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OWNER PROFILE

a players' course. Even I can appreciate what a great golf course it is, and I stink at golf.

Potomac Ridge is in southern Prince George's County. The National Harbor project, located 10 minutes across the Potomac River from Old Town Alexandria, is opening this April and includes a 2,000-room Gaylord Hotel. We're looking forward to some golfers from the hotel's conferences.

You seem very focused on the environment.

We've had to be, just to do business and get permits, but we're trying to make a stand environmentally from top to bottom. We've led the way locally. We're doing lots of little things, such as installing rain barrels at our facilities and using cups made out of corn in the cafe. We're getting back into Audubon International certification, and we're hosting the first golf tournament for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. I'm proud of this, considering the bad environmental image

that golf courses have. The 'green' aspects of Queenstown Harbor are a large part of the marketing for this tournament. Heck, I even drive a Prius, which is really small but gets fabulous gas mileage.

What are your challenges, and how do they differ from typical NGCOA facilities?

We're not a mom-and-pop operation, and we're not a huge golf management company. We're in between. But our challenges are probably more like NGCOA's mom-and-pop members. Luckily, our portfolio includes office buildings and other stuff that's helped us get through lean times. Also, while I don't think the environment is a huge issue for most courses nationwide, it's still a big issue for us. One of the constant challenges is dealing with an outdated perception that golf courses are inherently bad for the environment.

Quite frankly, economics are driving us to be

more careful with chemicals. Money also can be a good environmental motivator. We're also getting serious about water use – we changed our fairway grasses at Potomac Ridge to zoysia to be less thirsty. Water restrictions are going to come and we need to be prepared.

Are you going to be active on the national level in terms of lobbying?

Absolutely. The whole industry is getting more active and pushing things such as green carbon credits for golf. The industry has hired new lobbyists to push that, and we're having a "Day on the Hill" in D.C. this spring. There's a huge future potential for golf courses to be viewed as environmental resources for communities. We sort of led the way in that when we lobbied for and received "open space" designation for courses in Maryland.

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Yeah right! We're temporarily closing one nine at our 27-hole facility in Prince George's County because play is down. Still, I'm confident that the huge influx of housing, not to mention those 2,000 hotel rooms, will drive play. The future for that facility is bright. But on the whole, we're working hard to keep our rounds consistent. That truly has been a sign of the current state of things.

If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing about the market, what would it be?
I'll pick two. First, more accessibility for young golfers and, second, erasing the bad perception that courses have regarding the environment.

What are your goals as NGCOA president?
I want to push the sustainability/environment issues as much as possible. We have "fixed" a lot of the problems from years back, and the products and practices are getting better all the time. I

talked to one of the Toro scientists at the show and got jazzed about some of the environmental technologies coming down the pike. We'd love to be a test case for some of those innovations.

How often do you get to play?
Not very often. After talking with NGCOA executive director Mike Hughes about the importance of nine-hole play a few years ago, I started the "Friday Morning Irregulars." We have a big group that's invited to meet at 7:30 in the morning, on Fridays, and play the back nine – so no sellable tee times get used. I charge \$15, and it all goes to charity. It's a blast. Other than that, I don't get out too much, except for the occasional tournament.

What advice would you give to an aspiring golf course owner these days?
To analyze the community needs and make sure he or she knows what's on the municipality's de-

velopment plans. It just makes me nuts that cities and counties keep developing courses. Yikes!

If you could turn back the clock 20 years and change your career, what would you do differently?

That's a loaded question. If I had known about the golf career, I definitely would have tried to play more and learn more about the game before building a course. But there are only a few things I would change.

The best part of all was that for many years I was able to work with my father, Arthur Birney Sr., who just turned 80 and is still active, and that had been my dream. He's a fantastic man, and everyone loves him. The nicest compliment I ever received was while I was giving a toast at the wedding of one of my closest friends, when a little old lady leaned next to her friend and I heard her say, 'He's just like his father.' That was wonderful. GCI



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still in the
thick of it

After almost 20 years as a superintendent,

Quent Baria now works on the supply side of the business

By John Walsh

Photos by Darren Higgins

Last year, after 19 years as a superintendent and a lifetime on golf courses, a middle-aged Quent Baria, CGCS, found himself looking for a job. After a career progression with four different clubs on the East Coast, Baria's hand was forced at the Towson Golf and Country Club in Phoenix, Md. Instead of looking for another superintendent job, he already was contemplating working for a chemical company. Now a territory manager for Valent Professional Products, his transition from superintendent to salesman has been smooth.

Baria's story is similar to many other superintendents who've left the profession but not the industry because they've taken jobs helping out their brethren on the supply side of the business.

FROM CRADLE TO GRASS

Like many, Baria was born into the profession. His father, Robert E. Baria Jr., was a golf course superintendent, so the younger Baria grew up on a golf course, the Fincastle Country Club in Bluefield, Va., and lived on the property.

"I lived there since I was an infant, from the first day my folks brought me back from the hospital," Baria says. "I decided early on, at the age of 16 or 17, that I wanted to pursue turf management as a career."

After high school, Baria attended Virginia Tech and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in agronomy specializing in turfgrass management. After graduation, he spent one year as an assistant superintendent at the 27-hole Glen Oaks Club in Old Westbury, N.Y., under superintendent Richie Struss, CGCS, who's still there.

At Glen Oaks, Baria learned the colloquialisms and regional differences of turf management. He also was exposed to how a high-end club operated, and he took in the management feel.

"Basically, I saw the nuts and bolts of dealing with members," he says. "Richie was more of a liaison to the membership. I was basically his man on the ground to accomplish missions. He was under a different set of pressures and circumstances. I learned there's another side to being a golf course superintendent."

Baria also learned a lot from his father, who always set the bar extremely high. The elder Baria, who has been a GCSAA member for 45 years, retired from the profession at age 59 because of health reasons.

"While on his crew, I took the heat for a lot of things I didn't do just so he could get the message across to other crew members," he says. "He was a perfectionist. Even though there were membership demands, they weren't as demanding as the ones my father put on himself."

TOP DOG

In 1989, Baria left Glen Oaks and came back to southwestern Virginia, to his roots, and took the head superintendent job at the Tazewell Country Club in Pounding Mill, Va., at the young age of 23. Baria's original plan, however, was to spend another year or two as an assistant at Glen Oaks. But because there was a job opening 20 miles from his home and the folks at Tazewell sought him out to fill the position, he took it.

"That was back in the golf building phase

when the demand for superintendents was high," he says. "It was unlike a lot of the assistants nowadays who are five to 10 years in that role. I was fairly green but not as green as many of the young superintendents because of my experiences with my father and having worked on a golf course since I was 14 years old. I had nine years of experience on a course, obviously not in management, when I took the job at Tazewell, where I spent about five years."

At the time, Tazewell was one of the lower-tier private clubs that had budget and playability issues. The course lost a significant portion of grass on the greens the season before. One green was completely out of play and considerable portions of eight greens were out of play because of turf loss. Baria started early in the spring working to recover the turf, which was a bentgrass/*Poa annua* mix. He was able to regrass and reclaim a large portion.

"I started that job April 2, and after Memorial Day, we were 100 percent grass from then on every year," he says. "We were off to a rocket start, and the members were happy. They were saying, 'This guy can grow grass on a rock.'"

Baria credits his success at Tazewell to his skill set, which the club hadn't been able to hire before.

"There were far fewer turf professionals, far fewer people educated on a college level in rural southwestern Virginia," he says. "The ones that were around didn't seem to make their way into that part of the world."

As Baria reflects back on his career and some of his greatest successes, he thinks of Tazewell.

"It's a mark of true leadership when you can go back to a facility and not see where they missed you but see where they grew with you and continued to grow," he says. "You set a pattern, and they continued to grow even after your departure. It's neat to know you've been a part of that. I got the ball rolling, and from that day, they continued to function as a debt-free club. They paid for projects, such as irrigation upgrades, with cash. They've managed effectively and wisely. They've continued to seek professionals after I left. I felt like they got their money's worth when they hired their first professional."

DEEP ROOTS

From Tazewell, Baria moved on to Fincastle

Thinking about a career change? Consider these points:

1. **Consult your spouse.**
 2. **Pray. Spiritual direction and peace soothe the soul in times of turmoil.**
 3. **Consult with others who've made similar moves. When you can't find someone whose moved back from sales to course management, it speaks volumes.**
 4. **Asked yourself "What do I want to do?" instead of "What am I going to have to do now?"**
 5. **Don't put your children's desires ahead of properly positioning yourself to provide for them. Use the resiliency of youth for the family's mutual benefit.**
 6. **Trust your gut and instincts. Know they've driven you in a successful path before and will again. Embrace change, it's the only constant we truly deal with.**
-



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CAREER PROFILE

in 1993 to take the place of his father after his retirement. But before he left Tazewell, he had input on the superintendent that followed him – Charlie Scott.

“Tazewell is an intermediate-tier private club, one of those where a superintendent will come and stay four or five years,” Baria says. “It’s not that kind of perch position where you try to end your career, but it has had quality people and results ever since I was there.”

Fincastle was stable when Baria started working there, but later, because of a lack of clarity, the club went through with an untimely expansion and clubhouse renovation and invested a lot in phases of the operation that were destined not to produce a return on investment, Baria says. Although he had an opinion, Baria says it wasn’t his place to offer his input about such investments.

“It was already a line of demarcation and a source of division among the membership,” he says. “I made a conscious decision early on and stayed away from that one.”

Baria says the club believed it could improve its food-and-beverage, catering and facilities management and turn those improvements into a source of revenue rather than a drain.

“They actually increased the size of the monster they needed to feed, and that didn’t turn out to be a good thing,” he says. “But hindsight is 20/20.”

While at Tazewell, Baria’s budget was about \$150,000, which equates to about \$300,000 nowadays. At Fincastle, the budget was about \$375,000, which equates to about \$750,000 now. With those budgets, he was able to stay current with industry trends, such as using soluble spray programs, flat-line growth curves on greens, plant growth regulators to manage ball roll and mowing intermediate roughs. He also implemented a three-year sizable landscape plan for Fincastle’s entire facility.

“Rather than just sit down there in isolated southwestern Virginia and let the world pass us by, we were keeping pace with all the trends and improvements that were going on in the industry,” he says. “What was always neat in that climate and region was that our membership could go elsewhere to some of the finest venues, whether it was at the Greenbrier or destination beach resorts, and come back home and say, ‘You know what, we get to play a better golf course at home than we do when we leave.’ That type of statement made you proud.”

Aside from agronomic issues, Baria also developed his business management acumen at Tazewell and Fincastle. He had the pleasure of working with Walter (Buck) Sowers, a successful businessman and green chairman at Fincastle.

“I quietly requested he take over the role as green chairman because I worked with him before,” he says. “He had been my father’s green chairman for a number of years. He recognized right away that he couldn’t make me a better technician, but he could make me a better manager. The first thing he did was hand me the book, ‘The Goal,’ by Eli Goldratt and said, ‘This book doesn’t have anything to do with turf management, but it has a lot to do with ongoing improvement.’ It helped me to make sure we had systems in place and that we get correct feedback and act correctly on that feedback to make sure the next time we go through a process, procedure or budget, we were better at it the second, third and fourth time around.”

TIME AT TOWSON

Baria’s next career move came in 2002, when he left Fincastle to go to Towson.

“After a while, the budget at Fincastle flat-lined, and without malice or discontent on any party, I surmised that, from a career standpoint, we had gotten to a plateau level where I wasn’t going any farther,” he says.

Baria was looking actively for another job during the last year at Fincastle because he didn’t want to make a hurried decision. Baria was attracted to Towson for several reasons: working with a budget that was double the size of Fincastle’s, working in a metropolitan region and being compensated more.

“The dynamic was pretty neat at Towson,” he says. “It was all about comparing favorably to your peer and sister clubs around the Baltimore beltway. If you didn’t compare favorably, the pressure was on. If you were in a position in which you compared favorably, you could ride the wave.”

Moving from a rural setting to a metropolitan one allowed Baria to be recognized by more of his peers.

“A few people in the industry had always recognized that I was doing innovative things and using leading technologies,” he says. “That started to be recognized by a larger set of people when I moved to Towson.”

One of the innovative strategies was rebuilding all 19 greens using the International Greens