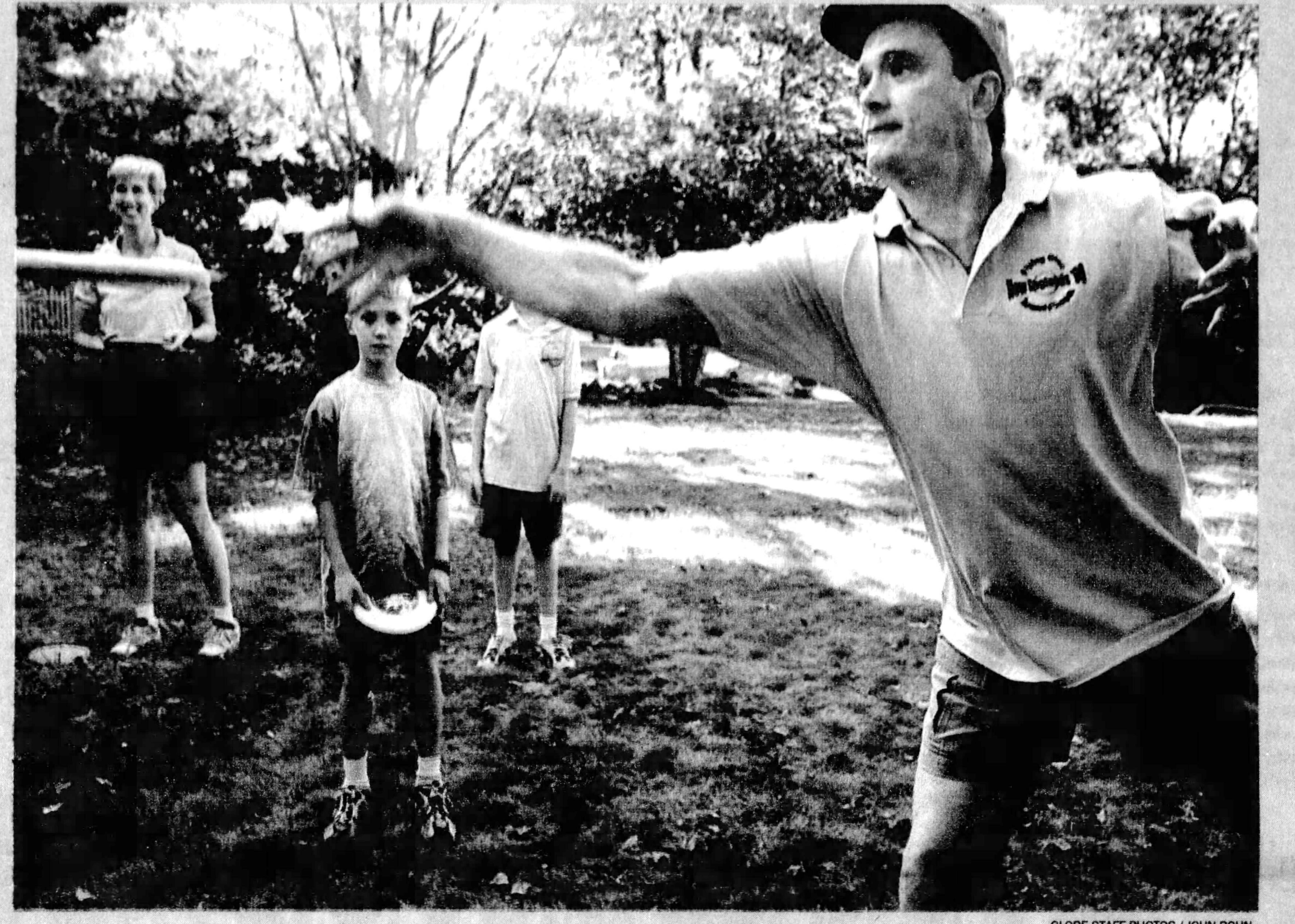
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It's Frisbee golf



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / JOHN BOHN

Top, left: Joy Hartwell takes aim at a Frisbee golf hole. Above: Steve Hartwell practices as Joy (left) and sons Darren, 8 (center), and Wesley, 10, look on.

At 7 Bay State courses, players put a different spin on 18 holes

By Cate McQuaid GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CHARLTON - From the first tee at the new course near the Buffumville Dam, Steve Hartwell squints across the fairway before sorting through his bag for the right driver and making his first shot. He's got a precipitous drop to a water hazard in front, then a low rise to the first hole. The side of the dam, a mountain of jagged rock, is to his left.

Hartwell takes the driver in his hand, steps away

from the tee, winds his arm around with the force of Pedro Martinez, and lets the driver fly.

The driver, in this case, is a small Frisbee with a sharp, beveled edge, and it floats to the right and easily clears the pond below.

"Nice, nice" come the comments from a cluster of players, each awaiting a turn at the tee. Welcome to Frisbee golf.

Hartwell, an avid player, has come to Charlton this weekend to try the new course and play a FRISBEE, Page C4

Flying saucers sighted on the 18th green

FRISBEE

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round of his favorite game. Most weekends, he plays tournaments. He ran the Massachusetts State Disc Golf Tournament in Sharon in July. Last month, he and eight other Massachusetts disc golfers flew to Rochester, N.Y., for the national championships.

Tournament events include freestyle Frisbee, which involves acrobatic throws and catches, and double-disc court, a Frisbee version of doubles tennis. Invariably, though, Frisbee golf is the big draw.

Frisbee golf has been around since 1974, but only in the past few years has it started booming, with courses sprouting in the Midwest, Texas, California, and Massachusetts. There are seven public courses in this state, many of them free. Eighty players vied for the trophy at the Massachusetts tournament.

"Disc golf has all the juice of ball golf," says Hartwell, vice president of the New England Frisbee Association. "But it's easier to learn."

Almost all the holes are par 3, with fairways ranging from 300 to 350 feet – making disc golf courses about a third the size of a traditional golf course. What would be a hole on a regular golf course is, in disc golf, a pole, 4 feet high and rigged with a skirt of loose chains over a wide basket. The chains serve to catch a Frisbee and let it fall into the basket, rather than bounce off the pole or whiz by it.

A close community

Hartwell also plays the game with his wife, Joy, and his sons Wesley, 10, and Darren, 8. They go to tournaments around New England together, from their home in North Reading. When the couple married, they used mini discs – the Frisbee golfer's marker – as favors at their wedding.

Where to play

There are seven disc golf courses in Eastern and Central Massachusetts. Most are 18-hole courses, and most are free to play:

Amesbury Town Park 508-655-2198
Cape Cod Community College,
Barnstable 508-771-4619
Buffunville Dam, Charlton 508-248-5697
Normandy Farms, Foxborough \$5 to play) 508-543-7600
Pyramids, Leicester 508-753-0726
Burgess Park, Marstons Mills 508-771-4619
Goodnow Park, Princeton 508-351-9801

Globe staff chart

"It's a real community, a big family," says Joy Hartwell, who first played Frisbee golf as an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. "We have these big social events that are relaxed and friendly. There's competition, for sure – the same group of guys all vying for top place – but any one of them, it could work for that day. They bring their families. We started playing long before we had kids, and we had them and just incorporated it into our lifestyle."

To play, you need four specially designed discs: a couple of drivers, an approach disc, and a putter. Each should cost about \$8. City Sports in Coolidge Corner is one of the few local sporting goods stores that sell them. The more expert you become at disc golf, the more special discs you may purchase. Most drivers hang to the left, but others are made to fly straight or curve right.

The Buffumville Dam course features water hazards, doglegs to the right and left, and fairways – or perhaps it's better to call them not-so-fairways – through the woods.

Using a dramatic overhand shot, Hartwell sets his disc soaring through the branches of the wooded sixth hole at Buffumville. David Stidden, who works at the dam as the project manager for the Federal Flood Control Project, looks overhead as Hartwell's Frisbee slams into a branch with a loud crack and breaks it. Hartwell groans as the disc drops to the ground.

"That's good," Stidden says, laughing. "We need to trim the trees around here."

The course at Buffumville was the brainchild of Brian Longcore, a volunteer here last summer from the Student Conservation Association.

"He's a disc golfer, and he saw this potential here, and laid out the course," recounts Stidden. What Longcore didn't know was that a couple of the state's best disc golfers, Bill MacWilliams and Jason Southwick, lived in Leicester, the next town over, where Southwick had set up a private course on his father's Christmas-tree farm.

A week before Longcore left to go back to school, he found MacWilliams on the Internet, and the two finished marking the holes and hammering in the tees. MacWilliams and Stidden approached Baypath Regional High School in Charlton and got the shop class to create the poles, and the course was finished.

Getting on course

Hartwell would like to see more courses put up on public land in Massachusetts.

"We've had trouble," he reports.

"We can raise the money, but we need a park that wants us. We're dying to get one inside Route 128. We can use land nobody else wants."

Park officials have been reluctant.

"We have so little parkland here, and people want to preserve it," Hartwell notes.

Still, courses like this one are far

from overcrowded. MacWilliams and Rick Williams, another champion disc golfer, are playing the round at Buffumville Dam with the Hartwells and Stidden. They've been playing disc golf for as long as they can remember. Most players came to it because they love to throw, and they love to challenge themselves.

"There aren't a lot of ultimate players," Joy Hartwell says of that popular Frisbee team sport. "It's a whole different mentality."

MacWilliams weighs a putter in his hand. It's smaller than the drivers, its edges rounder rather than beveled. He eyes the pole and basket.

"Putting, it's all right here," Mac-Williams conjectures, pointing at his head. "It's like a free throw in basketball. It's all psychological. Some guys, when it comes to putting, they start getting the jitters. Like every other sport, it's all nerves, brain power, and mind over matter."

Strength and luck with the wind have something to do with success as well. Many disc golf players hit the links in all kinds of weather.

"You can play in rain and wind and snow," says Williams. "There are ice bowls played all over the country. Newport, R.I., has an ice bowl tournament in January. We've played in 2 feet of snow. All you're doing is walking and throwing, and you can do that all year round."

The best part, Joy Hartwell says, is that anyone can play.

"It attracts a lot of different people. If you don't have a lot of strength, you can play from shorter tees. There's a whole seniors tour. It's a continuum – not like running, where your joints get all banged up," she explains. "It's low impact. It's a lifetime sport."

For more information on Frisbee golf, you can reach the New England Frisbee Association through its Web site, at www.nefa.com.