



Golf

It's golf — but just don't call them Frisbees

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BY MARK ARSENAULT

Journal Staff Writer

We blame 15th-century Scotland for golf, a game Mark Twain described as “a good walk ruined.”

(But at least, Twain might have added, golf is expensive to play and takes a long time.)

America can claim credit for a contemporary cousin to the Scots' evil creation — disc golf, a cheaper and usually less frustrating activity, with a shorter learning curve and no funny pants. This new sport also has its share of odd characters and quirky gurus, the most famous of whom is still a part of the game six years after his death.

A Rhode Island course is under development, and there are several outstanding places to play in Massachusetts.

The object of disc golf would be familiar to anyone who's ever blasphemed while holding a 7-iron. But instead of hitting a ball with a pricy piece of graphite, you throw a plastic disc from the tee area, aiming for a target that's generally 200 to 600 feet away.

Drive, approach and putt, just like ball golf. Stay in bounds. Stay out of the water. (Most golf discs don't float.)

Though the sport is a descendant of ancient Frisbee games of a bygone era, reliably carbon-dated to the 1960s, modern disc golf players throw discs, not traditional Frisbees.

“We don't use the F-word here,” says Sam Ferrans, international director for Innova Champion Discs, of California, a company that could be considered the Titleist of golf disc makers. Innova manufactures more than 50 models of discs, designed for short and long shots, as well as discs for putting.

Most golf discs are about 21 centimeters across — much smaller than a traditional Frisbee — yet they weigh about the same, usually 150 to 175 grams for a driver. Most of the mass is in the thick rim. Golf discs are not for catching. Actually, that would be an excellent way to hurt yourself — golf discs just go too fast. If the Frisbee is the Wright Brothers, modern golf discs are the F-16.

Credit for their invention goes to Californian Dave Dunipace, who cofounded Innova in 1983 to market his new, “beveled-edge” golf disc.

Dunipace was an avid Frisbee player who enjoyed early forms of disc golf using traditional Frisbees, which are now commonly called “lids.” (This seems so primitive in hindsight, you have to wonder if the game was postponed when woolly mammoths grazed on the fairways.)

“Dave wondered if he could make discs smaller, denser and more aerodynamic, like an airplane wing,” says Ferrans. Dunipace modified traditional Frisbees with clay, experimenting with rim designs before he went to a plastic molder to create the first disc strictly for disc golf.

He was awarded U.S. Patent No. 4,568,297.

His creation had a sharp edge and a “wing” under the rim, which allowed it to travel much faster and farther than a Frisbee.

Despite the patent, several other companies began making golf discs, too, and Innova went to court to defend its patent and win a licensing fee, Ferrans said.

Disc technology continues to improve. Just like in ball golf, disc players rush out to buy the newest products, hoping to throw farther or with more accuracy.

But while a Big Bertha driver might lighten your wallet for \$200, the newest Innova disc molded in the company's best plastic can be had for about \$15 on eBay or through one of many Internet retailers. Some sporting goods stores, such as REI and Dick's, carry disc golf equipment.

You just need one disc to play, but some players carry 20 or more for a round of golf.

Stop me when this gets too detailed, but there are several classes of golf discs. Drivers fly the fastest and farthest, and are the hardest to control. Mid-range discs have smaller wings and less of a sharp bevel. They fly more slowly and are easier to control. Putters have blunt edges like traditional Frisbees. Within those classes are subclasses, based on how a spinning disc behaves in flight. Discs are rated for their stability, which measures their tendency to drift in the direction opposite spin at high speeds, and to fade in the direction of spin when they slow.

Too much detail? All right, let's just say that a golf disc thrown properly travels a graceful S-curve, and is a beautiful thing to watch.

“Mostly I play because I like to watch the disc fly,” says T.M. Dyer, who for 10 years has spearheaded the development of a disc golf course under construction at Ninigret Park, in Charlestown.

Good form is more important than physical strength, and most healthy players can soon learn to throw a disc 250 feet. The best players throw 500 feet or more.

“The basic mechanical skill needed to connect a club with a ball is difficult to achieve,” says Dyer. “The basic mechanical skill to throw a disc is easier to achieve.”

Disc players don't aim for tiny gopher holes in the ground, they aim for targets known as “pole holes.” A pole hole is essentially a wire basket on a pole, with short lengths of chain suspended above it. Throw a disc into the chains and the disc will fall into the basket with a satisfying cha-ching.

This is where the history of disc golf is quirky.

Pole holes were invented by the George Washington of disc golf: the late Ed Headrick, another Californian.

In the 1960s, Headrick was a designer at the Wham-O toy company that marketed the original Frisbee. (Company lore says the toy was modeled after empty pie tins, which people had been throwing for fun for as long as people have eaten pies. The Frisbee was apparently named for the defunct Frisbie Baking Company, of Bridgeport, Conn.)

Headrick's first major contribution to flying disc sports was to add concentric grooves to the company's wobbly Frisbee, which greatly improved stability and gives the Frisbee its lovely smooth flight.

In 1976, according to a disc history assembled by Innova, Headrick invented the pole hole for disc golf. His design now dots thousands of courses all over the world.

When Headrick died, in 2002, his ashes, per his wish, were embedded in a line of discs and sold as a fundraiser for a memorial museum. Headrick didn't want those memorial discs under glass or on display shelves. He wanted people to use them, throw them, lose them, playing the sport he loved.

If we began by quoting Mark Twain, we should finish with words from Ed Headrick, who philosophized about the eternal fate of "Frisbyterians:"

"When we die, we don't go to purgatory," he reportedly said. "We just land up on the roof and lay there."Local links

The disc golf course under development at Ninigret Park has potential, but until it's complete, this is one man's ranking of the best disc golf courses within a reasonable drive of Providence.

Buffumville Dam, Charlton, Mass.

About 50 minutes from Providence; free to play and to park at this Army Corps flood control project.

Pros: Course is part of a beautiful park around Buffumville Lake; well-designed 27-hole course with lots of variety; challenging for even the best players; worth the drive just for the top-of-the-dam vista from the tee box on Hole 16.

Cons: Can get crowded on summer weekends; tough course for novices and even experienced players lose discs in the water here. My brother Ryan might hold the record for "the lost disc that landed furthest out into the lake" on Hole 16. His disc was in the air for so long, we had time to salute it and hum taps.

<http://webpages.charter.net/stiddem/buffumville/bvldgolf.htm>

Borderland State Park, Sharon, Mass.

About 40 minutes from Providence; \$2 to park at this popular running, hiking and mountain-biking park.

Pros: Well-maintained forest and fields; two 18-hole courses essentially laid out on top of each other, which allows players to shoot a short course or a long one; the "mansion hole" is spectacular; you might lose a disc in woods but you probably won't lose one in water.

Cons: Narrow, woodsy holes are tough on discs and may intimidate new players. You'll hit so many trees, you might feel like a lumberjack.

<http://www.borderlanddiscgolf.com/>

Maple Hill, Leicester, Mass.

Near the Worcester airport, about 60 minutes from Providence, a pay-to-play course on private land.

Pros: Like Borderland, two courses in one with long and short tee and pin placements; some great views and diverse holes on a working Christmas tree farm.

Cons: Fee to play is \$5; payment is on the honor system so not paying makes you feel guilty all day; lots of spots to lose a disc. Nothing irritates like watching your new plastic careen into a bog.

http://www.marshallstreetdiscgolf.com/courses_maplehill.html

– MARK ARSENAULT Disc golf

Location: Three local courses in nearby Massachusetts. (See accompanying story.)

Costs: Golf discs often can be had for less than \$10, and even less on eBay.

What to bring: an experienced player would use 20 or more discs. A beginner should start with one driver, one mid-range and putter. And maybe a backup in case one is lost.

Advice for beginners: Your first throw over water shouldn't be with your new, \$20 specialty disc.

What's the Web site: The professional disc golf association has mounds of information on playing the game and finding courses. www.pdga.com