

A New Golf Disc-ipline

Vermonters Are Playing An Old Game In A Whole New Way

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NORTH CALAIS — Disc golf players claim they have to deal with the same degree of frustration as regular golfers playing, as they call it, "ball golf."

How they express their aggravation may be a bit different — you can't really bend your seven-iron or hurl your pitching wedge into the woods when you're playing disc golf. That would cost you a stroke.

Several players at last weekend's Vermont State Championship in North Calais offered this suggestion on dealing with frustration as they teed off on a par-4 hole:

"Don't play."

Todd Sternbach of Montpelier, a member of the North Calais Disc Golf Association (NCDGA), was the first in his foursome to throw. Holding a plastic disc, smaller and denser than a

typical Wham-o type frisbee, Sternbach took a wide stance, rocked his weight back and forth on his heels and let fly.

The disc soared over the ferns of the roughly-mown fairway, caught the leaves of a tree but continued strongly, and made a slight curve around a stand of trees as it grounded out.

He was aiming toward a blue splotch that marked the post hole.

"That's not bad," remarked Dan Desch, stepping up to the tee.

Desch's driver disc sailed straight for the target, making a machine-gun rattle as it ricocheted off several birch trees.

"That's not so good," said Desch, a software writer from Montpelier.

The foursome, joined for the second round of the tournament by players with similar scores, continued up the fairway. Desch's brother, George, took a wide stance and threw his mid-range disc sidearm to get around a tree.

"Some of us like to get our bogeys out of the way early," George said. This was the first hole of the second round.

Off in the distance, screams of anguish occasionally broke the respectful silence.

The 36 players in the tournament were placed into nine teams then scattered at every other hole on the 18-hole course so they could play at the same time. The 6,222-

foot course, located on land owned by Paul Olander, has been fastidiously set up by members of the NCDGA with all the trimmings of a professional ball golf course, including tees for different-level players, flat tees and metal and chain contraptions called "basket holes," which are the targets. For a sport often played on rougher courses with objects, like trash cans or trees, this is a pretty sweet course.

"They're all different, but this is the longest 18-hole course in New England," said Olander, an engineer who first set up a nine-hole course on his land in 1990. The course eventually grew to cover 18 acres.

It's a game he's been "hacking around" with since he was young and wanted to build a nice place to play.

Desch played the same game in his boyhood neighborhood in New Jersey and continued to enjoy it

while studying at Rutgers

University. This is the only course in Vermont recognized by the New England Flying Disc Association

(NEFA), and the home of the NCDGA, whose members spend a few hours each week playing and caring for the course.

"It's mostly Paul who keeps the club

together," said Desch. "He just started inviting people."

Desch eventually finished third in the tournament, with 185 points for three trips around the par-64 course. Brock Pitzer, a player from Massachusetts, led the pack with 179 points. Although there are a handful of players who earn a living playing professional disc golf, the tone at NEFA tournaments is decidedly informal with little emphasis on competition. Winners receive no prize.

"In the past years we've given syrup as prizes, but not this year," said Olander. "Some tournaments have a chip-in prize, but I think that's bad for the sport."

The lack of pressure to win didn't seem to make players less serious however, and the troupe continued on their way, taking each shot thoughtfully and carefully.

Todd Canuel of Rhode Island took a mid-range shot at the basket, but the disc glanced off the chains, stood up on its edge and rolled away from the hole while he



Photo by Stefan Hard

Members of the North Calais Disc Golf Association construct stairs leading down a fairway on the North Calais course.



Photo by Stefan Hard

Dan Desch of Montpelier putts into a disc basket on the North Calais Disc Golf Course during a recent tournament.

pleaded with it to stop.

"There's a huge frustration factor. Especially if you're me," said Canuel, who plays at the North Calais tournament every year. "I love this course. This is probably my favorite course in New England."

Canuel said he used to think it was kind of strange to play golf with a frisbee, but now he goes to as many tournaments as he can and tries to play at least once a week during the warm months.

"The guy who got me involved tried for three years," he said. "I said 'If I go, will you stop bothering me?' I've been playing ever since."

The four players moved in on the basket, and one-by-one tossed their discs toward the basket where they were captured by the chains to fall into the cup. Some used the standard forward flick of the wrist, others



Photo by Stefan Hard

Todd Sternbach of Montpelier tees off on the North Calais Disc Golf Course during a recent tournament.

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flipped the disc end-over-end. A skilled player can make a disc take sharp corners or fly in S-patterns, which is one characteristic that players say makes it different from ball golf.

"The nice thing about this sport is that it's relatively inexpensive to get into," said Desch. "You can get a driver, putter and mid-range disc for about six dollars apiece."

Most players carried their arsenal of discs in a shoulder bag or fanny pack. Sternbach displayed a range of at least

a dozen multi-colored discs he uses, along with water, sunglasses and a bottle of Otter Creek ale.

"They're made to hold a beer, yes," said Sternbach.

For information about disc golf and the NCDGA, call Paul Olander at 456-7465.