

FLYING *Saucers*

BY JOSHUA H. BALLING /// PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICOLE HARNISHFEGER



Professional disc-golfer Nate Doss launches a shot out of the trees during the second annual Nantucket Disc Golf Open this summer.

“Grip it, rip it and have a good time!”

Nantucket Disc Golf motto

Gary Cyr “putts” during the 2014 Nantucket Disc Golf Open.

Nestled among the stately pines of the Nantucket State Forest is the Nantucket Disc Golf course. Needle-strewn paths lead from “hole” to “hole” on the par-68 course, one of the longest in the country. The setting is rustic, brush piles and downed limbs line the fairways, and “manicured” is perhaps the last word that comes to mind.

Which isn’t to say the course isn’t well-maintained.

The paths and fairways are cleared of debris regularly, branches frequently trimmed and the chain-link baskets that make up the “holes” on the course kept in tip-top shape. Those who play the course say it gets more care than most. It’s intended to blend into its surroundings. In fact, one of the conditions of the state Department of Conservation and Recreation in granting approval for the construction of the course was that only dead trees be cleared from the property. Even its black and white tee pads and cottagered rimmed baskets perched atop metal poles were designed to fit in with the Nantucket aesthetic.

Disc golf is played in much the same way as conventional golf, but with the disc serving as both the “ball” and the “club.” Putters are relatively flat and most like conventional Frisbees, while drivers are thinner, with more of an edge, which the thrower releases at an angle for maximum accuracy and distance. Scoring is the same as conventional golf, with one stroke counted each time the disc is thrown, with the conical basket serving as the “hole.”



It can take about three to four hours to play a full 18 holes, and golfers walk about two miles each round.

The Nantucket course came to be largely through the vision of one man, long-time summer resident Todd Rainwater, who was drawn to the collegial atmosphere and camaraderie of disc golf, especially compared to what he called the “stuffy atmosphere” of regular golf.

“I’m not much into formalities, or getting dressed up and going to fancy restaurants. Disc golf fit the type of sport I really like. No dress code, no tee-times. Bring your family, bring your dog, play three holes and leave. It’s the relaxed version of golf,” he said.

Rainwater is the son of Texas businessman Richard Rainwater, whose charity The Rainwater Charitable Foundation, helped to finance the project and supports the nonprofit that keeps it going.

Following three years of planning, negotiating and bureaucratic red tape, construction on the 10-acre course off Lovers Lane began in 2011, and the first eight holes were ready for play by fall. The course was designed by John Houck, one of the premier disc-course designers in the world.

“The first year or so of construction in the State Forest was honestly a bit tough. My wife Lowisa and I did our best to recruit members of the community to help come build the course but not too many people showed up to help. For the most part, my wife and her family, along with occasional help from others, built the entire north half (eight holes) of the course,” Rainwater said.

“Once we opened those holes up, people came and played and the floodgates opened and we ended up getting a lot of people to come out and help us build the rest of the course. We also ended up hiring a few people to help us build the final 10 holes.”

Last July, upon completion of the 18-hole course, Nantucket Disc Golf held the inaugural Disc Golf Open, with the second annual event this June attracting some of the top professional and amateur disc-golfers from around the country.

The Nantucket course is considered by many disc golfers the best in New England, and among the best on the East Coast. The only factor preventing it from being a truly world-class course, said Mike Harter, a California transplant who honed his game in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, is its lack of elevation.

What sets it apart is the distance and wide-open fairways. At 8,773 feet, it’s one of the longest disc-golf courses in the country, although a set of shorter tee pads are also located at each hole for beginners and younger players.

“It’s a lot more open than many other courses. Its signature is the length, compared to a course like Martha’s Vineyard, which is much more technically difficult given the number of trees. Ninety-five percent of disc-golf courses are par-threes. Most don’t even have par-fives,” Harter said.

Nantucket has three, ranging from 799-868 feet.

The layout melds seamlessly into its surroundings, which most players seem to prefer.

“To me, it should feel like a walk in the woods,” said Harter, who also runs youth programs for Nantucket Disc Golf.

The Professional Disc Golf Association gave the course this review: “Championship-style course in the beautiful South Pasture of the Nantucket State Forest. Wide (and occasional tight) fairways through the woods, many with multiple routes to enhance challenge and enjoyment. The short tees are great for new players, and the long tees will test the very best with a par-68 layout featuring three par-five holes and a variety of lengths and shot shapes. Top quality tees and signs.”

“The thing that players notice immediately is how well-maintained it is. Nantucket Disc Golf has done a superb job creating and maintaining the course. From my end, I think I was able to create a course that gives players – especially New England players – a unique experience in terms of hole length and par, shot shapes, and fairway widths to test their shot-making skills, plus options to test their mental game,” Houck said.

“Our mandate from the state was to create the course primarily by removing only dead trees. Fortunately, the pattern of storm damage in the forest had created smaller open areas that I was able to use as landing areas for par-four and par-five holes. It had also created alleyways that offer options for players to get into and out of those landing areas. So my hope is that playing this course will be a different experience every time, and that players will enjoy having those options and that variety.”

The game is played much the same as conventional golf, with conical chain-link baskets serving as the “holes.”



Nantucket’s disc-golf course, one of the longest on the East Coast, is nestled among the pine trees of the State Forest.





Harter credited maintenance supervisor David Weidmann with the high quality of the course.

"Dave and his crew do a fantastic job. They really take their jobs seriously," Harter said. "This spring they were hard at work moving the trees that came down in winter storms, and others that came down naturally."

The predominant pines in the State Forest have a lifespan of about 60 years, so even in mild years there's always work to be done. The course isn't watered – the idea is to keep it in as natural a state as possible – but Weidmann recently completed a stump-removal project that smoothed out many of the fairways and greens around the baskets.

Disc golf – and the Nantucket Disc Golf Course in particular – appeals to a wide range of players for several reasons, Rainwater said:

- It has an easy learning curve. Most everyone already knows how to throw a Frisbee and those that don't often can pick it up very quickly.
- It is inexpensive - one \$10 disc (assuming you don't lose it) gets you free "membership" for life at the Nantucket Disc Golf Course, and most disc-golf courses in the world.
- It can be played any time for as long or as short as you like. If you have an hour for lunch you can easily play a few holes and get back to work on time.

Good luck trying this in conventional golf.

● It is social. There is ample time during a match to interact with members of the group you are playing. Not only that, but when playing disc golf, players often meet up with other recreation-seekers (dog-walkers, hikers, etc.).

"Disc golf is a healthy, inexpensive, easy to learn, family-friendly, recreational alternative that can be played by anyone, young or old, at any time of the year. Nantucket is lacking in such forms of recreation, in my opinion, and the disc golf course helps fill this void quite well," Rainwater said.

"Being as accessible as it allows us to reach out to and enhance the lives of the youth and others in the community who may not have the resources to participate in more expensive forms of recreation. These groups – the youth and those who cannot afford more expensive forms of recreation – are often the most vulnerable and being able to bring these groups to the course and positively impact them is our goal and something I am super-excited about being able to do."

On Nantucket, there is a core group of 15-20 disc golfers who play regularly, about a dozen of whom compete most weeks in a Sunday afternoon doubles tournament. Harter and Rainwater are working hard to attract more players to the course, particularly

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women and children. Already, students from the Nantucket Lighthouse School, Nantucket New School and Boys & Girls Club play regularly, and a disc-golf club has been formed at Nantucket High School. Ultimately, Harter would like to see the formation of a high-school team to compete against other schools on the mainland.

"It's a niche, a new sport. You don't have to be the quarterback of the football team or queen of the prom to play and be accepted," he said. "I started playing and fell in love with it at 35, but we've got kids starting to learn at 6 and 7 now. That's how we're going to grow the sport."

Very few women, however, play disc golf nationwide – about 20 percent of regular players – and even fewer on Nantucket. Harter said he's considering hosting Friday evening "Ladies Nights" for women and girls only as a way to make the game less intimidating.

Like Harter, Rainwater sees disc golf as a positive outlet for island kids looking for an outdoor activity that might be outside traditional team or individual sports.

"For those youths who are not a part of traditional school sports and who lack healthy recreational alternatives and simply want something fun to do, disc golf is a sport which they can take up and play and enjoy with their friends and family. If this just means getting these kids outside, allowing them to be a little social and getting them a little exercise, I think this could really impact their lives in a positive way," he said.

There is also, however, a competitive aspect to the sport, one that attracts former athletes and outdoor-sports enthusiasts of all skill levels. In a phrase, it's a lot more than "Frisbee golf."

"'Frisbee golf' is a term often associated with a fun game on the beach or in the woods with friends throwing a Frisbee at objects or perhaps into a barrel or a basket. When I think 'Frisbee golf,' the first things I think of are fun and a good time with friends," Rainwater said.

"'Disc golf' at the Nantucket Disc Golf Course and throwing discs into professional baskets is just as much fun and just as social as Frisbee golf, and if that's all you want it to be, that's great. However, as you play the game, you will realize disc golf is a truly legitimate sport which challenges you in a way that you've never been challenged. To me that makes it truly addictive. And to me there's nothing more healthy than being addicted to a healthy, challenging, outdoor, social sport which I can play most any time and most anywhere in the country for the rest of my life for free." ///

Nantucket Disc Golf Course
21 Lovers Lane
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www.nantucketdiscgolf.org

Joshua Balling is the associate editor of Nantucket Today and the assistant editor of The Inquirer and Mirror, Nantucket's newspaper since 1821.

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