

Wildlife West Hosts Disk Golf Tournament



Written by Lee Ross

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Most disk golfer courses don't have cholla cactus in place of the traditional sand trap, or have golfers walking by the habitat of an albino raccoon on the way to the golf course.

Those were just a few unique features of the first disk golf tournament in Edgewood, the "Prickly Par Shootout," in Wildlife West Nature Park on Sunday.

Possibly the most important detail of the tournament was the weather. After the gloomy morning clouds burned away there was lots of sunshine and hardly even a breeze, making it a beautiful fall day to walk around and sling a few disks at the park.

And the event was counted as a huge success, with 55 competitors, and even more people who didn't join the tournament out tossing disks for fun. The early estimate for competitors was about 25, but quite a few people drove out from Albuquerque to a few came from as far away as Texas.

Judging from the variety of people who came out, from men and women, school children to retired military and people with tattoos and earrings to more straight-laced folks, it seems to be a sport that is gathering interest from all kinds of people.

Disc golf is similar to the original sport, but instead of a ball and clubs, players throw discs from the tee to an elevated metal basket with chains designed to stop the disk. There are similar obstacles too — trees, shrubs and hills — but in Edgewood it's important to watch for the odd cactus needle stuck into the flying disk, or in your foot.

In a short speech to the players, Guy Butrum addressed that particular problem, noting that the tools for splinter-removal, including needle-nosed pliers, are available.

Butrum, who helped organize the tournament, said there's been a progression in disk golf in the area. He said

the sport has gone from people goofing around and throwing disks at targets they found, like rocks or poles, to what he called the "nomad" tradition.

"There were no courses or anything," he explained. "Each person would bring a basket."

People from Albuquerque and the East Mountains would load their pickup trucks with portable baskets, drive into the Sandias and create their own course, he said.

It was only recently, April this year, that Gino Caggiano started working on a permanent course at the park in Edgewood. Now he and a few other locals have 18 holes with signs, tee off areas, maps and baskets.

Stephen Simpson, a disk golfer from Albuquerque who has played since 1988, said the tee-off areas could use some work. Right now they're dusty dirt patches marked by flags. But he was impressed by the layout, especially hole 6, which is a par five and is 1,130 feet from tee to basket and one of the longer "holes" in New Mexico.

"There are a couple of nice holes," he said after ripping off a huge drive and sending his disk out of eyesight. "New Mexico is behind other states."

Simpson, who is retired from the navy, said his obsession with disk golf is "typical addict behavior."

He plans entire vacations around disk golf tournaments in other states and was New Mexico's amateur champion in disk golfer in the 1990s, he said.

Several local sponsors supported the tournament, and there was quite a bit of support from Jon Welch of Play it Again Sports in Albuquerque, who kicked in \$500 of the \$2,000 in cash prizes paid out to 35 players along with gift certificates and trophies.

The big winner was Kyle Norrid, who came in first in the pro-division and got \$320 and a trophy. There was also \$300 donated to the park to feed animals.

Welch said he is trying to grow the sport in New Mexico. At five to 20 bucks a disk, it's not too difficult to get started, he said.

"It's a fairly new," he said. "We really do try to do affordable sports ..."

Welch added that the sport is growing like mad in Texas.

Park founder Roger Alink said the course is part of a long-term strategy to get people to come to his park, and to Edgewood. And it seems to be working, he said.

"It's catching on," Alink said. "There are golfers every day, seven days a week."

There has even been discussion of extending the course into the 30 acres of land behind the park that is managed by the Santa Fe County Open Lands and Trails Planning and Advisory Committee (COLTPAC).

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