

Golf on the Open Road

As a new generation graduates into the world of golf, it's not all plus fours, bright green grassed courses and strict clubhouse etiquette they crave, as Gareth Jones found out.

Image a golf course with no grass, no bunkers. Picture a course without trees or water features. Reflect on a golf course with no greens, flags or actual holes. Sound like a dream, a nightmare?

Well it is actually reality. Crossgolf, as it is known, is golf but minus the numerous rules, restrictions and etiquette attached to the traditional game. In fact, there is just one rule in crossgolf - safety first. Germany is its birthplace and, like David Hasselhoff, it's big in Deutschland. In fact it has become so popular that the first crossgolf club in the country, The Natural Born Golfers, claim to have over 150,000 members worldwide, a figure that continues to rise rapidly.

In a nutshell the game is golf but not as we know it, as it is played wherever, whenever. Be it down the street, over the local construction site, on a housing estate or even on top of an office block or disused train, crossgolf can, and is, literally played wherever there is room to swing a club. During friendly rounds of the sport holes are not predetermined and are typically chosen as the

It all started in the early hours of one dull morning as a bored Torsten decided to throw a party in his hotel room. With the party flowing Torsten soon felt the urge to practice his swing - he was just starting out in the game - he withdrew his clubs and suddenly the corridor became an ideal fairway. After taming the harsh, unforgiving carpeted area Torsten shortly moved the game outside, practicing in front of an office block on a daily basis, and crossgolf was alive and kicking.

As Scotland is the home of traditional golf, Germany is the fatherland of crossgolf and the biggest tournament in the sport has just been held in the country. In a six city tour, crossgolfers fought it out for the much coveted NBG Iron Cup, the holy grail of the sport. Hamburg, Cologne, Frankfurt, Munich, Leipzig and Berlin hosted the third annual tournament, which allowed 60



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game progresses, with the length of the hole varying dramatically from a simple cheeky chip across a road to a mighty drive over a run-down factory. It is also not uncommon for a crossgolfer to be aiming for his ball to hit a target rather than sinking neatly down a hole. Like most things in the sport, these targets really can be anything, from hitting a rubbish bin, to a graffiti letter on a wall, to an abandoned car.

Historians of the game of golf may conclude that crossgolf itself stems back to the beginnings of the original game, when Scottish shepherds used to hit rocks around their pastures with sticks, however the modern game of crossgolf had a characteristically bizarre birth. An individual by the name of Torsten Schilling is the man responsible for bringing this new form of golf to the masses, but even the man with the great imagination surely could not have envisaged how far the game would come from such simple beginnings.



No dress code is required in the game

entrants into each of the six events. Over 1,200 people applied to play in the final stage in Berlin alone, which provides a startling scale of how popular the game has become.

Obviously it wouldn't be crossgolf without a different scoring system. In fact there is no scoring at all, instead tournament officials award prizes and trophies based on their own fanciful standards. In the NBG Iron Cup the trophy winners are decided in categories such as Style, Hardest Try and Best Entertainment. "Fun is always to be the centre of attention. With us it does not concern, in principle, points of league or sporty maximum output. Also there is no dress order and no handicap," said Torsten Schilling, crossgolf's creator and head of the Natural Born Golfers.

Why this extreme version of golf has become so fashionable in the land that has provided the world with golfing great Bernard Langer and European Tour



Imagine this tee shot at your club!

pro Alex Cejka is due to one underlining factor, the lack of public courses in the country. While the game becomes more accessible in numerous nations across the globe, in Germany golf remains an elite and expensive pastime. To play golf participants, firstly, must be licensed and then the cost of membership to a private golf club normally prices the majority of wannabe golfers out of the sport before they can even think of swinging a nine iron in anger.

Crossgolf might sound somewhat surreal, particularly to golfing traditionalists, but since its inception its popularity has spread across Europe faster than Michael Schumacher's Ferrari. Even the British are getting into the explosive game, where it is more commonly known as Urban Golf. The UK held its first Crossgolf Tournament in May 2004, which witnessed a field, including Ryder Cup player Ronan Rafferty, of over 64 men and women, who participated in a round through the streets of London.

Unlike the NBG Iron Cup, The UK's Shoreditch Urban Open, organised by disillusioned golfer Jeremy Feakes, closely resembled a true golfing competition with official scoring, a watered down dress code, holes with par and even caddies. The tournament saw urban golfers play their shots off AstroTurf mats,



There is no debate about women playing against men in this extreme version of golf

traditional holes were replaced by adopted manholes and cars acted as water hazards.

Other crossgolf locations include Barcelona, Paris, Kuala Lumpur and Warsaw, while future events are scheduled for Budapest and Shanghai. Even the Americans have got into the game, with the Urban Golf Association based in San Francisco - who said the Yanks only play golf on bright green grassed courses, with colourful, flourishing backdrops? The sport has now become so successful and its status has grown so considerably that plans are afoot to stage a massive 14 city World Tour by the end of 2006, which will bring with it its own unique difficulties.

"We never realised when we started organising these big events just how many problems we would face. In Germany it is no problem to gain permission to hold an event in a city. However in other countries we have had some



A crossgolf buggy, slightly different to what you would see on a traditional course

problems getting permission to play. It can take a lot of hard work to get all the right paperwork, etc together and get everyone to agree to let us play, but it is all worth it in the end," explained Torsten.

Favorite locations for crossgolf courses characteristically are big areas with distinctive landmarks, which allows tough and interesting holes containing numerous obstacles to be played, while also limiting the risk of hitting a passerby, but even these sites can cause certain predicaments.

"Recently in Spain we had a whole tournament planned to be staged at a major harbor. Then at the last minute it was announced that soldiers and sailors from the Iraq War were coming back on the same day as the tournament. When we got to the harbor to play huge wire fences had been erected and we just couldn't get anywhere near the course to play."

Torsten, who at the time of inventing the game worked as a television set designer, rapidly realised the game's potential and left his job to concentrate his efforts on developing crossgolf as a business. As well as competitions, he organises corporate events for major multinational companies, which include Volkswagen, IBM, Microsoft and American Express. Not surprisingly when



Vast areas such as construction yards make a great crossgolf course

whacking golf balls through the streets of a major city Torsten takes out liability insurance for all crossgolf events and tournaments, but as yet there has never been an injury, proving the game's only rule, safety first, is always adhered to.

"Our slogan is golf when, as and where one wants and the game is played for pleasure and enjoyment above anything else," stated Torsten.

Fun and enjoyment are certainly the order of the day with this sport. Fancy dress and loud clothing is often spotted at events - mainly in the US - and crates of bottled beer are never too far away from a crossgolf course. In the NBG Iron Cup it is a must that: "The last tournament ball is always played in a bar or another party-suited mechanism."

That sums it all perfectly. Crossgolf is a sport that is played for no other reason than pure, unadulterated fun, something that can only be a good thing in today's world of rules and regulations.