

Fore play

Disc golfers hit the links for a whole different ball game. Without balls

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On a golden Sunday afternoon, Scott Annett is on the disc golf green at Edmonton's Rundle Park with competitive disc golfer Chad Gamelin. Each carefully selects their disc from the bag Annett carries which contains twenty-some brightly-coloured Frisbees of varying weights and sizes.

Teeing off, Annett winds up like a discus player then releases the disc, which whirls through the air and down the green.

"Fore!" he yells to the golfers ahead.

The disc brushes against the branches of the nearby trees but sails on by, probably 20 feet ahead, before losing momentum and collapsing on the grass just short of the first hole.

The 27-year-old business owner has been playing for six years, after his brother told him about the sport. "I tried it once, and I was hooked," he says.

Since then, he's seen a growing number of youth and adults take

to the sport, for a lot of the same reasons he did.

"There are a lot of good aspects about it," says Annett, former president of the Edmonton Disc Golf Association which has about 50 members.

"For one thing, it's cheap, anybody can come down, you don't have to book a tee time or anything like that, and you don't have to have the specialized discs to play. You can come down with a regular Frisbee."

Gamelin, 33, picked up the sport in 1990, after noticing some disc golfers in action during a shift at Rundle Park. An avid golfer without money to burn, disc golf really hit the spot.

"I got tired of paying \$60 for a day of golf," he says. "It's a lot more casual down here, too."

Since then, Gamelin has discovered that he's, pardon the expression, a top



CREDIT: Photo by John Lucas

Throwing a golf club in anger is not considered good preparation for disc golf. Chad Gamelin keeps his eye on the target during a round at the Rundle Park disc golf course.

flight player.

"I didn't start shooting well until five years ago. And then in 2002, I had my first tournament that I won. I played a lot that year. And just from there really, I got consistent, and that's one of the major things -- consistency," says Gamelin.

These days, he heads to Rundle Park to play disc golf two or three times a week, and hopes to go to the U.S. to play some of the international tournaments when he's able.

The rules of disc golf are the same as ball golf, Annett explains, but the "holes" are wire baskets sitting almost a metre above the ground. Steel chains hang from the top to stop the Frisbees from gliding on past the basket.

A disc golf course looks like a golf green, but without the finely manicured turf. Edmonton's course, like many of the disc golf courses around the world, leaves natural obstacles undisturbed.

"In Drumheller, they throw a temporary course in there for a tournament every year and it's unbelievable," Annett says. "You're in the hoodoos and shooting over canyons and stuff."

Disc golf may sound exotic and new, but it was actually invented in the mid-1970s. Edmonton's only disc golf course at Rundle Park was built just a few years later. Since its inception, about 2,000 disc golf courses have sprung up across the globe. In Alberta, there are disc golf courses in Edmonton, Lily Lake, Calgary, Lethbridge, Canmore, Wetaskiwin, Cardston, Nordegg, Olds, Red Wood Meadows, Three Hills, and the temporary course in Drumheller.

In Alberta, and around the world, tournaments are held at all times of the year. One international competition, the Ice Bowl, is actually a number of tournaments held simultaneously at courses worldwide every winter, to raise funds for charities. At Alberta's Ice Bowl, dozens of people bundle up and head out to the course despite the cold.

"It's pretty trying times when it's minus 30 and there's three feet of snow. But we still come out," Annett says.

And it's not always easy to find your Frisbee in a freshly fallen snow, but disc golfers aren't daunted: many tape a brightly coloured ribbon to the bottom of their disc to make it more visible in the snow.

A bigger natural challenge is the wind, especially in Alberta. But Annett explains that certain throwing techniques can keep a disc on course (pun intended).

"If I have a big headwind coming towards me, what it's actually going to do is take my disc and make it go right, because of the spin on the disc," he says. "So what you want to do is put some edge on it, and tilt your disc to the left, and it will fight the wind, and hold that, and go straighter for you."

Easier said than done.

Disc golf, no matter how you slice it, isn't anything like tossing a Frisbee for the dog. Like traditional golf, it's a game of skill and patience. But while it takes some doing to master the skills,

Annett thinks disc golf, which is easy on the joints and the wallet, is for everyone.

"Anyone can play, from two years old up to a hundred years old," he says. "We see lots of groups and schools (at the Rundle Park course), and I've seen special education teachers bring the kids out. Basically, anyone can play it."

IT ALL BEGAN WITH PIE

Two Frisbee sports -- Disc Golf and Ultimate, which combines elements of soccer, basketball, football and netball -- both trace their origins back to the birth of the Frisbee, at the start of the 20th century. In the early 1900s, the Frisbee Pie Company sold pies

to New England colleges, whose students made a game of throwing and catching the pie pans. In 1955, Fred Morrison designed the Pluto Platter Flying Saucer, which was inspired less by pies and more by the UFO craze that hit North America after the Second World War. Nevertheless, Morrison's disc was branded the Frisbee in the mid-70s by the company Whamo, whose vice-president of sales, Ed Headrick, would go on to invent the game of Disc Golf in 1975.

Free golf? Who are you kidding?

I Rundle Park Disc Golf course was established 26 years ago, is owned by the City of Edmonton while the baskets and signs are owned and maintained by the Edmonton Disc Golf Association. It's free to play.

Flip, flop and fly

In the spirit of the sport's affordability, beginners often play their first games with the Whamo Frisbee found in their parent's basement. But just like the clubs-and-balls version of the game, equipment can make a difference.

Scott Annett runs a small home-based business called Brasco Brothers Disc Sports, which sells specialized golf discs. (He also sells them out of the equipment shop in the ACT Centre at Rundle Park; golf discs are also available at Shaggies on Whyte.)

According to Annett, there's some significant differences between golf discs.

I The aerodynamic driver, used for the tee shot, is small in diameter with a very low profile and narrow edge. Designed to limit wind resistance, they are the fastest, longest flying discs.

I Midrange discs have a larger diameter and higher profile, and are designed to go a fair distance with increased accuracy.

I Putters have a diameter in between the midrange and driver, but have the highest profile of the three, and typically have a blunt edge with a deep lip. Putters fly slowly -- they're designed to "float" through the air -- and are the straightest flying discs.

I According to the Edmonton Disc Golf Association website, you should be able to outfit yourself for about \$50.

RULES OF THE GAME

While these are not the official tournament rules, the Edmonton Disc Golf Association offers them as useful guidelines for beginners.

- Be Earth-conscious: don't litter!

- Disc golf is played like ball golf, using flying discs. One stroke is counted each time the disc is thrown, and when a penalty is incurred.
- Tee throws must be completed within the designated tee areas.
- Order of play: After teeing off, the player whose disc is farthest from the hole throws first. The player with the fewest strokes on the previous hole is the first to tee off.
- Stance: Fairway throws must be made with the foot closest to the hole on the spot where the last throw came to rest.
- A run-up and normal follow-through, after release, are allowed more than 10 meters from the hole. Inside 10 meters, a player may not step past his/her lie. "Falling" or "jumping" putts are not allowed.
- A disc that comes to rest inside the Disc Pole Hole or chains constitutes successful completion of that hole. A disc that comes to rest on top of the pole hole does NOT constitute a successful putt.
- A disc that comes to rest more than two meters above the ground is considered out of bounds. The disc must be thrown from the ground directly below the suspended disc, with a one stroke penalty.
- A throw that lands out-of-bounds is to be carried in and played from the point where the disc went out-of-bounds, with a one stroke penalty. Out of bounds areas include roads, water, pavilions, and walkways. Alternate recreational rules do not include penalty strokes, but you should still always carry your disc back in bounds and off of roads and sidewalks.
- Never throw until the players ahead of you are out of range, and until the fairway is completely clear of spectators and park guests.

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