

One of the disc golf pole holes, part of the permanent 18-hole disc golf course in Norwalk's Cranbury Park



DISC GOLF FLIES HIGH IN NORWALK

The story behind the peculiar pads and baskets you can find in Norwalk's Cranbury Park

BY NAIDEN STOYANOV

If you've ever hiked in Norwalk's Cranbury Park you have certainly seen them. Strange contraptions consisting of a metal pole and a wire basket with loosely fitted chains hanging over it. It's a safe bet that, to the uninitiated, it would be impossible to correctly guess their purpose and function. But for everyone else they represent the final goal of a journey of one, or many, strokes of areal mastery. Their

alien appearance is only reaffirmed by being the final resting place of many flying discs, although not unidentified, strangely provoking varying emotions ranging from joy to frustration, but always accented by a sense of completion.

The contraption described here is the Disc Golf Pole Hole and the sport is, naturally, disc golf. And Norwalk played a big role in establishing it in the region.



THE BEGINNING

The Frisbee is one of the simplest toys carrying boundless opportunities for fun and games. It's extremely portable and could be as cheap, or as expensive, as one likes, which makes it accessible to everyone. It doesn't require any additional equipment and can be played anywhere. And, apparently, you can even play it by yourself (although it's always more fun with a friend or two).

That's what some college students in the 1960s discovered, when they started throwing their Frisbees at designated objects from a distance. The game of Frisbee Golf, as it was known back then, was born. Played at "object courses" (called like this since players were trying to hit objects, rather than specifically designed targets) with rules and scoring more or less identical to golf.

As the sport gained popularity, American inventor Ed Headrick came up with the above-mentioned now standard Disc Golf Pole Hole. And it was only fitting that he would be the one to come up with the fixture, since he worked for the Wham-O company which came up with the Frisbee itself.

But, when long-time Norwalk resident Adam Fasciolo started playing disc golf in the 1990s it was the old-fashioned way with friends trying to hit objects from a distance with a regular Frisbee. They would go to Cranberry Park in Norwalk and they would invent their own 18-hole course by designating trees, rocks, fence posts and other objects to serve as their targets.

Adam remembers that they had the complete course rigged in an ingenious way where, if the park was crowded, or the weather was uncooperative, or if there was another reason why they wouldn't be able to go the whole distance, they could play the first 9 and then play them backwards for a full game of 18.

Pretty quickly, Adam and his friends created a community of friends that would show up regularly to play disc golf every Sunday. This went on for a couple of years before they found out about a real 18-hole disc golf course just over the state border in Mt. Kisko, NY.

Adam and his friends were ecstatic! "We went there and we saw the pole holes. And it was like, the skies opened, and the sun shone through and it was like 'Oh my God this is a real sport'." Around that time they were also introduced to the golf disc, which is quite different than the original Frisbee.

NORWALK'S BIRDIE

Inspired by what he saw in Mt. Kisko, Adam decided to try to get a permanent disc golf course in Norwalk. At the time, unbeknownst to him, there were no 18-hole disc

golf courses anywhere in the state of Connecticut and there were very few, if any, in the entire New England region.

So, Adam visited the then Norwalk Parks and Recreation director, the late Timothy Scheibel, and pitched his idea for an 18-hole disc golf course in Norwalk. Adam was delighted to find out that Scheibel, who had already heard about the sport from his kids who were at college at the time, was really open to the idea.

But it wasn't meant to be a hole in one. Even with support from such high places, Adam's dream of having a permanent 18-hole disc golf course almost didn't happen. The reason? Money, of course. After researching the price for 18 disc golf pole holes it became apparent that the funds that would be needed exceeded the maximum that the director of the department is authorized to spend without approval from the town council. So, naturally, Adam went to the town council.

The sport had grown exponentially in the last few years, but at the time not many people had even heard of it. So the council, although amused by the proposal, decided against funding it, but did not shut down the idea completely. The deal was that if Adam found someone to donate money to pay for the pole holes, they would be OK to allowing the course to be built.

Adam took to the then budding Internet and posted on a disc golf message board explaining his predicament and asking for ideas. It didn't take long for another like-minded disc golf enthusiast, who happened to be a metals trader from Ridgefield, to offer to pay for the equipment himself. Being in the metals trading business, he had heard about a course in Wisconsin that was upgrading their hole baskets so he quickly secured the old ones and got them delivered to Norwalk.

Surely to the surprise of the town council, Adam went back to their very next meeting with the equipment for his disc golf course now secured. The city stayed true to their word and the Parks and Rec crew helped install the pole holes, sticking to Adam's suggested course design at Cranbury Park, making it the first 18-hole disc golf course in Connecticut and among the first in New England.

The course quickly became a hit with players, both from near and far. And it quickly became the host of major tournaments, including the Connecticut Disc Golf Championship for a number of years.

Meanwhile, the course is taking on a life of its own, according to

DISC GOLF COURSES

NEAR AND FAR

NEAR

According to the Professional Disc Golf Association's Course Directory, Connecticut has 26 disc golf courses, of which 6 are in Fairfield County:

1. **Cranbury Park**, Norwalk - 18 holes
2. **Oyster Shell Park**, Norwalk - 9 holes
3. **Waveny Park Disc Golf**, New Canaan - 12 holes
4. **Sherwood Island State Park**, Westport - 18 holes
5. **Park City Disc Golf Course at Veteran's Park**, Bridgeport - 18 hole
6. **Fairfield University**, Fairfield - 18 holes

Source: pdga.com

FAR

Countries with disc golf courses

United States	6,652
Finland	615
Canada	277
Sweden	217
Estonia	152
Germany	116
United Kingdom	93
Czechia	91
Norway	89
Japan	76
Denmark	63
Australia	59
France	52
Iceland	51
New Zealand	33
Switzerland	27
Austria	19
Netherlands	19
South Korea	14
Spain	11
Poland	9
Slovakia	9
Rest of the world	110

Source: wikipedia.com



Adam, where some of the holes were redirected and also tee boxes were installed.

“My legacy is that I put it in the ground, but then it almost became a living entity,” says Adam. “It’s grown and it changed its direction a couple of times on its own. So I think that’s a really cool thing.”

In the years that followed, disc golf has been becoming ever more popular.

“Now there are quite a few permanent 18-hole disc golf courses in Connecticut and there are a lot more in the country,” explains Adam “There is one in Fairfield University, one on Sherwood Island, and that’s just in Fairfield County. There are also a lot more people that play the sport now. There are different manufacturers of golf discs.”

And with the ease of disc golf course maintenance required (hardly any), no wonder courses are popping up everywhere and people are taking to the sport like never before.

SO YOU WANT TO PLAY

The game of Disc Golf, as already mentioned here, is quite similar to the game of golf, but players use flying discs and aim for pole holes, instead of using golf clubs to hit golf balls aiming for a cup in the ground. And just like golf, it looks deceptively easy and could be just as frustrating.

In a nutshell, each hole has a "par", which is the



number of throws that a player is expected to have before hitting the target with his disc. The first throw, the tee throw, starts from a designated tee area, which could be a special pad or just an area with a line that should not be crossed. The next throw is from behind the lie (where the disc from the previous throw landed). And this is repeated until the designated target is hit. There are other rules and variations, but you get the idea.

There is also different equipment for the different stages of the game, not unlike the different clubs that golfers use. Discs come in different shapes, each of them designed for the best performance for the specific game situation. Broadly, discs can be divided into distance discs and putters. And they are all engineered to have different flight characteristics. The amount of research and development that some manufacturers put into designing discs for the game is impressive.

Then there is the technique. Throwing a disc that will make precisely calculated S-turns in the air navigating trees and obstacles as if it has a UFO-like control does not come without learning and practice. A quick search on the Internet reveals a plethora of content both for the beginner as well as the most advanced player out there.

Yet, for the ones who have tried it, just like golf, the game often quickly becomes an obsession like no other.

A major advantage of disc golf is its accessibility. Norwalk and Fairfield County does have its own courses, but in the absence of a “real” place to play, one can quickly revert to the classic object golf course, which could be played anywhere.

Also, as mentioned, disc golf courses require minimal, if any, maintenance. Especially where they are set up in parks with trails and natural pathways.

Which brings us to the etiquette, which is very important for every self-respecting player of the sport. Disc golf’s fairways are often trails, used by hikers, dog walkers and other fellow recreation enthusiasts. But disc golf players will tell you that with adequate signage and proper course etiquette, everyone can enjoy the park.

So if you hear “Fore” make sure to quickly duck and then look for a flying disc in your vicinity.

And with disc golf’s popularity on the rise maybe it’s time for all of us to give it a try.

“The sport is not flying under the radar anymore as it used to,” shares Adam. “A lot of people know about the sport now and it’s become a lot more popular. And I am just glad that Norwalk has a course. Norwalk actually decided to put in a second, 9-hole course over in Oyster Shell Park.”

But it’s the one in Cranbury Park that started it all. ■