Golf Returns to Lakewood Park

By: Victoria Ford



Historic golf outing at the Rockefeller estate.
Photo credit: Ocean County Collection

Pieces of Lakewood's glamorous past stand protected in the woods along Route 88 in Lakewood, where, 75 years ago, financier John D. Rockefeller's vacation estate became the original Ocean County Park.

The original iron gate still marks the entrance to the 323-acre property. At the front of the property stands the original gatehouse and what is called the Buzzwell house, home of the park system's first superintendent. Farther back off the road, the original stables now house storage and maintenance equipment. Pottery classes are held in the original barn. Ocean County Park is also home to an 8-acre dog park; playgrounds, lakes for swimming and fishing; a lakeside beach complex and natural amphitheater; and the Ocean County Master Gardeners' greenhouse.

Once a prestigious destination for professional golf tournaments, today the same fairways are graced by players of disc golf, a sport gaining popularity in the area, championed by Frank Gualtier of Ocean County Disc Golf. In 2010, Gualtier, a physical education teacher at Freehold Township High School, designed and installed a permanent nine-hole course at the school. Next he approached Ocean County Park with the idea for a course, which became a reality in 2013 thanks to dedicated volunteer efforts, according to park Superintendent Mary Jane Bavais.

The 18-hole disc golf course is a full professional course, Bavais said, describing it as a wonderful addition to the park because it coexists with the natural setting in a minimally intrusive, zero-impact way. The course layout was strategically designed – by Gualtier, Carl Cubbedge and Mike Keim – in a way that wouldn't interfere with the aesthetics of the park.

Dgcoursereview.com describes the Ocean County Park course as having "good shot variety for the terrain available (mostly flat and lightly wooded), with water in play on several holes."

The activity brings a nice group of people to the park, Bavais noted, usually foursomes. Those who play the sport tend to be environmentally conscious and respectful of the grounds and surroundings, she said.

Eric Leinen of Brick and a few buddies gathered to play a round. Leinen said he plays as often as he can on nice days when he isn't working. A newcomer to the game, he was introduced to it last fall, and now he's practicing to get good enough to join a league. Leinen said he likes disc golf for the outdoor aspect and the relaxation. It's an activity he can enjoy with his girlfriend, and "it's a good excuse to be outside all day," with the competitive element to give it a thrill.

Like golf clubs, different discs are designed for different uses, such as drivers, mid-range and putters, Leinen explained. Players tee off from a square pad filled with stone dust, and the object is to reach each "hole" or basket in the fewest possible throws. Each tee has a natural log bench and a simple wooden marker.

Certain "holes" have added challenges, such as trees or other natural obstacles to work around. The official disc golf baskets, DISCatcher targets, were generously donated by South Jersey Disc Golf.

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As the Professional Disc Golf Association points out, part of the sport's beauty lies in its simplicity. "A professional quality disc costs less than $15 and it only takes one for basic play."



Contemporary frisbee golf player at Ocean County park.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

Nathan Baker of South Jersey Disc Golf explained the South Jersey and Ocean County clubs are actually one organization. South Jersey was officially formed last year, he said, and is working toward its 501(c)(3) status. The mission is to promote the sport, to build new courses and attract new players. Find out more at facebook.com/SJDisc.

Each course has its own operating body, he explained, with designated course pros. The Ocean County Park course has two co-course pros, Gaultier and Mike Keim. It's all volunteer-run, Baker said. And it serves a community of several hundred who regularly use and enjoy the public courses.

The sport has continued to gain popularity since it was created in the 1970s, but today the organization moves toward "a change in the way it's perceived," elevating it from its hippie-ish connotation to one more cultured and accessible to everyone, to broaden the range of people who play it. Disc golf, Baker said, is really for anyone who enjoys nature, nurtures a competitive spirit and has an appreciation for public parks. He also likes how it's so welcoming to both genders and all ages. "It's a really great community out here," he said.

The PDGA elaborates: "Specially-abled and disabled participate, giving them the opportunity to take part in a mainstream activity. Because disc golf is so easy to learn, no one is excluded. Players merely match their pace to their capabilities, and proceed from there. The Professional Disc Golf Association, with a member base of 50,000-plus, is the governing body for the sport and sanctions competitive events for men and women of every skill level from novice to professional. Permanent disc golf courses are found in countries worldwide."

Bavais said the PDGA-sanctioned Ice Bowl in January was really a sight to behold, with the ground covered in snow. "When you have 75 people here in the middle of winter, you're doing something right," she said.

The Ice Bowl was a charitable event that raised money and non-perishable food items for a local food bank, Baker added.

"I love the fact that (the course) is being so well used," Bavais added.

In addition to disc golf, the park lists among its recreational uses: bike trail, cross-country skiing, driving range, fishing, fitness trail, handicapped accessible facilities, open playing fields, picnic area, playgrounds, restrooms, softball, swimming, tennis courts and volleyball.

"There is just so much the parks offer to so many people," Bavais said. She elaborated, parks are places of refuge, investigation and discovery, of bonding, serenity or adventure; they connect people – not only with each other, but with their true selves.

The park in general is a source of personal pride for Bavais, who can recall high school track workouts along the perimeter fencing and started working there as a teenager (she used to hand paint park signs). Her mother, too, worked for the parks system, as a secretary to the director; and a tree stands in memorial grove in honor of her grandmother.