

Disc Golf proponents look for opportunities to expand

By **Robert Belardi**

In 2014, while mountain biking on the trails behind the Ontario Science Centre, Jeff MacKeigan stumbled on a new sport. He saw people throwing a frisbees (discs) into a chain holder attached to a metal pole.

‘It was a really snowy year, so we said, let’s give this disc golf thing a try,’ MacKeigan said. ‘Fast forward a few weeks later and we’re talking on the phone about where we were going disc golfing next.’

It’s how most people find this game. MacKeigan says this isn’t a sport most people grow up with. It is one to be found.

Disc golf is a sport that began unusually with students throwing pies around in New Haven, Connecticut. Ed Headrick, the owner of Wham-O – a toy company in California – was intrigued by this as word spread swiftly across the country. He developed a plastic version of these pies and that’s how disc golf was born.

Similar to the way golf works, the objective is to throw your frisbee into this metal basket in the least amount of throws as possible. You ‘tee-off’ with your frisbee and play each hole as you would on a golf course.

In 2018, he was a full-time employee with a consumer packaged goods company. MacKeigan was awarded employee of the year by the company – an honour he still holds in high esteem to this very day – but his passion for the sport of disc golf and the community of people within it, continued to grow.

MacKeigan made the call to pursue disc golf full-time and quit the consumer-packaged goods company in 2019.

Later that year, he and his business partner Cara Hovius, installed a beginner-friendly disc golf course at Marilyn Bell Park in Toronto. In the Fall of 2020, he opened at Scarlett Woods in the city as well.

‘Seeing the passion this game instills in other people, is amazing. We launched Scarlett Woods Disc Golf Course in November (2020). It’s really cool. The Mayor of Toronto (John Tory) made the announcement. That weekend, we were at the course both days to ensure everything flowed smoothly,’ MacKeigan said.

‘And the opening weekend went by in a flash. What was most remarkable, were the emails that were sent to the Mayor giving thanks for the course. Some people included us in their notes. They were incredibly heartwarming.’

‘There are people going through unbelievable challenges in their life. It’s really quite amazing, you see people out there, throwing frisbees into metal baskets and you can tell this is one of the best parts of their day. It’s hard to describe but easy to experience.’

In the past 31 years, the City of Toronto had three-disc golf courses in total. MacKeigan and Hovius have doubled that to six in the past three years.

And they are working on many more.

One player, Aurora resident Todd Billo, invited MacKeigan and Hovius to speak to the Town of Aurora’s Council this month to propose the construction of a disc golf course.

They shared the disc golf community concept with metrics on how the game is growing in popularity and how cost effective the sport is.

According to the PDGA, disc golf courses in Canada, grew by 18 per cent in 2017, 11 per cent in 2018, 12 per cent in 2019 and 9 per cent in 2020.

Membership increased by 17 per cent in 2018 and again by 28 per cent in 2019. This past year, even though COVID was a reality, disc golf membership has increased by a whopping 33 per cent.

MacKeigan also says he will work with the Town of Aurora and build a course in a location which best meets the Town's planning criteria. One of his biggest concerns is safety. Courses are designed to peacefully co-exist with other park users.

He awaits Aurora's response.

What a disc golf course would bring is inclusivity, he says. Anyone can show up to play. No matter who you are, or what your background is, it doesn't matter. It is a place where everyone is welcome.

Disc golf brings a wide range of people together. In its first year, their Marilyn Bell Park Disc Golf Course has seen a marriage proposal, new players learning the game, pro disc golfers honing their skills and even a father and daughter team who try to get in a round every day after school.

This game is for all ages and there is a sense of camaraderie between those that play. New players will often find disc golfers willing to share some starter discs and tips on improving their game.

During this time of uncertainty and anxiousness, a disc golf course and community seems to offer exactly what so many of us are looking for right now, they say. This sport can be played at any time (day or night) through all the seasons and is often free to play.