



Time for field builder certification

What do they say about great minds thinking alike? Couldn't help but think so when I read that the American Sports Builders Association (ASBA) launched its new Field Builder Certification Program.

My colleagues and I at Lohmann Sports Fields have been calling for this sort of measure the last several years, and there's a specific reason why: We've seen this situation before, and we've seen how it was fixed.

I'm a golf course architect by trade. Our parent firm, The Lohmann Companies, has been designing and building golf courses since 1984. Back then, the golf business was just like the sports field business: Anyone with a dozer was "qualified" to build a golf course, and the result was a whole lot of courses that ultimately needed rebuilding. The sports field construction industry finds itself in the same exact situation today: Too often, the contractor who bids lowest is the contractor who paved the parking lot.

An industry standard for sports field contractors is the answer. If the client has confidence in the certified parties, he or she will have confidence in the bids—a confidence that "real" bids will ultimately yield a quality, finished product.

I don't want to pick on vertical contractors or paving contractors. They do the jobs they are qualified to do, very well. And when it comes to sports fields, they often have the best of intentions; heck, lots of times they are the guys who just happen to be on site when someone in a position of authority says, "Hey, you ever built a ball field? You should bid on this job."

Unfortunately, most of these contractors don't know enough about drainage, agronomy and sub-surface material specs to build things properly. Oftentimes this becomes apparent early in the bid process. In short, they don't know enough to make an educated bid. Their bids are low because they've left something out. If they build the project and come in on or below budget, you can be sure they've left

something out, something important.

We saw a supreme example of this in Grand Rapids, MI, at Fifth Third Ballpark, home to the Tiger's Single-A affiliate, the Whitecaps. The owners spent \$400,000 with our company in 2009 to completely rebuild a field that was only a year old! The culprit? Cheap pipe that was never tested. There's a standard of materials and workmanship that golf course builders use and the reality is, that standard doesn't yet exist in the sports field realm.

Hey, we were happy to do the work for the Whitecaps but it was unfortunate it even had to be done. Our attitude is, let's give the guys who manage these facilities the chance to manage them properly. That starts with proper construction. Leave aside for a moment the difficulty in maintaining a facility that hasn't been built properly. What happens when an owner spends \$400,000 in 2009 to rebuild the field? Do you think the maintenance budget suffers for 2010? You bet it does.

ALL ABOUT THE BIDDING

It's all about the bidding. Without certification, there's nothing in the bidding process that enables a qualified contractor to say, "I'm for real." On the contrary, real contractors making real bids are invariably bidding higher than inexperienced contractors. Yet inexperienced guys are getting the jobs that all too often must be redone way before their time.

I've talked about this problem with STMA President Chris Calcaterra. We agree that, somehow, we have to convince municipalities, school districts and park districts to quit looking simply for the lowest price and start pre-qualifying their contractors. The best solution, frankly, is for the industry as a whole to take the initiative in the form of ASBA certifica-

tion, because its own standards will be highest and most uniform.

"We definitely support credentialing in the industry," Kim Heck, STMA executive director, told me. "I know from speaking with our members that the lack of common specs has been a real challenge. For example, at K-12 schools there is a complex bidding process, but there have been times when the contractor who has put in the parking lot has also been engaged to build the sports fields."

And you thought I made that up! It really does happen.

I was also glad to see the ASBA has taken things another step further. There are several levels of Field Builder Certification: The Certified Field Builder (CFB) designation demonstrates core knowledge of field construction as well as expertise in both natural turf and synthetic turf. Certified Field Builder-Natural (CFB-N) designation indicates grass expertise only, while Certified Field Builder-Synthetic (CFB-S) indicates synthetic only. All certifications would be renewable every three years.

In the 20 years since the Golf Course Builders Association of America formed and issued its certification program, the credentialing of contractors has turned a bad situation completely around. It's very rare to see a golf course built today by anyone other than a certified course contractor. There exists an industry-wide understanding among course superintendents but also among their owners and club managers that building something as straightforward as a fairway actually involves specific technical expertise, agronomic understanding and quality materials. Ignoring this reality will just cost you more money down the road.

Lohmann Sports Fields was founded on the idea that building athletic surfaces shouldn't be so different from building fairways, greens and tees. We feel our 20 years of golf construction expertise more than qualifies us to build sports fields — but we plan to take that ASBA test and get certified. We applaud the ASBA initiative, and we encourage all the qualified contractors to get certified, too. ■

Bob Lohmann is founder and principal of Lohmann Sports Fields and has more than 20 years of construction and agronomic experience in the sports turf industry.