



Great golf's a toss away

IT'S GOLF WITHOUT THE CLUBS, OR FRISBEE WITH A GOAL. EITHER WAY, MIDWESTERNERS OF ALL AGES AND FITNESS LEVELS ARE CRAZY FOR DISC GOLF. WE'RE EVEN LEADING THE NATION IN THIS FUN AND HEALTHY TREND.

A STREAK OF COLOR flies through a wooded park. A sleeker, denser version of a Frisbee drops into a metal basket, and chains clang triumphantly. Birdie!

This is disc golf, a 30-year-old sport that has spread to hundreds of public parks in the Midwest, which has become a hub for the game with 550 of the country's 1,500 courses. Iowa has the second-most courses in the nation with at least 88. Minnesota follows with 86.

Disc golf mimics traditional golf by requiring long drives and short putts to score, and by giving players the chance to walk a variety of terrain. Disc golf, though, uses plastic discs rather than clubs and hip-high, pole-mounted baskets rather than manicured greens. That makes it easy to convert public parks into free disc golf courses for solo players or groups.

Since people don't use disc golf carts, the sport transforms an ordinary walk through the park into a full-body workout. Players strengthen leg and arm muscles, improve flexibility, challenge the brain and get the heart pumping by walking, or even jogging, a mile or two.

"You see a whole range of people doing it," says Mike Jensen, a Bismarck, North Dakota, player who got hooked

on the sport four years ago. He loves the freedom. "You don't need a tee time, and you don't need to pay for it."

You also don't need experience or training to start, which is why it appeals to so many people. Mike plays with his 14-year-old brother-in-law, Shane, every Sunday afternoon and during the week when they can. "It's what Shane calls our 'brotherly bonding time,'" he says.

This region's varied landscape has helped the sport boom here. "[The Midwest] has some of the most interesting terrain for disc golf in the U.S.," says Chuck Kennedy, co-director of course development with the Professional Disc Golf Association. Chuck adds that a new trend is brewing: pay-to-play disc golf courses. The Highbridge Hills Sports Complex outside Ashland, Wisconsin, will rank as the world's largest venue when its five courses on 300 acres are complete.

After trying basketball, swimming and cross-country skiing for fitness, Mike says disc golf is the only sport he's stuck to. He loves how parks change with the seasons and how he always finds fresh challenges in the game. "[The exercise] just happens while you're having fun," he says.

By Lisa Meyers McClintick

GET STARTED

FIND AN EASY 18-hole course with tee pads and baskets less than 300 feet apart. It can take just a half-hour to play. They're easy lunch-hour breaks.

START WITH A recreational Frisbee if you already own one or invest \$7 to \$10 in a lightweight golf disc with blunt edges. Most sporting goods stores carry them.

IF YOU'VE BEEN SITTING in a cubicle for awhile, stretch leg, arm and back muscles first.

WATCH FOR DISC GOLF CLUB postings at the course or ask players you meet for advice. Most are happy to offer pointers on technique or particular holes.

FOLLOW COURSE ETIQUETTE by playing the holes in order and waiting for the hole ahead to completely clear of players before throwing. A hard-thrown, sharp-edged driver can cause injuries.

INVEST IN ADDITIONAL DISCS, designed for drives or putts, as you improve.

FOR MORE INFORMATION or for courses near you, contact the Professional Disc Golf Association (416/203-9628; www.pdga.com).