

## Flying Discs

York County is one of the centers of the universe in several areas. By centers of the universe, I mean that we're known far and wide for something. Youth, school, and league soccer (especially U-17) are things we're known for nationally, as well as for girl's softball. We're in a significant historical area for the Carolina Backcountry element of the Revolutionary War. The Catawbas produce a style and form of pottery that goes back thousands of years and is prized by astute collectors. And there are a few other worldly subjects in which we rank.

We're also known for disc golf. The United States Disc Golf Championship is held here every October on what's called the Winthrop Gold Course at Winthrop University. In 2010 it's held on October 6-9.

One of the reasons that we're known for disc golf is that Innova Disc Golf is located here. Dave Dunipace, co-founder of Innova, invented the modern disc used in disc golf in 1983.

Until that time, the majority of flying saucers were UFOs or Wham-O Frisbees (the latter of which came out in the late 1950s and are still extremely popular). But unlike the Frisbee, a golf disc has a beveled edge or rim that improves accuracy, increases distance, and gives a variety of flight characteristics that can be more easily controlled. These discs aren't what you threw around on the beach as a kid. You don't really want to catch a disc golf disc by hand — they aren't as rounded, soft, and flexible as a Frisbee. You pick them up after they land.

Discs look flat, but if you sight down the edge on some models there is a slight rounding across the top. They typically weigh from about 140-180 grams or between 5-6½ ounces (there are exceptions) and are usually much smaller in diameter than a "typical" Frisbee. The plastic in the various styles can range from rigid to flexible and from a hard to gummy-soft feeling.

Disc golf is played like regular golf. In golf you tee up a ball at the tee and hit it with a club toward the green to putt it into a hole. You will likely need to hit a ball several times to sink it into the hole. The number of allowed strokes for each hole is called "par" and is generally 3, 4, or 5 depending on the overall distance from tee to green. In disc golf you do the same thing, without the clubs or balls. From a tee you throw a disc toward a disc catcher. Like golf, par is typically going to be 3, 4, or 5.

Disc catchers have a rim at the top with chains hang-

ing down. The chains help stop accurately thrown discs and dump them into a wire, circular basket below the chains. You throw your disc at the catcher until it hits and stays in the catcher. When that happens you've finished that hole. It doesn't count if you hit the catcher and bounce off or out.

In order to play competitively at the top championship level for professional and amateur disc golfers, you need to be able to throw a disc at least 400-450 feet or more and land that throw within a 50-foot circle. An average, good disc golfer might be able to throw 200-300 feet. It might take a beginner several months to work up to a consistent 100-150 feet (it's all about practice), depending on age and athleticism.

Like in regular golf, you start with a drive from the tee toward the green. Your second shot will be a fairway shot (throw) to land closer to the green on a longer hole or an approach shot (throw) to the green to set up the final throw or putt. It's the same golf terminology in both types of golf.

Par is the number of allowed strokes for that hole — it's breaking even on the hole. One stroke over par is a bogey, two strokes over is a double bogey, and so on. One stroke under par is a birdie, two strokes under is an eagle, and a hole-in-one is called an ace. An ace is when your first throw or drive off of the tee goes into the hole (disc catcher). Aces aren't uncommon in either form of golf, but they aren't common, either.

Three strokes under par, almost impossibly rare in all forms of golf, is called an albatross. This requires an ace on a par 4 hole or a score of 2 on a par 5. Scoring a 2 on a par 5 hole is the equivalent of scoring an ace for your second shot.

To win at the championship level in either form of golf requires a steady string of birdies, few pars, and virtually no bogeys. You must finish your round well below par in order to win. In the 2009 US Disc Golf Championships, the leader group all finished at more than 30 under par after four rounds, with the winner, Nikko Locastro, taking the crown at 34 under par.

In conventional golf, the average golfer is going to finish well above par, at a bogey level or higher. In disc golf, the average is to finish at or around par, maybe slightly above. It's not that disc golf is easier overall, but closer putts are easier to make in disc golf, so saving par becomes slightly more realistic. In both sports, you still need to arrive close to the hole in order to putt, yet a putt of 5-10 feet in disc golf is a cinch, while a putt



of that length is far from over in ball golf.

You might think that the entire goal of throwing a disc is throwing it straight. Nope. Not always. A good player can throw a disc so that it turns left, turns right, or does both in the same throw, though the normal tendency of all discs is to hook or fade left slightly at the end of the throw. Specific models of discs are designed to fly straight or even favor turns to the right or left in varying degrees. Some discs are made to turn in one direction when first thrown, then turn the other direction during the same flight in a snake-like flight path.

There's a large number of grips to use with different discs and throwing styles, much like you would adjust your stance and grip in regular golf. For most grips the thumb is on top, the first finger is lightly curled under, and the other three fingers are underneath (the final three fingers might be fanned apart, curled toward the inside edge underneath the disc, or a combination of both). The grip depends on the disc design, type of throw, what you want to accomplish with the throw, and what is comfortable for your hand and arm.

Throws can be backhand, side-arm, overhand, or highly angled in a sweeping motion, from a standing position or with a run-up. And the various throws produce astonishingly different flight patterns. The intention of one throw, a "roller," is for the disc to hit on its edge and roll down the fairway.

The "thumber" is thrown upright and high into the air (the disc edge is vertical), but the disc immediately goes slightly right (off of the direct line between the person throwing and the target) and flips on its back upside-down. It then makes a hard turn to the left and flies a good distance off-line to the left until it finally sweeps back to the right, returning to the line on which it was originally thrown. The person throwing the disc doesn't really create the wild turning movement — it's the physics and aerodynamics of the disc itself.

In many ways, disc golf is a twist on golf, without the clubs, spiked shoes, golf carts, or greens fees. Discs replace the golf balls. And you'll make almost every 10-foot putt you attempt. Disc golfers also use bags to carry the discs, but some players simply carry a couple of discs with them by hand. You can be very complicated and involved with your discs or more laid back and still achieve similar results.

All of that information essentially means that disc golf isn't all that complicated and expensive. Almost

any age can play. Though I will say that at my age (59), some of the throws strain joints and muscles more than on a younger player. If you warm up and act realistically, disc golf can be played no matter your actual age. However, it's easy to modify the game to accommodate both young and old.

Some of the distances that the pros and top amateurs throw discs can seem impossible. At the USDG Championships in October 2009, one of the distance-throw competitors ripped his disc out for 564 feet. And he came in third. Number two came in with 15 feet more at 579. And the first-place finisher added six feet to that for a winning throw of 585 feet. But even those astonishing flights aren't the records.

The open world record (generally called the men's record) is really out there at 250 meters (820 feet) and is held by Christian Sandstrom from Sweden. Sandstrom threw an Innova disc to set the record. The women's world record is 153 meters (almost 502 feet) and is held by Niloofar Mosavar Rahmani, also of Sweden.

The longest ace (hole-in-one) was recorded by Brent Bell at the 2002 Big Sky State Games in Billings, Montana. It was slightly over a mind-boggling 221 meters (726 feet) and thrown from a tee on a tall cliff that was nearly 200 feet in altitude above the disc catcher. While the altitude obviously helped with the distance, Brent Bell threw it dead-accurate. And nobody else has done it from that hole or any other at that length.

Alex the sea lion holds the non-human distance record at 9.76 meters (32 feet). This record was set in the United States at the St. Louis Zoo on December 5, 1996. The longest canine catch (not throw) was thrown by Mark Molnar to Cheyenne-Ashley Whippet on October 12, 1994, in Pasadena, California. It was 118.9 meters (390 feet). That's 1.3 football fields in length. Record statistics are maintained by the World Flying Disc Federation (WFDF).

Disc golf courses tend to be different from conventional golf courses. Golf is played on manicured fairways and green surfaces that make turf specialists permanently and irrevocably paranoid. Think of the typical golf course. Most of us would want our lawns to look like golf courses if we had the time and resources to put into the whole green and lush thing.

Disc golf courses are much more eclectic. Winthrop University has vast areas of lawns around the campus, so the disc golf at Winthrop courses are played in open, landscaped areas for most holes. But many disc golf

courses are laid out in wooded areas. And the “greens” are essentially a circle going around the disc catcher with a radius of 10 meters (32.8 feet and often informally called 30 feet or 10 paces). Any throw within the circle is considered to be a putt and requires special stance considerations.

In golf, trees don’t grow on the greens. In disc golf, the catcher could be surrounded by trees (as it is on several Winthrop holes). Or the entire course might be set in the woods, with narrow fairways cutting sharply right or left like dogleg holes in golf, just meaner. A disc golf hole could be under 100 feet or over 1,000, depending on the person designing the course. Championship-grade courses play long and tight, often with large, out-of-bounds areas to catch even slightly errant throws.

The course at Fewell Park in Rock Hill is set among trees that are particularly wily and devious. The Fewell trees move after you throw the disc when you’re not looking. The course is nine holes long, all par 3, with each hole having a short and long tee, creating an effective 18 holes in the space for nine. This course can be played quickly (in less than an hour if you rush) or leisurely (if you amble and take your time enjoying the outdoors). The course at Boyd Hill park in Rock Hill is more scenic, rolling along through the woods. Both are favorites with locals.

Winthrop has a total of 27 holes. The normal 18 are tucked around the lake, with the additional championship holes around Winthrop Coliseum. Some of the lakeside holes are changed or combined for the USDG Championships and are added to the long holes around Winthrop Coliseum. The championship course

is called the Gold Course (it’s designed to destroy all but the best players). On warm days, a steady stream of disc golfers can be seen on the Winthrop courses, at Boyd Hill, and at Fewell.

In all, the Rock Hill listing of disc golf courses totals 23, with the number of holes at each ranging from as few as six to as many as 27. Many of the schools in Rock Hill (elementary, middle, and high schools) have courses that are publicly accessible, though not during school hours. Plans are being made for other courses in the county. Disc golf courses are all over South Carolina.

Charlotte has numerous courses and some of the best in the southeast. You can literally find disc golf courses everywhere. Virtually all are free and open to the public (check local park hours). It’s also popular in other countries. Town and city recreation departments, colleges, and universities install disc golf courses because of the game’s existing and increasing popularity, the recreational and exercise value, and the exceptionally low cost of installation and maintenance as compared to other sports.

Excellent discs cost under \$10, with top-line discs often well below \$20. This is not an expensive sport. If you don’t lose them or leave them outside in the sunlight and weather, discs could literally last for many rounds of golf, though when playing around water, you should remember that discs don’t float.

The disc golf records include children as young as one or under and adults at 102. Surely you fit somewhere in the span between. If you ever had fun tossing a Frisbee, you’ll love stepping up to the tee in disc golf.

