



*No. 8, South Course,
BallenIsles Country Club
at JDM, Palm Beach Gardens.*

Photos by Brian Everhart

Tom Benefield –



*No. 7, South Course, BallenIsles Country Club
at JDM, Palm Beach Gardens.*

He works on cutting edge of profession

BY KIT BRADSHAW

These are crucial times for Florida golf course superintendents. The politics of water conservation and environmental protection make golf courses an easy target for governmental shenanigans, even if the bureaucrats are misinformed, which can be expected.

Tom Benefield Jr., newly-installed president of the FGCSA, is both knowledgeable and articulate about the politically-sensitive issues facing golf course ownership and superintendents. He is now in the right place at the right time to lead his fellow superintendents toward correcting misconceptions and misinformation about golf courses and their benefits to the state.

He knows the objections that have been raised against golf courses and more importantly, he knows the answers to those objections and can communicate them.

Intelligent, experienced, well-organized, focused, tough and tenacious: these are all qualities that make up the man who now directs his attention toward proving the positive worth and value of golf courses in the Florida environ-

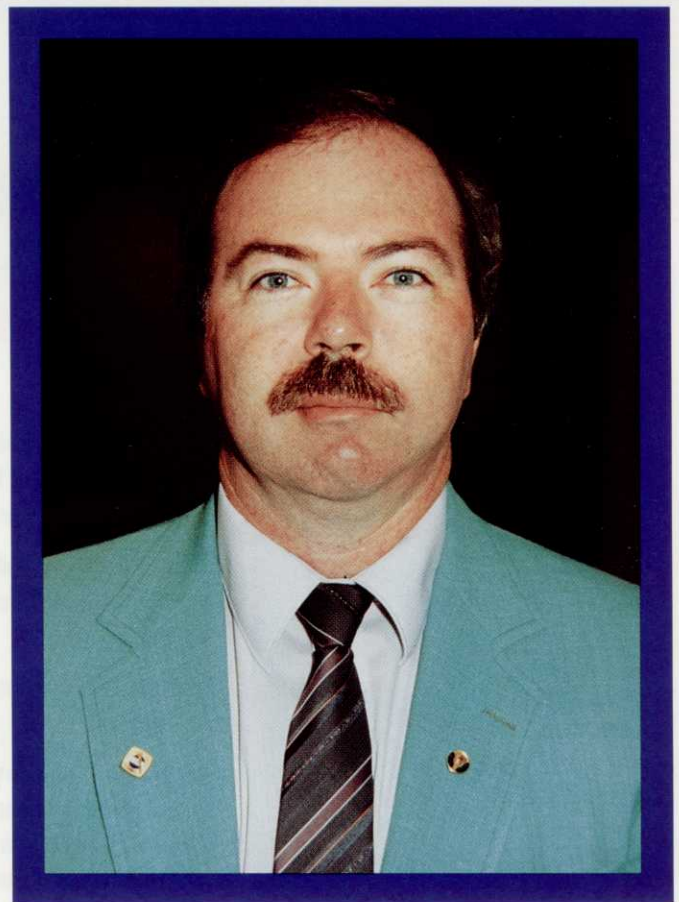


Photo by Philip Pettus

**Tom Benefield, CGCS
president of the FGCSA**

mental scheme.

Tom's background gives clues to his ability to transform apparent weaknesses into strength.

When Tom Benefield was in the fourth grade he stut-

No. 8, East Course, BallenIsles Country Club at JDM, Palm Beach Gardens.



tered constantly. But through the efforts of his teacher, who helped him overcome his stuttering through music, he went on to become a debater and a parliamentarian in high school.

At a previous job, Benefield was the 10th superintendent in six years at Beacon Woods near Spring Hill, Fla. “Two weeks after I came to Beacon Woods,” he said, “my greens chairman was upset with me and some of the things I was doing. He told me, ‘You weren’t my choice. I didn’t vote for you.’”

“When I left four years later, he came back to me and said, ‘Even though you weren’t my choice, I think you’ve done a hell of a job here.’”

“It was good to have someone who was totally against you change his perspective on how he views your job and win him over.”

Benefield doesn’t quit easily. And he realizes that one of his goals as the FGCSA’s new president — getting a state professional licensing program for golf course superintendents — is going to be controversial.

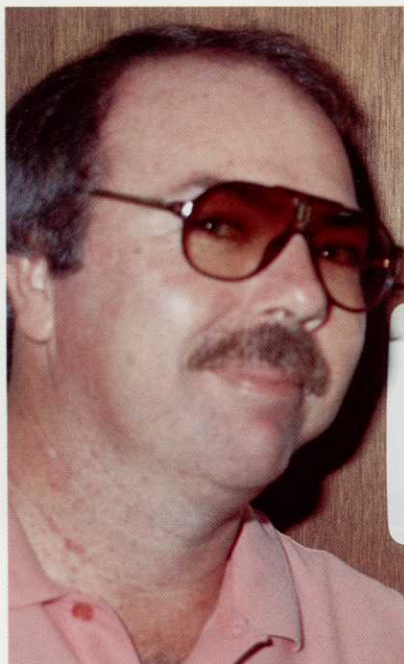
“It will anger some people,” he said matter-of-factly. “But it will make others happy. About 75 percent of the superintendents will be able to qualify for a license. About 20 to 25 percent won’t qualify and they’ll be upset.”

“It will also affect people moving into Florida from other states. You will have to show that you have knowledge of Florida conditions to work here. And when the licensing program is in effect, every golf course would be required to have a licensed superintendent on the staff.”

Benefield has some solid reasons behind his push for licensing. “It’s strange to me that you have to have a license to cut hair, but not to deal with water recharge areas, the aquifer, pesticides and so on. I think it’s something that’s been needed for a long time.”

Benefield said the logical way for licensing criteria to be created would be for the FGCSA to work with the DER,

Tom Benefield, CGCS



Age: 37

Education: Graduated from Lake City Community College with a degree in Golf Course Operations. Certified Golf Course Superintendent, GCSAA.

Current Position: Golf course superintendent at BallenIsles Country Club at JDM, Palm Beach Gardens.

Professional: President of FGCSA, previously vice president.

Previous employment: Assistant superintendent at River Oaks CC, Houston; Superintendent at Willow Creek CC, Beaumont, Texas; superintendent Sun Air CC, Dundee, Fla.; superintendent, Beacon Woods, near Spring Hill, Fla.

Family: Married to Deborah Eileen. They have a son, Joshua, 9.

water management districts and the Florida Freshwater Fish and Game Commission.

"The licensing program could encompass a grandfather clause. There are a lot of people who don't have the education, but who are among the best superintendents in the state. So they could be grandfathered in," he said.

Along with licensing would be an institute for continuing education through the FGCSA, where superintendents would attend educational programs one day every three months to stay abreast of the regulations.

"We have the structure through the education committee," Benefield said. "The biggest problem is to get the superintendents to agree it needs to be done." Benefield realizes this won't be easily achieved, but he said he enjoys challenges.

To some extent, he's been preparing for his presidency of the FGCSA since his days as a superintendent in Texas.

Jim Holub, superintendent at River Oaks CC in Houston, gave Benefield good grounding in the job skills necessary to be a good golf superintendent.

"I think the first person you work for out of school influences how you proceed through the rest of your career," Benefield said. "If you get the knowledge up front, you will do very well down the road. On the other hand, if you don't work for someone who is up on what needs to be done and has good practices and management ability, you will definitely have trouble down the road. Jim Holub helped me immensely."

When Benefield left River Oaks to become superintendent at Willow Creek CC in Beaumont, Texas, he learned two more valuable lessons: The course was being built out of reclaimed rice fields and Benefield learned the construction side of the business. And — he learned Spanish.

"I came in close contact with Spanish-speaking workers, many of whom didn't speak any English at all. So because of that experience, I have a fairly decent background in Spanish. This has been

beneficial."

At Sun Air Country Club in Dundee (near Grenelefe Resort), Benefield came across a totally different communication challenge. The course had one owner who also owned an estate, orange grove, pasture lands and horse stables for his prized Arabians. Benefield was in charge of the all these properties as well as the condominium ground.

"Having one owner really made it simple," he said. "It's probably the best situation. Basically, if you keep the owner happy, you'll be happy. If he's not happy, then you either make him happy or you look elsewhere."

And at Beacon Hill, where the ownership was split among members, Benefield still had other challenges, despite the previously-mentioned turnaround by the greens chairman.

"I think it's more difficult to have a club run by committees," he said, "because you have several people wanting you to do different things at the same time. Many of them came from different parts of the country and now they have to work together. That's a problem because they don't trust the employees. So you can get into a battle of egos between the greens chairman and the club president.

"This is the where it is important for a golf course superintendent to learn to communicate with everyone... the members, the committee chairmen, the golf professional.

"Your pro can make or break you. There have been more golf course superintendents who have lost their jobs because they didn't communicate with their pro. I've always made a special effort, no matter where I've been, to build a special relationship with the pro. I think that this is what kept me at Beacon Woods for

four years."

"For example," he said, "you have a shotgun start at 7:30 in the morning, and 280 people are planning on playing golf that day. But you have rain or a frost, and

the tee times are delayed. Now someone is going to miss his tee time that day, and he's not going to be happy.

"You just can't leave the pro out there, all by himself. You have to go out there and face the members and talk to them. Then you've done your job.

"But a lot of superintendents would turn the other way. Then you've created a problem with your pro."

When Benefield left Beacon Woods for BallenIsles CC at JDM in Palm Beach Gardens, he knew he would be facing quite a different challenge.

JDM's three courses had existed since the mid 1960s and of the three, only the east and north sides of the East course had homes around it. The 1,300 acres was nearly pristine compared to other built-out development communities.

"The membership was very used to this type of course. There wasn't any place else around they could play in such a natural area," he said.

All this changed in 1988 when Hansen Inc. of Philadelphia negotiated with the McArthur Foundation to buy additional property with the intention of developing the acreage. In 1989, the North and South courses were reconfigured to allow for this residential development. Benefield came to BallenIsles in late 1989 and was well aware of the situation.

"First of all, you had members who had been there for 20 years and they've been used to the three courses with just a small amount of development. It didn't matter who was making the changes; all the members knew that someone was

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taking something away from them and they would never get it back. So one of the challenges was to keep the members happy and they did this by keeping one course open throughout the the course reconstruction by Joe Lee.

"The other problem was during the grow-in process. We had to get all the courses up to their potential as quickly as possible and that was a time-consuming, tedious process. And, we were doing the growing-in during the drought, and that made it even more difficult.

"Today there is still a challenge, every single day," said Benefield. "We want to get to the point where we're recognized as one of the best facilities in the area. One of the things we have done is create a landscape maintenance division that is involved with all the common areas, the community association areas and the residential lawns.

"As the number of homes increases, this division will increase in size as well. Right now, 20 to 30 percent of my budget is attributed to that area. In time, the percentage will be larger — double my



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GOLF COURSE RENOVATION

golf course budget — because of the volume of homes that will be there.”

BallenIsles also faces a problem which many golf courses in the state now face — the availability of water. Benefield said it's vital that superintendents learn to articulate the value of a golf course to the water districts that create the water regulations.

“We're a big fat target sitting out there. We're a rich man's game... or we are perceived as such. So you have a lot of bad public perceptions that have to be overcome. We are being run roughshod over. We are being pushed into taking care of what is a community cost... recycling reclaimed water.”

Benefield said the water situation has two problems of public perception.

“First of all, it's an educational process for the board of directors of the water management districts to let them know what is going on in the real world of golf courses. They call us wasters of water, but they really don't understand we are not.

“For instance, my permit here at BallenIsles allows me to use 5,232 acre-inches of water a year. In the first four months of this year, I got over 33 inches of rainfall. Everything on my property drains to 220 acres of lakes on my property. So I am recharging these

33 inches of rainfall. Let's say that instead of 33 inches of rainfall, it was only 10 inches. I have 1,300 acres here. That's 26,000 acre-inches of water that I'm recharging back into the water table. I'm putting back five times what I'm allowed to use.

“Golf courses aren't wasters of water, they are huge collection basins for rainfall. We're the exact opposite of someone who wastes water.”

Then there's the matter of reclaimed water. Benefield believes golf course superintendents need all the communication skills and the political awareness they can muster to correct erroneous assumptions by public officials.

“Golf courses are being forced to take and to pay for more reclaimed water,” he said. “We are providing an acceptable disposal method for the community's semi-hazardous waste. We

are willing to take the water, to distribute it on millions of dollars worth of land — land the community does not have to purchase to dis-

pose of the water. We are willing to use millions of dollars worth of irrigation systems and pump stations to get the water to our property. We are providing a service to the public.

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“For us to have to pay to provide that service is ludicrous. The water district looks at this and says, ‘let's run this thing through the Public Service Commission.’ The Public Service Commission is going to nail us. It won't matter to them if we pay a dollar a thousand gallons.

“We need to tell the public and the water districts and the governor and the DER what we think is ethical and fair in this regard. If golf courses weren't here, where would they put this wastewater?”

“Instead of being charged, we should be receiving credits for what we bring to the table. And what we bring is the fact

that our golf courses are allowing them to dispose of their reclaimed water, and thus saving hundreds of mil-

lions of dollars to the public. I think it's pretty cut and dried.

“But,” Benefield says, “unless someone steps in and gives a more definite push — someone like the governor's office and the DER — we are going to have a problem throughout the state.

“I hope there's enough intestinal fortitude among the people who have been appointed to the boards of governors of these different water management districts to recognize what is fair, accurate and reasonable, and go forward.

“But I do think it will be a tough call to make.”

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