

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

Continued on page 28



Point

Continued from page 26

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."

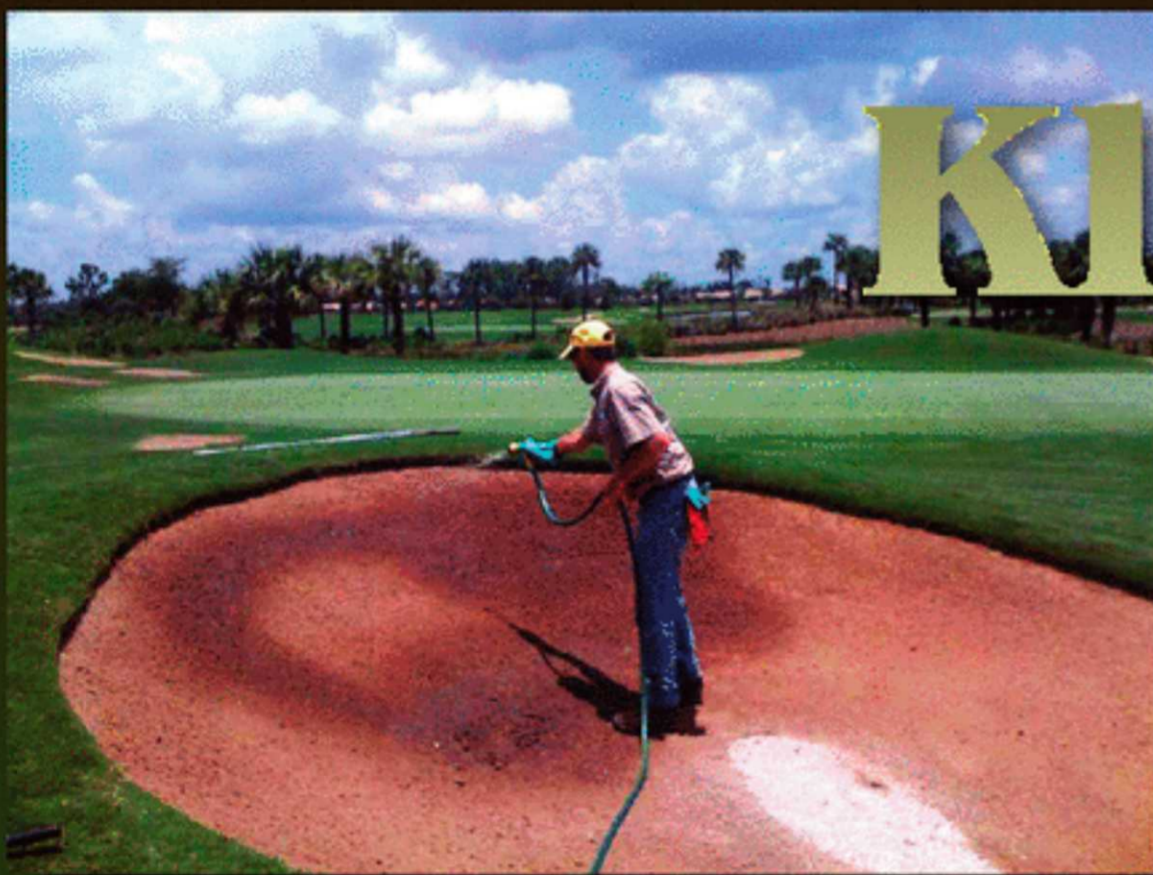
While a nice compliment, I can't help but wonder whether the certified superintendents and GCSAA staff in attendance actually agreed with what Schmidt was saying. Do they believe that certified superintendents are the hall-of-fame members of the association? While seemingly innocent in nature, Schmidt's 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 is 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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