved, the desire and the need to recognize outstanding professionals also grew. This culminated in the establishment of criteria by which superintendents could be measured. GCSAA launched the certification program in 1971 to provide superintendents the means to substantiate their work and accomplishments in continuing education.

## **APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS**

Only experienced golf course superintendents can become certified. To apply for certification, a superintendent must have at least five years of actual on-the-job experience as a head golf course superintendent, and must be currently employed in that capacity.

## **TIMELINE**

Applicants must also meet formal educational prerequisites either through college course work, or through GCSAA's educational curriculum. Beginning in 1994, superintendents will need either an associate's degree -- that's 60 semester credit hours of college -- or will need to complete GCSAA's Division I curriculum, in order to be accepted as a qualified applicant. The prerequisite will increase to 90 hours of college or equivalent in 1999, and to a bachelor's degree or equivalent in 2004.

GCSAA has pre-planned these increases in the educational requirements for certification application in recognition of the highly dynamic nature of the superintendent's profession. If the requirements were to remain static while the profession evolved, the "certified golf course superintendent" designation would diminish in value. "CGCS" is meaningful to those who are willing to make the significant personal commitment required to initiate and follow through with the certification process.

## **PROCEDURES**

Once a superintendent is accepted into the program, he or she must pass a six-hour examination. This comprehensive exam covers knowledge of GCSAA and the certification program; the game and rules of golf; turfgrass management; pest control, safety and compliance; financial management; and organizational management.

In addition to the examination, another crucial component of the procedure is the attesting process. During the certification process, two currently certified superintendents visit the applicant's golf course to conduct an in-depth personal interview and tour the course and facilities. The attesting superintendents evaluate the applicant's solutions to three problems encountered during management of the course and both attesting superintendents must recommend the applicant for certification.

## **RENEWED**

Once the examination and attesting processes have been successfully completed, a superintendent will become certified for five years. Certified superintendents are required to renew their certification every five years by documenting participation in educational activities that ensure they continue to merit the distinction conferred by the CGCS title.

## **PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE**

Here again, with the rapidly growing complexity of golf course management, the standards of "what professional excellence means" continue to advance. It follows naturally that the requirements for recertification -- and for the educational programs that count as credits toward renewal -- must also advance accordingly if our profession is to maintain its hard-won reputation for integrity and credibility.

## **CHANGES**

This is why GCSAA's Board of Directors voted last spring to upgrade the standards for awarding CEUs to educational programs, and to phase in corresponding changes in the requirements for certification renewal. The fact is that the world in which we live and work is changing very rapidly and this means that our profession has to change, too, so we can keep pace.

We are certainly not trying to thin the ranks of certified golf course superintendents. We don't want anyone who is currently certified to lose that status. In fact, we'd like to see our numbers of certified superintendents grow. We just want to make sure that certification means something. The upgrades that

we've made validate the certified golf course superintendent's credibility by demonstrating that he has indeed participated regularly in continuing education.

## **ALL CEUS**

We certainly don't want to hurt our affiliated chapters or other state or local associations either. But for certification to mean something, we have to make sure that all CEUs stand for the same quality of educational experience.

For many years now, all of GCSAA's seminars and correspondence courses have met the standards set by the international association for continuing education and training, the IACET. IACET is the organization that originally developed criteria for awarding CEUs.

But until these changes took effect in July, GCSAA used to award CEUs for other types of events that didn't meet these same criteria. Unfortunately, at some conferences, it used to be that all you had to do was find where the sign-up sheet was, sign in, and then go play golf if you wanted. There was no way of telling if people actually attended the whole event, and even if they did, there was no test to measure whether they got anything out of it.

## **WORK WITH STATE AND LOCAL**

Again, GCSAA is not trying to take anything away from the chapters or local associations. Our education department staff is more than willing to work with sponsoring organizations to help them develop their programs so they will meet the IACET guidelines. Our education department staff have already worked successfully with the University of GUELPH, North Carolina State University, Purdue University, The Texas Turfgrass Association, The Florida Turfgrass Association, The Ohio Turfgrass Association, The Kansas Turfgrass Association, The Nebraska Turf Foundation and the Chicagoland Chapter to get their programs in line with the new criteria. They were all able to offer CEUs, and now the Education Department staff is working with a number of other organizations to get their programs up to speed with the new guidelines, so they will be able to offer CEUs, too.

Now, I understand that there are some pretty common misperceptions out there about how much more difficult or expensive these new standards are going to make it to earn or renew your certification.

## **CEUs ARE YOURS**

Any CEUs you have already accumulated are yours. They are permanent. Once you earn CEUs, they cannot be removed from your transcript or reduced -- not even if you earned them for participating in events that are no longer eligible for CEUs.

## **AFFORDABLE, ACCESSIBLE**

As far as earning additional CEUs, the last thing we want is for superintendents -- whether they're currently certified or not -- to think that they can't achieve or keep status because:

- 1) It's too expensive, or
- 2) There aren't any educational opportunities available for them to earn CEUs.

I'm here to tell you that these perceptions just aren't accurate. When I'm talking about certification, I'm not talking about a big financial outlay. I'm talking about an investment of time, a commitment, a dedication. Sure, everybody has to pay the \$65 renewal fee. Beyond that, the fact of the matter is that you don't have to spend another red cent to renew your certification since the certification program began, and still today, you simply take the certification exam -- and that costs nothing at all. You can even use a total of three tries over a year's time to successfully complete all six areas of the exam.



## **TAILORS EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS**

Most of us who are certified are interested enough in keeping up with new developments that we look forward to new learning opportunities. Have you taken any of GCSAA's correspondence courses? Well, we have really made a strong commitment to providing these excellent educational opportunities at a very affordable price -- and you don't even have to travel at all! We're adding more correspondence courses all the time. Our goal is to add at least three a year. That way, by 1997, there will be more than enough courses available for you to get enough CEUs for renewal just by taking correspondence courses.

We're also looking at getting into satellite hookups so that we can work with local groups to provide video teleconferencing. We could hold a seminar at our headquarters education center, and beam it out to multiple locations across the country. These would be two-way communications setups. You can see and hear the instructor in Lawrence, and he can see and hear you. So you can ask questions and it's almost like being there. That's obviously a ways down the road yet, but it's something we're looking at very seriously. And of course, we'll always have our regular seminars at conference and in different regions.

## **COLLEGE COURSES**

You can also get CEUs by taking college courses for credit. There are enough community colleges around these days that almost everybody lives within just a short drive -- and some of them offer correspondence courses, too. Superintendents are taking courses on computers and information systems at their local community colleges. You can find great courses in business, management, personnel, finance, accounting and so on. Of course, not too many of these courses are tailored specifically for the golf course management profession like GCSAA's are. That's why the certification program does have a minimum percentage of your CEUs that must come from GCSAA education programs.

As far as the specific requirements for what you as an individual would need to meet to renew your certification, that depends on when your renewal date is. I have handouts up here that explain what the requirements are during each phase of the transition. I don't want to get into that up here, because it is complicated, and I don't want to confuse the people who renew in 1996 when I'm talking about what the requirements are for renewing in 1994. We have already mailed a copy of these out to all currently certified superintendents, but please feel free to come up and get another copy. I'll be happy to try to answer any questions you have, but I have to admit that I've just barely got a good handle on what my own situation is.

## **GCSAA EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

Let me go ahead and give you the names of the people who really know this stuff, so if I can't answer your specific question, you have someone you can call. First, Director Bruce Williams from Illinois. He's the Chairman of the Certification Appeals Committee and he has a good understanding of what happens and when. Or you can call GCSAA Headquarters and talk to Nancy Scott, who is our Education Manager for Certification, or Penny Hoffman, who is the Executive Secretary for Certification and whom you've probably talked to many times. These people are more than happy to help you figure out what you need, and what your options are for getting there. Don't hesitate to give them a call. They want very much to help you achieve professional success.