

Disk Golf

By Mike Harrington, Beautiful Blooms Landscape & Design

Editors Note: Mike Harrington is the former Golf Course Superintendent at Scenic View Country Club in Slinger, WI. Since 2005 he has been Co-owner (with his wife Loriena) of Beautiful Blooms Landscape & Design in Wauwatosa, WI focusing on lawn and landscape design, installation, and maintenance. He has travelled to over 400 disc golf courses in 22 states since he started playing the game less than 4 years ago. If you have any questions about the incorporation of disc golf into your golf course feel free to email Mike@thediscgolf-experience.com.

Disc Golf is very similar to golf only instead of hitting a golf ball with a club, you throw a disc with your arm. There are tees, fairways, rough, water hazards, OB areas, trees, greens (32' around the basket), and holes (Basket AKA Pole Hole). The goal is the same to get from one point to another in the fewest throws.

Not only are the physical parts of the course the same, but the thrill of hitting that perfect golf shot translates to disc golf too. Watching the disc float through the air effortlessly around the trees or over the pond right under the basket keeps so many people coming back over

and over again. It's the same as getting onto a par 5 in two shots by hitting a perfect 3-wood from 250 yards away clearing the bunker and rolling it up on the green to a 2 foot tap-in putt for Eagle. This is one of the reasons disc golf is one of the fastest growing sports in the country, the adrenaline and the thrill are the same as when you hit a perfect golf shot.

Golf courses have so many of the same elements as disc golf courses that the same property can be good for both sports. A golf disc is thrown only about 20-40% of the distance of a typical golf drive so much less land is needed.

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Top Left: Unique green at Idlewild Course in Burlington, KY

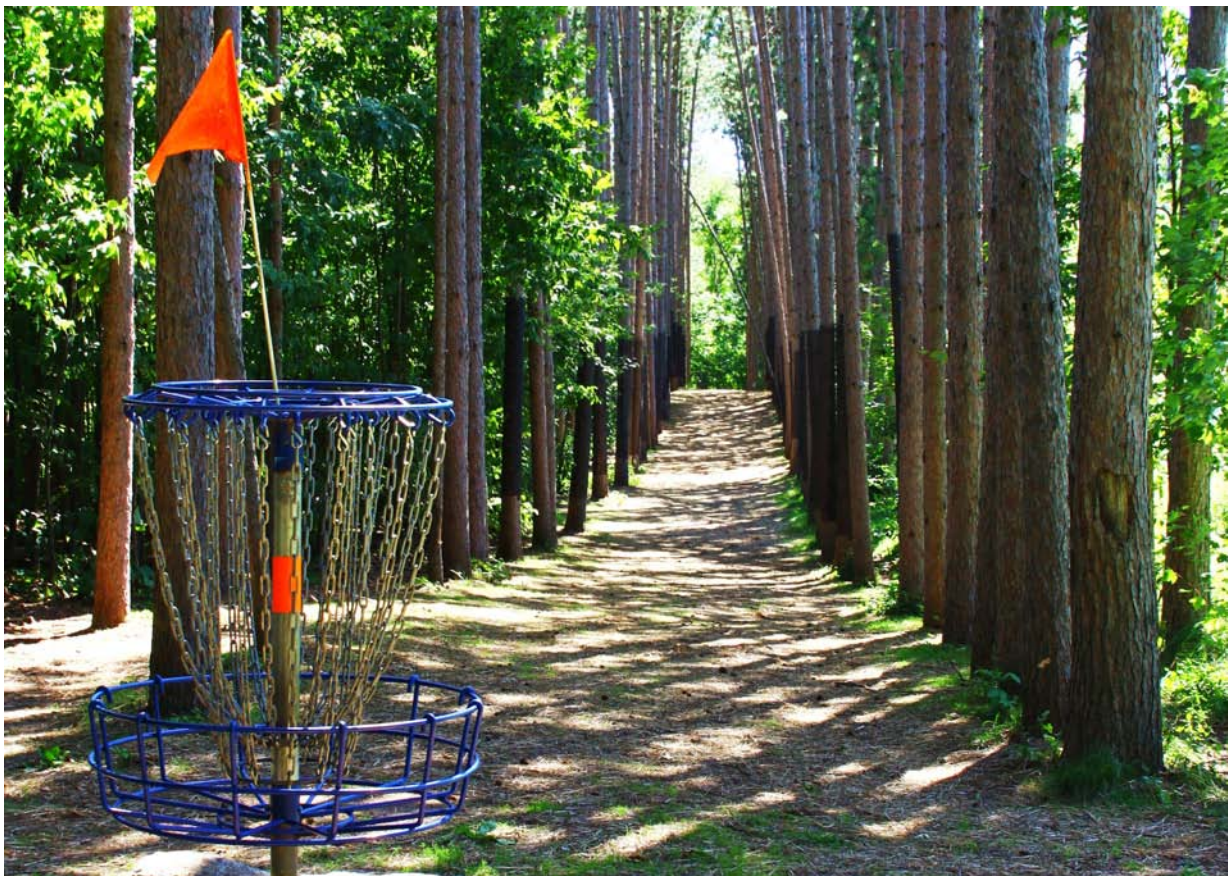


Top Right: Tee off pad.

Right: Western Carolina University Disc Golf Basket in Valve Box



Below: Hole 4 at Blue Ribbon Pines in East Bethel, MN (photo courtesy of Jenny Cook)



A decent 18 hole disc golf course could easily fit into 9 holes of a typical golf course. If there are unused woodlands or prairie areas available, you could either add more disc golf holes, or use less of the golf course for disc golf. Because the distance of the holes is quite a bit shorter, we also desire much narrower fairways, which is why woods are a great feature on some disc golf holes. Good design incorporates more obstacles and risk/reward shots like over water or through the woods. An occasional open hole using the golf fairway would be acceptable, but a great course will have a good variety of open length, lightly wooded holes, water or OB danger, and even densely wooded areas.

Disc Golf Course Accessories and the necessary installation and maintenance

The most basic tee would be a nice level area of grass but the only drawback is that you will want to move the tee markers regularly to avoid compaction and turf damage. The next step up would be to use

a rubber mat or an Astroturf tee area for more consistent footing. Even better than these surfaces would be to use existing paved cart paths. Another step up would be to pour new concrete slabs where the tees would be placed. This is obviously the premium option and I would not recommend this unless you are sure disc golf will be a part of your course for quite a while.

Once you decide on the desired tee type, you might have a little prep work for the tees, depending on the tee surface. You will also need a little bit of time to install the concrete for the permanent locking metal sleeves (used for permanent basket installations only). The best part about adding disc golf to an existing golf course is that it will not require a lot more effort on day to day maintenance. You already mow the grass, take care of your trees, rake your bunkers, paint your water hazards, and irrigate the turf. Depending on your specific golf course you might not even need to move the baskets in and out if you have a lot of peripheral wooded or prairie property since those areas are also enjoyable for disc golf.

Rest assured that a well designed course will keep all discs and people far away from the fine turf areas. We do not want discs landing on the green, nor do we want overuse and compaction to begin on the nicely groomed tees. Fairways and rough could withstand an occasional disc and subsequent throw. For a frame of reference, the typical disc golf course turf is comparable to golf course rough. Wooded holes don't get enough sun to sustain turf, but mulch can be applied to bare areas if the leaf cover is not enough to keep the mud from being on the surface.

The potential economic impact of disc golf

An upward trend in the sport of disc golf is the desire for pay to play courses as opposed to the free municipal parks. The municipal courses are becoming overcrowded and beat up due to the decreasing parks budgets, and a lot of the maintenance is left to the local disc golf club volunteers. Many of the more discerning disc golfers are looking for places where it will be less crowded, more secluded, quieter, more scenic, and better maintained, and they are willing to pay for that experience. According to a survey done by the Professional Disc Golf Association (PDGA) in 2011, of the people willing to pay for a nicely maintained disc golf course, the optimum fee would be \$4-6, with some people saying they would pay over \$15. Add in a golf cart rental, some beverages, and possibly some food sales and there is a significant amount of money from a completely different target market. That income looks even more substantial when you realize the additional inputs are pretty minimal and disc golf could take advantage of your slow periods. I imagine that your golf course owners, who have been dealing with less tee times and fewer golfers over the past decade, would love to have that additional income.

Is disc golf suitable for all golf courses?

Disc golf could be designed to fit into just about any golf course, but there are so many variables that the extent of use might vary dramatically from course to course. The amount of money people are willing to pay will also vary depending on the property and the level of challenge that can be provided. From a design standpoint the factors involved would be the trees along the fairways, the water that is in play, the use of bunkers to create more obstacles, and the overall size of your property. If there are peripheral prairie areas or densely wooded areas that can be used, then the design could be altered dramatically to capitalize on the unused portion of the property.



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The biggest factor to consider when deciding if disc golf would be appropriate for your property is to study the slow periods of golf. Are there specific evenings where a section of the golf course could be closed to golfers and opened for disc golf league play? Are the early spring and late fall months particularly slow because the golfers are waiting for ideal weather conditions? Could you have a course that would support simultaneous play by golfers and disc golfers? Currently there are

two courses installed on golf courses in the Minneapolis area where the disc golfers get a tee-time just like the golfers do and you could find a few dozen golfers and a few dozen disc golfers on the same course at the same time. Disc golfers also tend to be a hearty bunch of people and will play in just about any weather including snow, so it is important to think about the opportunity for a course in the wintertime, when there obviously is no revenue from golf. All of these circumstances will affect

the type of course that could be put in and the amount of money people are willing to pay to play your course.

Perhaps your course could support a permanent disc golf course being installed. It might only be able to justify a temporary setup a couple nights a week, or for that matter even just a couple of tournaments a year. I am confident with the right promotion, and the proper planning and design, this is something that will be a profitable addition to many golf courses. ✓



Left: A very popular hole called “Top of the World” on Hole #27 at Delaveaga in Santa Cruz, CA (Photo Courtesy of Jenny Cook)

Below: #17 at The Lodge Island Course in Pawhuska, OK . . . plays similarly to #17 at TPS Sawgrass Stadium Course

