

## WHY NOT TRY

# Disc Golf Can Turn Your Walk Into a Workout

This surprisingly fun sport changes a stroll in the park into an afternoon adventure with a flying piece of plastic.

By Holly Burns

Aug. 18, 2022

Until a few weeks ago, the only thing I knew about disc golf was that I probably wouldn't like it. I'm great at throwing parties but awful at throwing anything else. But in a recent bid to spice up our humdrum family walks, I took my kids to a nearby park, which, it turns out, has a disc golf course. That was my first surprise. My second surprise was that I loved it.

Apparently, I'm not the only one. Disc golf's popularity, which had been growing steadily since its grass-roots beginnings in the 1960s, has shot up during the pandemic, said Danny Voss, director of marketing for the Professional Disc Golf Association, or P.D.G.A. Membership grew almost 75 percent between 2020 and 2021, as opposed to its typical yearly growth rate of around 10 to 15 percent, Mr. Voss said.

And it's not hard to see why. Disc golf is outdoors. You can do it alone or distanced from other players. And — as distractions during a global apocalypse go — it's very, very fun.

## Wait, what exactly *is* disc golf?

Like regular golf — which disc golfers call “ball golf” — the sport is about getting one object inside another object in the fewest number of tries.

Instead of a ball, though, you use a flying disc (similar to a Frisbee, but smaller and heavier). Instead of hitting with a club, you throw with your hand. In both sports, the target you're aiming for is called a “hole,” but in disc golf, that hole is an elevated basket swathed in dangling metal chains that make a jubilant *plink* when your disc lands inside.





Disc golf “holes” aren’t holes at all, but raised baskets with chains that direct the disc downward. Todd Korol for The New York Times



Serious aficionados may have a wide selection of discs. But if you’re confused, just use a putter — the most stable of the bunch. Todd Korol for The New York Times



A set of chains on the hole make a satisfying “plink” when the disc hits home. Todd Korol for The New York Times

## It's super affordable.

Steve Ganz, 54, a technology consultant in Leesburg, Va., took up disc golf in 2002 after he lost his job. A friend invited him to play, “and I thought, ‘well, that sounds silly,’” he said. But the friend kept calling, Mr. Ganz finally acquiesced “and it was love at first throw,” he said. Though he had played ball golf in his 20s, he found it too expensive. “I was never able to get as good as I wanted to.”

Disc golf, however, has a much lower price tag. There are more than 13,000 courses worldwide — 9,000 in the United States — and over 90 percent are free. To find one nearby, download the UDisc app. A standard course consists of 18 holes, though there are plenty of nine-hole courses, which are easier for beginners.

All you need to get started is “a disc, your water bottle and your shoes,” Mr. Voss said. A starter set of discs — which includes a putter for short distances, a driver for long distances, and a midrange for everything in between — runs about \$20. The putter, the slowest-flying

disc, has a deep and rounded rim, while a midrange is wider with a narrow rim, which makes it glide longer than a putter. Drivers are the most aerodynamic, with a flat, sharp edge that helps them hold a high speed for longer.

If you buy only one disc, make it the putter, said Melba Seto, 37, who mentors new disc golfers in Calgary, Alberta, and teaches clinics for the Women's Disc Golf League. That's because it's the easiest way to assess your technique. "Putters are meant to fly straight. If it's not going straight, you're doing something wrong," Ms. Seto said. "Until you can consistently throw a putter, don't worry about all the other discs. Just master that."

## It's open to everyone.

While disc golf has always been "a little alternative," Mr. Voss said, its days of being grouped with "hippie hobbies" like hacky sack feel numbered, as professional players accrue both athletic acclaim and sky-high salaries. The current U.S. disc golf champion, Paul McBeth, signed a \$10 million endorsement deal last year.

Still, having a reputation as a laid-back, unpretentious sport has its upsides, Mr. Voss said, including "the chance to be more welcoming." In fact, a huge part of disc golf's appeal is that "it's accessible to almost anybody," said Ms. Seto, who has played with people in wheelchairs (many courses are flat), coached players with limited mobility and squeezed in a round at her favorite course a few days before giving birth.



Backhand is the most common style of throw in disc golf. It starts with the throwing arm across the body and then it flings out, like starting a lawn mower, releasing the disc forward. Todd Korol for The New York Times



Unlike in most regular golf courses, children and sometimes even pets are welcome on the course. Todd Korol for The New York Times



Most golf discs are brightly colored, but that doesn't mean they can't get lost. It's good to have extras. Todd Korol for The New York Times

Children can try it "as early as they can throw something," Mr. McBeth said. Mr. Voss's 71-year-old mother plays two rounds a day. Unlike some athletic pursuits, "disc golf doesn't exclude anybody," said Shane Kamp, 43, a real estate office manager who has been playing for three years. "You're not discriminating against the short, skinny kid."

## You don't need prior experience.

While you can play alone, disc golf also offers a Covid-safe way to socialize. But don't play in groups of more than five, Mr. Kamp advised, "because then it starts getting slower."

You might assume you need to be a Frisbee whiz before trying disc golf, but actually, "if you haven't had a lot of experience with a Frisbee, it's almost better," Mr. Ganz said.

That's because it's not only the tool that's different — a Frisbee is larger, lighter and travels more slowly — but also the technique.

While a backhand is the most popular throw for both, with a Frisbee, it's "a wrist toss," Mr. Ganz explained, whereas "disc golf requires a fast whipping action of your arm."

Mr. Kamp likens the move to “a kind of lawnmower-starting motion.” Ms. Seto said it’s helpful to imagine “you’re elbowing someone and then slapping them.” People assume it’s like throwing a baseball, said Mr. McBeth, 32, but in fact it’s a little like swinging a baseball bat. “The shot is very lower-body driven,” he said.

## It's good for you.

It’s no secret that walking is great low-impact exercise. Research has shown that walking 30 minutes a day can provide significant physical and emotional benefits and a recent study revealed that even 10 minutes of daily walking may lead to a longer life.

Experts generally recommend a pace of three miles an hour, enough to be “huffing and puffing as you have a conversation,” said Dr. Matthew W. Martinez, a sports cardiologist at Morristown Medical Center in Morristown, N.J.

So does strolling a course more slowly — plus stopping to throw — still count?

Absolutely, Dr. Martinez said: “Any time you’re walking, you’re still gaining benefit.” In a 2012 study, researchers clipped pedometers to 340 disc golfers on 15 different courses and found that they walked an average of 5,613 steps, or almost three miles, for every 18-hole round.

Plus, Mr. Ganz said, you can dial that exertion up or down.

“There are flat courses in mixed-use parks that are literally a walk in the park,” he said. “Or you can strap on a backpack filled with discs and play an advanced-level course that has lots of elevation changes through rough terrain and make it a vigorous hike.”

Though Mark Twain is said to have described ball golf as “a good walk, spoiled,” adding some purpose to your perambulation can be “a good way to distract your brain from thinking it’s exercising,” said Dr. Martinez, which some research has shown can improve performance.

Disc golf can even be a type of mindfulness exercise, said Hailey King, 20, the current U.S. women’s disc golf champion.

“One of the biggest things in disc golf is not getting upset over a single shot,” she said. Instead, try to remain sanguine, so you can throw the next disc with a clear head. Ms. King added that practicing this mantra has helped her cultivate patience, on and off the disc golf course.



Nicole Rae Johnson throwing her disc at the Baker Park course in Calgary, Alberta. Many disc golfers pride themselves on maintaining an inclusive and friendly atmosphere. Todd Korol for The New York Times

## You become part of a community.

Mr. Kamp enjoys disc golf so much that he even built a nine-hole course in his back yard and listed it on UDisc for anyone to use. So far, half a dozen strangers have shown up to his house, including a couple on a date who played a few rounds and then stayed to hang out.

But even if you aren't likely to bump into a fellow player in your own back yard, Mr. Kamp said that other disc golfers are usually happy to stop and help out.

My own first time on the course brought me various gifts, including a lot of useful advice from strangers; the satisfaction of closing the exercise ring on my fitness tracker; and a magnificent new piece of lingo, "bangin' chains," which some players use to describe the sport. The experience was simultaneously humbling (I was pretty bad!) and exhilarating (then I got slightly better!).

"It's not about how far you can throw, it's about where you are now and where you are later," Ms. Seto said. "The whole point is just being active and getting out."

Holly Burns is a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area and a frequent contributor to The New York Times.