

# PDI PUSHES PROFES

## PROGRAM HELPS SUPERINTENDENTS; GCSAA PLANS TO PROMOTE CLASS A STATUS

**A** title is only a word unless there's something to back it up. With this thought in mind, golf course superintendents throughout the country are in the midst of putting substance behind the term "Class A."

In 1971, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America began a certification program for its members. However, it acknowledged the program, which bestowed the designation certified golf course superintendent on its recipients, was a rose that didn't smell too sweet.

Scott Woodhead was a superintendent in Montana for 25 years before becoming president of the GCSAA in 2000. Woodhead says all one had to do to become a Class A member was have a job as a superintendent for three years and pay annual dues.

"This was part of the problem superintendents had in terms of people's perception of them," he says.

With that criteria, it's difficult to challenge the notion that superintendents are little more than guys in muddy boots and jeans who mow grass. In contrast, people see PGA of America pros in a golf shop with a Class A designation, and the pros command respect because golfers know they had to meet certain requirements to earn that designation.

So, how will superintendents flip the script?

### MUCH IMPROVED

In 2001, at the GCSAA annual meeting in Dallas, the membership passed a resolution to implement a new program called the Professional Development Initiative.

The mission was to improve the knowledge and skills of superintendents by instituting clearly defined competencies. This means members must pass certain standards every five years to be a Class A superintendent.

"Seventy-five percent voted for implementation of membership standards," says Woodhead, who now works for the GCSAA as the senior manager of governance/member standards.

To earn the Class A designation, members must have three years of experience as a superintendent, hold a job in that capacity, earn various degrees of continuing education points (based on prior formal education, such as a four-year agronomy degree) and pass an integrated pest management test.

Eighty-two percent of all GCSAA Class A and superintendent members who responded to the survey had a two-year certificate, an associate degree or a higher degree of formal education.

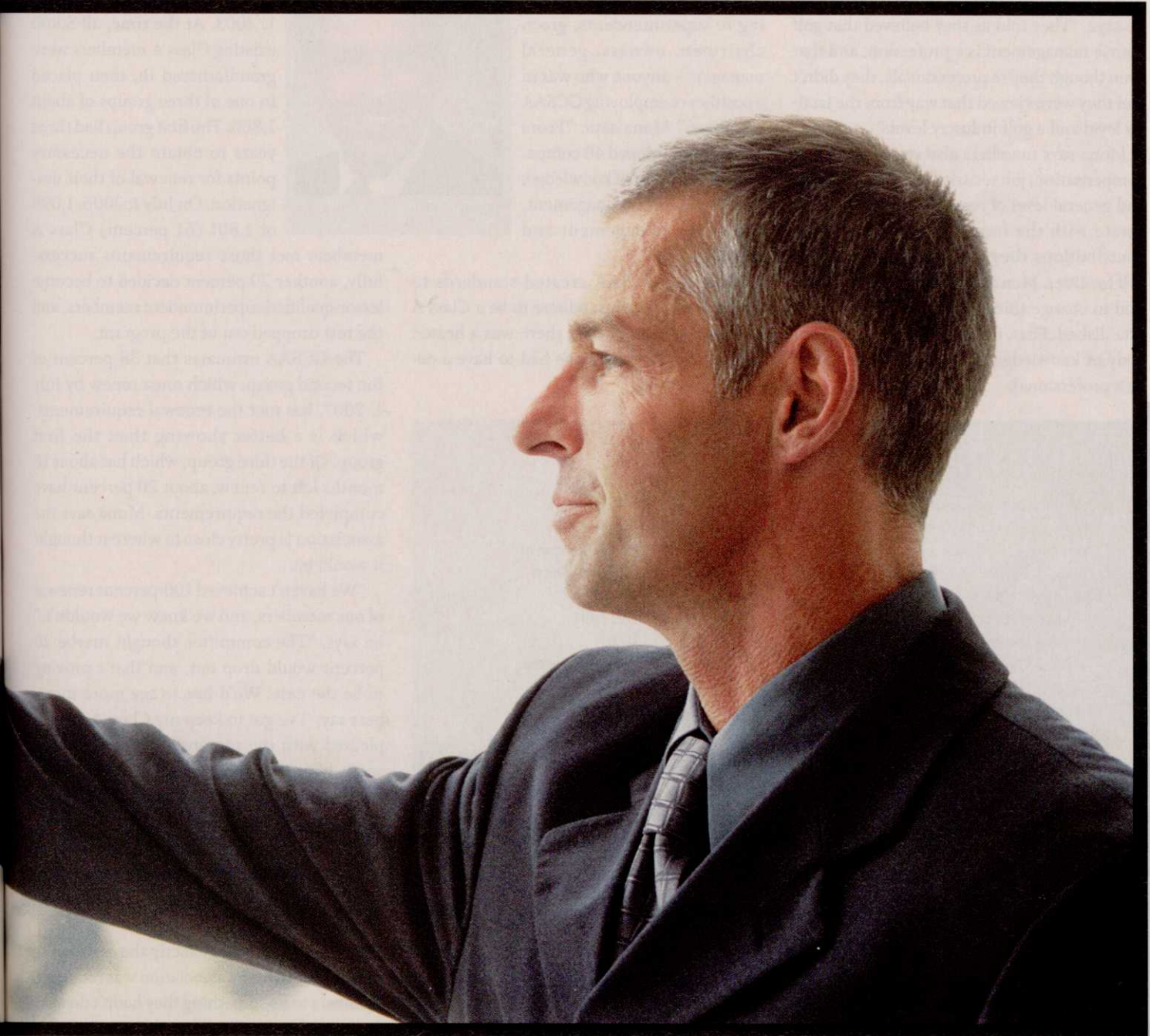
The process of establishing the PDI program, from broaching the subject to implementation, took five years, Woodhead says.

"We know superintendents are staying on top of their game," he says. "We just made a mechanism so we could report back to golfers



# PROFESSIONALISM

BY T.R. MASSEY



and employers to tell them exactly what their superintendent was doing.”

Steve Mona, c.e.o. of the GCSAA, attended his first national meeting in that capacity in 1994. He says delegates from all 104 chapters discussed emerging issues and the direction of the association.

“The members were clear to the board that they wanted certain things to happen,” he says. “They told us they believed that golf course management is a profession, and that even though they’re professionals, they didn’t feel they were viewed that way from the facility level and a golf industry level.”

Mona says members also stated that their compensation, job security, job opportunities and general level of respect wasn’t commensurate with the formal education and the contributions they make to the success of golf facilities. Mona and the board agreed, but said to change things, two criteria had to be established. First, there must be a recognized body of knowledge that one must master to be a professional.

“You can’t just hang out a shingle and say you’re a doctor or lawyer,” Mona says.

Second, there must be a requirement to continue to claim a professional designation, which means ongoing education. The GCSAA hired the Stanford Research Institute to determine the contents of the body of knowledge.

“For about two years, they did extensive research, talking to superintendents, green chairmen, owners, general managers – anyone who was in a position of employing GCSAA members,” Mona says. “From that, they developed 48 competencies, the body of knowledge, such as resource management, personnel management and many others.”

Next, the GCSAA created standards to which members must adhere to be a Class A member. As part of that, there was a heated debate about whether one had to have a degree, Mona says.

“At end of the day, we voted ‘no’, but we created a sliding scale,” he says. “You must achieve a blend in five areas: formal education; continuing education; job experience; service to local chapter, community and the national organization; and a pesticide license or [a passing score on] a test that’s equivalent to it.”

The PDI program started July 1, 2003. At the time, all 5,400 existing Class A members were grandfathered in, then placed in one of three groups of about 1,800. The first group had three years to obtain the necessary points for renewal of their designation. On July 1, 2006, 1,099 of 1,801 (61 percent) Class A

members met those requirements successfully, another 29 percent decided to become lesser-qualified superintendent members, and the rest dropped out of the program.

The GCSAA estimates that 38 percent of the second group, which must renew by July 1, 2007, has met the renewal requirements, which is a better showing than the first group. Of the third group, which has about 18 months left to renew, about 20 percent have completed the requirements. Mona says the association is pretty close to where it thought it would be.

“We haven’t achieved 100-percent renewal of our members, and we knew we wouldn’t,” he says. “The committee thought maybe 20 percent would drop out, and that’s proving to be the case. We’d like to see more members say, ‘I’ve got to keep my Class A.’ We’re pleased with the response, but we’d like to see it higher. Ideally, everyone would do it except those who are leaving the profession or retiring.”

Woodhead says the contentious part of the debate came when members voted for the PDI program, but since then, there haven’t been many complaints.

“I don’t know what exactly the arguments were, other than the association was requiring members to do something they hadn’t done in the past,” he says. “Just having requirements



Mona

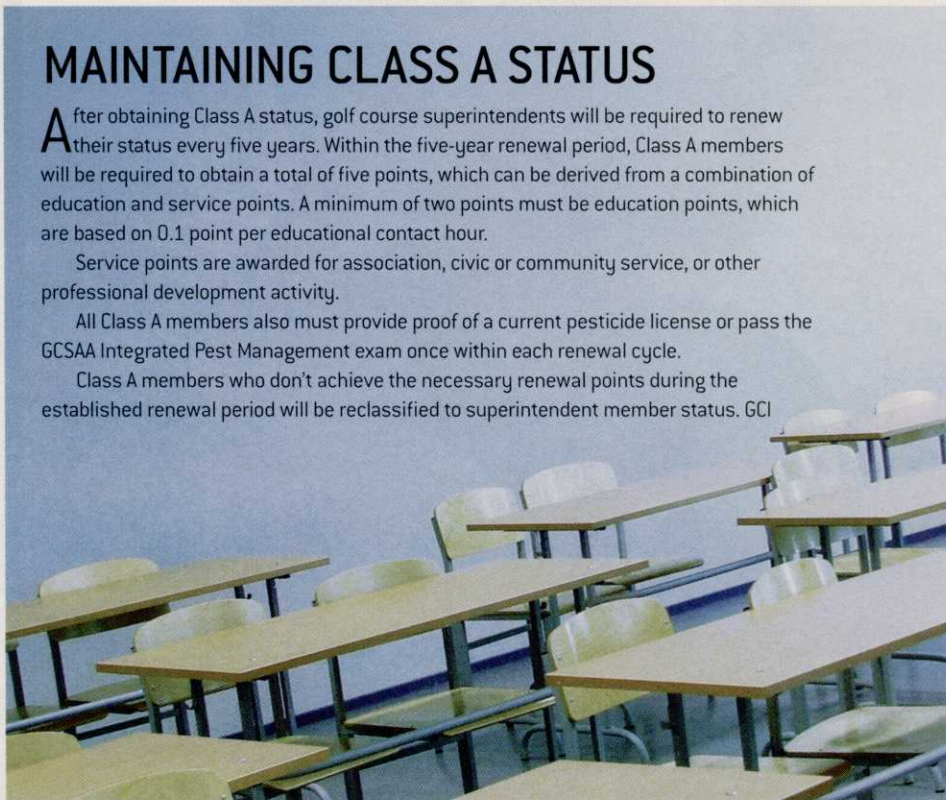
## MAINTAINING CLASS A STATUS

**A**fter obtaining Class A status, golf course superintendents will be required to renew their status every five years. Within the five-year renewal period, Class A members will be required to obtain a total of five points, which can be derived from a combination of education and service points. A minimum of two points must be education points, which are based on 0.1 point per educational contact hour.

Service points are awarded for association, civic or community service, or other professional development activity.

All Class A members also must provide proof of a current pesticide license or pass the GCSAA Integrated Pest Management exam once within each renewal cycle.

Class A members who don’t achieve the necessary renewal points during the established renewal period will be reclassified to superintendent member status. GCI



was the problem for some.”

Mona knew some would oppose the program – those who didn’t want to be told what to do or didn’t believe it would impact their employment.

“That’s fine, but for the most part, people are saying they asked for it, and they wanted definitions,” he says.

#### MEMBER FEEDBACK

Keith Pegg, an international member of the GCSAA who’s currently working in Japan, doesn’t think much of the program.

“The PDI is a joke,” he says. “We had certification that was great, and we didn’t need PDI.”

But Pegg seems to be in the minority.

Richard Staughton is president of the Georgia chapter of the GCSAA and golf course superintendent at Towne Lake Hills Golf Club in Woodstock. Though he hasn’t renewed his Class A status, he claims to be a continuing education geek.

“It’s always a good thing,” he says. “It comes down to continuing education. You have to stay on top of current trends.”

Gary Carls, golf course superintendent at Sunnyvale Golf Course in California, is in the third renewal group and thinks it’s great to have member standards.

“In some ways, I wish it was even stronger,” he says. “But once it gets rolling and the guys get renewed, the standards will get tougher down the road.”

Carls says the profession has changed a lot since he started in Michigan in 1978. Twenty-five years ago, degrees weren’t required. One just joined a crew and worked his way up.

Nowadays, most of those coming into the business have an agronomy degree.

“When I started, I was out mowing and working with crews,” he says. “Now, there’s more budgeting, managing and meeting with the board and the shop about how to drive rounds and the business side of it. It’s not just about growing grass anymore.”

That’s why Carls believes the Class A designation has to mean something.

“They’re just starting to promote the Class A designation now that the first group has been renewed,” he says. “During the past few years, we’ve talked about its value, and the owners have come back with the idea that they might use this designation as hiring criteria.”

Bill Davidson, golf course superintendent at Naples Grande Golf Club in Florida, was in the first renewal group and says it was exceptionally easy.

“If you just go to monthly meetings with your local chapter and take a limited amount of continuing education units to keep up your license, you can get enough points,” he says. “The biggest problem is that guys rely on people to do things for them. Guys get points and don’t turn them in. You have to manage your own certification. You can’t just go to a meeting and hope.”

#### FINANCIAL BENEFITS

There’s evidence the program is paying dividends financially. According to a recent GCSAA salary survey of superintendents, annual compensation rose from \$44,000 in 1993 to almost \$69,000 in 2005. The average salary of those who’ve earned a Class A designation rose to \$80,489 in 2005, an increase from \$56,994 in 1995. Class A superintendents’ salaries averaged 15 percent greater in 2005 than superintendents without a Class A designation.

Mona says GCSAA research shows the perception and favorable opinions of superintendents are on the rise.

“The two main messages are, one, that having a Class A designation is a key to the economic vitality to the golf course,” he says. “Second, superintendents play a crucial role in the golfers’ enjoyment of the game. What makes a round enjoyable? The golf course itself, in the end, is the primary differentiator of the quality of the experience. Golf course conditions influence your enjoyment of the game.”



Carls

Mona says the GCSAA board promised its members to market them if they passed the PDI.

“If we can get these messages communicated, recognition and respect and job security will take care of themselves,” he says.

Mona acknowledges the jury is still out on the recognition and awareness campaign.

“We have great research data that shows we’ve raised the level of awareness of our members,” he says. “But the long-term goal is still out there. Ultimately, when an employer hires a superintendent, we want them to say, ‘I have to have a Class A GCSAA member because the risk of not having one is too great.’ And we want golfers to know who their superintendent is by name. We want them to say the work they do is having the most impact on their enjoyment of golf. It’s not a competition between pros and superintendents, but we want our fair share of the recognition.”

In that regard, Mona says the association targets employers and avid and influential golfers to send the message about the importance of the Class A designation.

“They understand in general terms what it takes to be a Class A member and what it takes to continue, so they can ascribe value to it,” he says. “We are communicating to these people where they live. We’re targeting different media outlets they tune into.”

The GCSAA has made a substantial investment with the Golf Channel this year via ads and other programming that will begin in March, Mona says.

“We’re also running particular ads in publications focused on golf course decision makers,” he says. “The message is that the Class A GCSAA member brings certain attributes to the facility, and employers should insist on a Class A member. It all loops back to where we started, when we said we want respect, job opportunities and security.”

When that happens, a title is more than just a word. **GCI**

*T.R. Massey is a freelance writer based in Columbus, Ohio. He can be reached at [trm@columbus.rr.com](mailto:trm@columbus.rr.com).*