

Disc-tractions



by David Emerson, # 30747

I was running from something pretty serious. He was running to something pretty important. We talked about doing this often, but in the end, the trip came together rather quickly, with very little planning.

For me it was about spending a week in Europe playing disc golf. It was the break I needed as I approached the 18-month mark in my battle with prostate cancer. For him, it was a week with his son who had traveled the continent for two months playing in disc golf tournaments, doing what 22-year-olds do. The trip would provide something similar to us both, an emotional rescue. We built unexpected friendships, increased our love for the game, and strengthened a relationship. In my experience, it's not very common for men in their late 30s to meet someone they bond with in such a powerful way. At times, it's as if we are brothers, separated at birth.

We met seven years ago in business school. The story might be better if I said we bonded immediately, but we did not. It wasn't until about eight months into the program that we really got to know each other. It was during the class' international trip when we roomed together for 10 days that the real bond was established. Aside from my wife, I have respect for him like no other friend in my life. We are alike but different. We share likes, and we disagree. Most importantly, we share a love for disc golf.

It took him some time to convince me to try disc golf. I joined him for the first time in June 2002, about a year after he started. Like most disc golfers, I was immediately hooked. The first three years we played primarily on Saturday mornings. I climbed the learning curve rather quickly, improving my game rather rapidly. Scores dropped and dropped until I found myself shooting nine or 10 strokes over par, or better. Then I hit the wall—a few steps back, a few steps forward. I tried new discs, new grips, and new throwing styles until I found one that felt somewhat right.

Immediately, I loved this game so much more than ball golf. Having struggled with traditional golf for years, I had managed to get my handicap down to a somewhat respectable 17. With a young son however, I had a hard time finding five hours in any weekend to go play. Disc golf offered some of the same benefits; a little exercise, some male companionship, and some light hearted competitiveness. All of that, and it cost less and took less than half the time. Our Saturday morning group has slowly grown into a rotating gang of eight or nine guys. For the group, it seems to be more about the love of the game and the camaraderie than competing with each other.

Almost three years later, we found ourselves in February of 2005. It was at that point that Saturdays took on a whole new meaning. They became something more, therapeutic. In February of that year, I was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer. The game continued, and I needed it more than ever. It was an escape from the realities of home and the constant thoughts of cancer. It was a relief of some sort, at least for a few hours a week.

As I mentioned previously, the trip came together with very little planning. The goal, if there was one, was to make our way to Beaminger, England and the British Open. We decided that if we were traveling that far for the Open, we had to go to at least one more country. Additionally, and no offense to the British Disc Golf Association, there weren't enough courses to keep us in

England all week. So where to go? We settled on Sweden with its 88 disc golf courses—12 in Stockholm alone.

So many rounds, so many shots missed and made. Now that three months have passed, I reflect on the importance of the trip to me personally. Was it the distance from home that allowed me to push the thoughts of cancer and the constant stress surrounding the situation from my conscious mind for more than a minute at a time? What was it that allowed me to detoxify long enough to really enjoy myself? Was it the thrill of having virtually no plan for the trip? Was it the fact we were 5,000 miles from home? Was it the time spent with good friends? In the end, it was a little of each of those, but mostly, it was the disc golf.

Sweden was a blur, it all happened too fast. We played until dusk (10:30 p.m.) both nights—18, 54, 36 holes in two-and-a-half days. The next thing I knew, we were on a plane back to London. I was exhausted. Little did I realize that it was a feeling that would become all too familiar.

On the way to our ultimate destination the British Open, we slept in the car in order to see Stonehenge. It turned out we were too early. We pushed on, arriving at the host town before the sidewalks were unrolled.

Arriving early and with sunlight burning, we decided to get in a practice round. What transpired over the next three hours was nearly indescribable. The elevation changes, the woods, the stinging nettles, the sheep, and most of all, the disc golf. The best description of the course I can muster is very long and very hilly. Hole #8 (the Hypotenuse) for example, was 800 feet in length with an elevation drop of 150 feet. I am in pretty good shape for a 43-year-old, but this course just sucked the energy out of me. We played our practice round in sheer amazement. The view of Beaminger was breathtaking, simply beautiful.

This was our first tournament, ever, and we entered the tournament as amateurs. We were there just to have fun after all. Playing as an amateur did nothing to make the course any easier. I struggled through rounds one and two and found myself near the back of the 25-person flight. He was on the mark and found himself tied for second after the first day. Sleep was scarce on Friday and Saturday, and a good meal even more so. Somehow through the rain and the exhaustion, I rebounded in Sunday's final round and ended up tied for 10th. He slipped ever so slightly to finish tied for fourth. I thought my effort was quite respectable, particularly considering my miserable start. He again, left me more than impressed. To travel as much as we had, to sleep so little, and to be in physical pain he was in (due to a bicycle accident two days before we departed) then to be leading the British Open after the first round and tying for fourth place was quite an achievement.

We met a number of individuals that stand out in my memory. I struggle to find a way to describe their generosity as unique. They were after all typical disc golfers; quick to share their knowledge of the course but even quicker to share their food, their tea, their extra tents, and more.

As I find myself at home now three months later, reflecting on the trip of lifetime, I can't help but think, where would I be without this game? I would have missed all of these memories, all of these friendships, all of these distractions. The Saturday morning gang continues on, and so does my battle with cancer. Neither can replace the memories we lived and created with a little disc of plastic so far from home.