

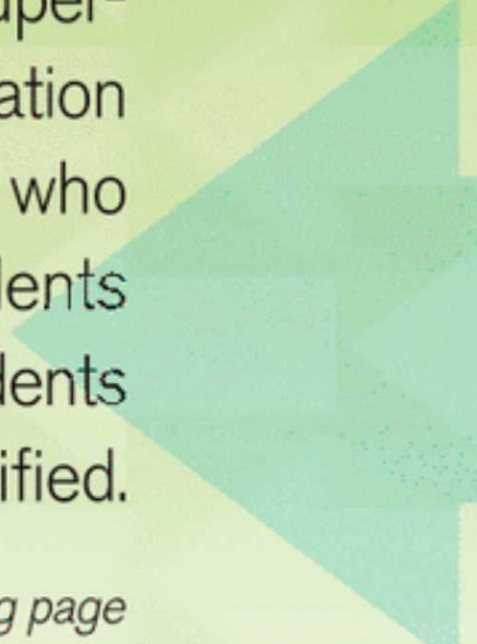
POINT COUNTERPOINT



Superintendents square off over GCSAA's certification program



To be or not to be a certified golf course superintendent? This has been a hot button in the golf course maintenance industry for years and continues to spark debate. *Golfdom* asked **Christopher S. Gray Sr.**, golf course superintendent and general manager of the Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky., and **Rafael Barajas**, certified golf course superintendent of Hacienda Golf Club in La Habra Heights, Calif., to contest the benefits of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's certification program in print. Gray says superintendents who are certified are not necessarily better superintendents than those who are not. Barajas believes superintendents will have better career opportunities if they are certified.



Golfdom would like to know your views on golf course certification. Please send Editor in Chief Larry Aylward your views in an e-mail. You can contact him at laylward@questex.com.

The certification discussion continues on the following page

POINT:

Certification program turns members into groups of 'haves' and 'have nots'

BY CHRISTOPHER S. GRAY SR.

I believe a certification program in our industry is probably a good idea. I even agree with the position that fulfilling the stringent requirements to become a certified golf course superintendent is truly a personal choice that each one of us must make for ourselves. But that's pretty much where I stop supporting the certification program.

While I applaud the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's effort to enhance the superintendent profession and image through the certification program, I loathe the unfortunate reality it has caused by driving a wedge between membership classes and transforming our association into the "haves" and "have nots." The reality of the GCSAA certification program is it causes more problems within the membership of the association than it solves outside our industry.

I'm a "Class A" member by the current "class system" being used by the association. The only reason I'm a "Class A" member is because I was grandfathered in at that level during the great Professional Development Initiative debacle earlier this decade. I honestly could care less whether I'm classified as "Class A" or "SM" (Superintendent Member) or "CGCS" (Certified Golf Course Superintendent) or whatever other arbitrary designation the GCSAA wants to give us. Personally, I would rather be seen as simply a "member" of the GCSAA, along with 21,000 other fellow turfgrass industry professionals.

Unfortunately, it appears this is not

the sentiment the GCSAA wants to embrace. In fact, it can be easily seen that, through its marketing efforts, the GCSAA has placed a higher perceived value on "certified" superintendent members than the rest of us "non-certified" superintendent members. This incredibly self-serving perception that certified superintendents are somehow better than non-certified superintendents is what has been dividing the membership since the beginning of the certification program 38 years ago.

Earlier this year, I viewed footage from

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COUNTERPOINT:

You will only benefit yourself by becoming a certified superintendent

BY RAFAEL BARAJAS, CGCS

If you don't carry the certified golf course superintendent designation (CGCS) behind your name, your employer is probably fine with that. In fact, it might be the reason they hired you in the first place. For years, I've heard people say, "My employer couldn't care less if I get certified." If that's the case, they probably couldn't care less about a lot of things. In turn, your unwillingness to challenge yourself to attain certification status says you agree and expect nothing more from your employer, your course or yourself. If your

employer does not support the time, cost or commitment required for your certification, that view would also likely be reflected in every aspect of care at your course. Is that how you want to spend your career?

There's a difference between those who understand the importance of continuing their education and those who choose complacency or the status quo. Lack of professional certification through the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America can be used as justification for a lower salary or fewer pay increases. That's good for your employer, but what about you? It can also be used as leverage to keep you in place at your current course, rather than looking for the best career opportunities that may lie ahead. Again, that's good for your employer, but it's not good for you.

We all know there is a return on most every investment; in this case, the statistics of the GCSAA salary survey show the positive difference in salary of a certified golf course superintendent versus a superintendent who isn't certified. You can question the statistics, metrics and the survey methods all day long, but the bottom line is this: Most of us who chose to challenge ourselves and attain certified status enjoy the rewards of our investment through some combination of better job satisfaction, respect and recognition among peers, higher pay, and/or better career opportunities.

Superintendents attain certification status for many different reasons. On paper, the letters CGCS stand for a lot more than ego or status. In the golf

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this year's annual, invitation-only certification luncheon held in New Orleans. This year's guest speaker was Baseball Hall of Fame member Mike Schmidt. During his speech, Schmidt made the following remark, "I was sitting there thinking about this group that I'm here with today, and I sort of feel like I'm sitting in the hall of fame of golf course superintendents."

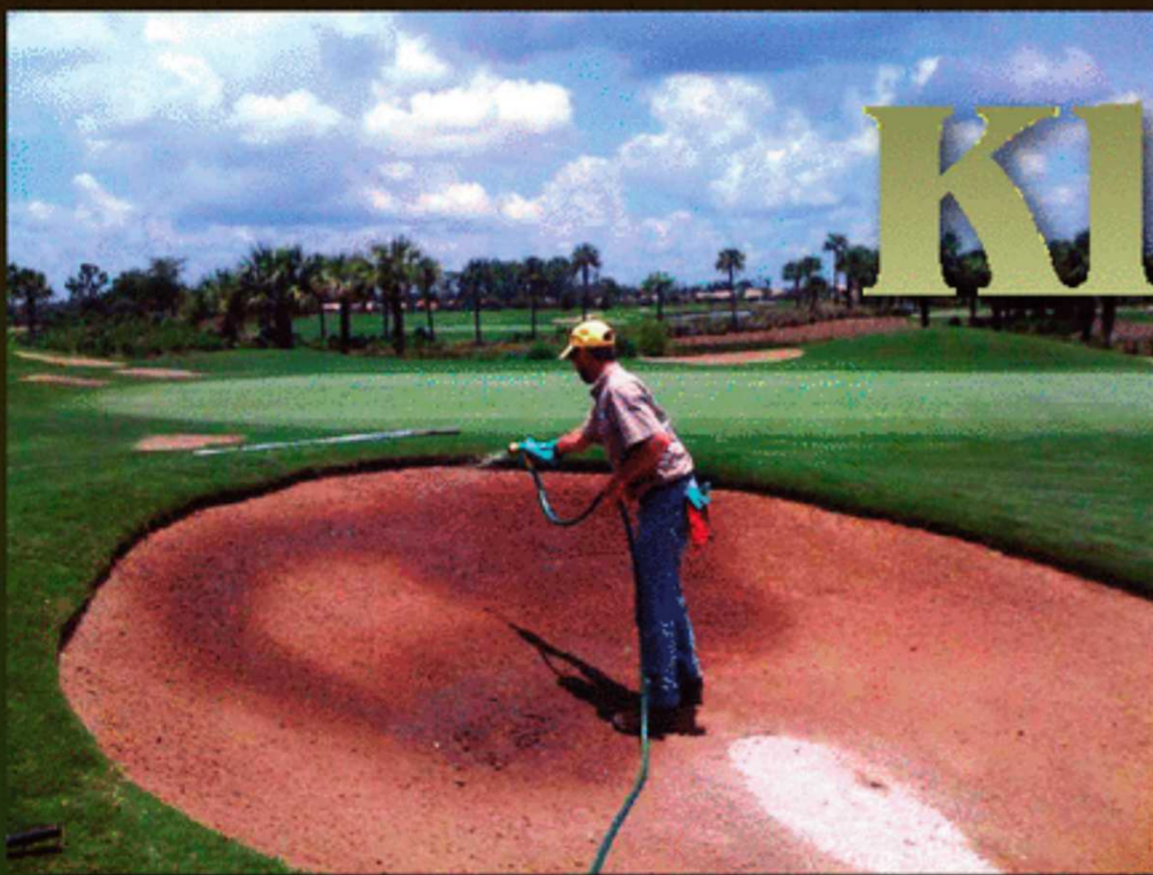
While a nice compliment, I can't help but wonder whether the certified superintendents and GCSAA staff in attendance actually agreed with what Schmidt was saying. Do they believe that certified superintendents are the hall-of-fame members of the association? While seemingly innocent in nature, Schmidt's comments illustrate the exact problem non-certified members have with the certification program — that many of the certified superintendents truly believe they are the elite of the association and that the GCSAA supports and encourages that belief.

You must look no further than the certification page of the GCSAA Web site, where the very first sentence states, "GCSAA offers golf course superintendents a professional certification program enabling them to be recognized for their superior levels of achievement in golf course management." Since when did building a portfolio, passing a written exam

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT 'GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT' TOOK PLACE ON AN ACTUAL GOLF COURSE, NOT IN A CLASSROOM SETTING."

and being attested by fellow certified superintendents transform into "superior levels of achievement in golf course management?" I always thought "golf course management" took place on an actual golf course, not in a classroom setting.

This type of marketing directly infers that superintendents



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who become certified are superior in their professional abilities of managing a golf course to superintendents who haven't become certified. I have a big problem with statements that actively endorse one classification of membership while passively downgrading all others. Believe me when I tell you I'm not alone in thinking this.

I've known many certified superintendents throughout the span of my career, and some of them are among the best superintendents I've ever seen. However, some of them, quite frankly, lack so much practical skills that I wouldn't even let them manage my 6-year-old daughter's municipal soccer field. Contrary to what the GCSAA implies with its marketing, not all certified superintendents are equal in their abilities, no matter how many written exams they may pass or continuing education credits (CEUs) they accumulate. The simple fact remains: Certification does not, in any way, guarantee actual job performance success.

One undisputed fact about the certification program is that superintendents who have achieved this designation earn, on average, a higher salary than non-certified superintendents — nearly \$10,000 more according to GCSAA's annual Compensation and Benefits Report. It's very easy to know this because it's boldly stated on almost every certification marketing piece that comes out of the GCSAA headquarters. This year's report, again, echoed this undeniable higher salary trend, at least among the certified members who are male. Oddly, this value-added feature of the certi-

“CERTIFICATION DOES NOT, IN ANY WAY, GUARANTEE ACTUAL JOB PERFORMANCE SUCCESS.”

fication designation appears not to translate to certified members who are women. According to these same reports over the past three years, female certified superintendents earn, on average, about \$6,000 to \$10,000 less than their

Class A counterparts. I doubt that this fact will be prominently featured on any certification marketing materials.

As stated before, I think a certification program is probably a good idea for our industry, but not at the expense of making 85 percent of the dues-paying members, who are not certified, feel like they're second-class members to the certified superintendents.

More than ever, we need to find ways to come together as an association to cope with the harsh economic reality that lies before us — not continue to find new ways to segregate the membership. Until the certification program can be retooled and remarketed to not elevate the minority members by denigrating the majority members, the certification program will continue to divide the membership at its very core. ■

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Counterpoint

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course management industry, this is a globally recognized symbol that proves you are committed to the highest level of professionalism in your field. The game of golf along with the environment and the economy are always changing. To be the best, you need to continuously learn, adapt and improve. Certification is a measure of your ability (and willingness) to do that by achieving and maintaining high standards through education and experience.

Becoming certified isn't some rubber stamp you get simply by paying a fee. Certification begins with meeting eligibility requirements, based on your level of post-secondary education. This determines the number of years of experience and continuing education required to become a CGCS program applicant. Once you meet the requirements to apply to the program, you'll complete an educational worksheet and send it with an official copy of your college transcript. If you are verified as eligible to apply, you have one year to complete your examination and the attesting of your golf facility.

The certification will validate your competencies through three methods:

**"TO BE THE BEST,
YOU NEED TO
CONTINUOUSLY
LEARN, ADAPT
AND IMPROVE."**

A portfolio, which can be started at any time in your career; a closed-book, multiple-choice exam, which must be successfully completed within one year of application; and the attesting of your golf course facility.

Some people will counter my argument by claiming I'm saying you can't be a good superintendent without a CGCS certification. This could not be further from the truth. But don't you want to be the best you can be?

The accounting, aviation, health care and construction industries all have professional organizations that keep members at the top of their games. It is the same with golf course management. Do you want somebody monitoring air traffic who doesn't have Federal Aviation Administration certification? Wouldn't you rather have a Certified Public Accountant monitoring your finances than somebody who simply knows how to use a calculator? With certification and

the GCSAA behind us, we are stronger and more able to share information and emerging trends. We also challenge each other to think more, do more and achieve more both individually and as a group.

There's a difference between just having a job and being part of a profession. A job



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is something you have to do, and you do it regularly for a paycheck. You might sort of slog through it every day and not care much, or you might be very good at it and you may learn through experience and trial and error over the years. Either way, when or if that job ends, what will you have left?

With a profession and certification, you have all the benefits of a job plus the proven ability to achieve a stated set of educational requirements for initial certification, as well as the continued ability to meet and adapt to new challenges within your industry. Plus, you have a strong community of fellow professionals with whom you share knowledge and camaraderie, and a network of support if the time comes to look for a new employer.

Typically, when a superintendent attains CGCS status, his or her employers will offer congratulations. But that

person — like me when I attained certification many moons ago — isn't guaranteed a pay increase. A lucky few superintendents will be financially rewarded soon after achieving CGCS designation — good for them!

Understand that employers are looking for those they feel are the most qualified in today's highly competitive market. If you're currently in the job market, you've likely noticed that most, if not all, the prime jobs being advertised have a “GCSAA Certified Preferred” notation on them. Does that mean you won't get hired if you aren't certified? Probably not, but why not get moving and begin today, so you can walk into the interview and tell them you are already seeking certification?

No one can argue the fact that having more experience and respected certification will give you the edge and advantage in today's competitive market, especially in a challenging economy.

It's easy to make excuses as to why we can't achieve certain things — we're too busy, we don't have the time, etc. You can keep talking about all the things you don't have, but I believe it's better to focus on what you want to have, and it all boils down to whether you are willing to look ahead.

I think you can and should move ahead, and I'll be among the first to congratulate you on your achievement and welcome you as a fellow certified golf course superintendent. ■



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