

## BUILDING A BETTER MISS TRAP

I was mowing on hole 14 one day, when I saw a player on the tee; it was just him and his dog. I knew it was his first time there, so I asked him how he was enjoying the course. "Yeah, it's good," he grumbled. "I don't know how I could be in the middle of the fairway on hole 1 and be stuck behind a tree with no shot."

Hole 1 was a pretty open hole, and the only trees were on the edges of the fairway. I was completely stumped by this player's comment. Stuck behind a tree in the middle of the fairway? Not possible. Several weeks later, I finally figured out what he meant (I think). To him, "fairway" meant the area that was mowed. To me, if you were behind a tree on that hole, you were clearly off the fairway. And so here we have another important difference between ball golfers and disc golfers: they can tell if they're in the fairway by looking down at the ground; we can only tell by looking up at the obstacles ahead of us.

In ball golf, being in slightly taller grass means that you've got a problem; in disc golf, being in slightly taller grass means that you might not see a quarter that falls out of your bag. In ball golf, being in sand means that you've got a problem; in disc golf, being in sand means you can write your name with a stick. Unless the playing surface is extra rough, wet, or uneven, disc golfers don't really care. So how do you know if you're off the fairway in disc golf? The simple answer is this: if you've got a problem, you're probably off the fairway.

**Diagram A** shows how changing the playing surface doesn't necessarily change the status of your lie. My two friends, Ralf and Lars, teed off on hole 1. They apparently weren't properly warmed up, because they both missed the fairway. Lars's shots almost always finish right, typical of most Lefties And Righty Sidearmers (**LARS**). So he wound up in the woods. Ralf, who's just like most of your run-of-the-mill Righties and Lefty Forehanders (**RALF**), hyzered out behind a couple trees.

**Diagram B** shows that, even after I mowed the fairway wider and cleared some trees—providing a nice, flat grassy playing surface for both of them—Ralf and Lars are still off the fairway.

But in **Diagram C**, after I took out a few more key trees, my friends find that they've actually stayed in the fairway. That's because, in disc golf, it's less about the playing surface and more about having a line you can throw.

One of the great appeals of disc golf has always been that there are so many things you can do with a disc. Golf balls aren't very good at curving around things or hovering or skipping. And they can only roll in a straight line, unless they get help from a slope. And if you ask them to fly upside down, they don't even know what you're talking about. The amazing talents of a disc make it possible for us to do things with our courses that they can't do with theirs. Still, in my mind, their courses have always had several distinct advantages. One of them is sand traps.

### Sand By Me

Sand traps have always made me envious of ball-golf course designers. Sand traps add something to the game of ball golf that we rarely get to experience. Let's imagine that you're playing disc golf, and you're in the rough 30 yards from the pin. There's no significant slope to the green and no OB nearby. You're probably looking at one of three options:

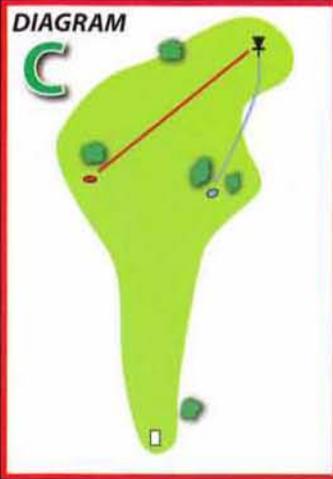
1. You have a clean line to the hole, and you can just lay up and tap in 99 times out of 100. Maybe you can take a run at it, though you know there's very little chance of it going in. Very little challenge; very little fun.
2. The rough is too thick to offer any lines. There's nothing to do but punt: try to get back in the fairway, and hope you can get a little closer to the basket than you are now. No challenge; no fun.
3. You have one or two tiny openings you can try to hit, and success is more a matter of luck than skill. Too much chal-



Lars and Ralf both missed the fairway.



Even though an area is mowed, it's not necessarily where you want to be. Lars and Ralf are clearly off the fairway.



Having a good line to the basket means you are in the fairway.



Having a tough but makeable shot (tricky angle, tight alley) is like being in a sand trap.

lenge; high chance of misery.

Your only options are pitch, punt, or pray. In any case, none of your choices are what I would call a real golf shot. [See the article about NAGS Zones (Not A Golf Shot), *Disc-Golfer* Winter 2011.]

But if you're playing ball golf, and you're in a sand trap 30 yards from the pin, you've almost certainly got a challenging but makeable shot. If you exhibit great skill, you can earn a great reward. Some of the most memorable shots in the history of ball golf have been miraculous recoveries from the sand or some other form of trouble. The drama can be off the charts when someone is fighting to take or hold the lead, tries a risky approach to the green, and winds up in a sand trap. At that point, everyone watching knows that the next shot could end in triumph or tragedy.

It all comes down to two words: recovery shot. You make a mistake and you're on the edge of doom. The other players in your group think they're about to pick up a shot. But you make an amazing recovery shot and save the day. It's a classic case of "When the going gets rough ..." Sand traps can also play an important role when they're near landing areas. You can miss the fairway, but a great shot will get you back in business. Having the opportunity to recover from a mistake: that's a great feature that makes ball golf one of the world's best sports. Disc golf is a great sport, and it would be even better if it could somehow give players more of those opportunities.

#### I Sand Corrected

Does disc golf have any sand traps? I'm going to say yes.

Look at ball golf. If you make a good drive on a par four and wind up in the fairway, you can get to the green with a good shot. If you're in a sand trap, you can only get to the green with a great shot. If you're in a sand trap, you've made a mistake, you now have a problem, and you have the chance to correct your mistake by making a great shot. Take a look at **Diagram D**. The way the hole plays now, **Ralf** and **Lars** find themselves in exactly that situation: they've made a mistake; they have a problem, and they have an opportunity to correct the mistake. Whereas in Diagram A, they had no way to get to the pin, now in D they have a chance. So, I would say that in D they are both in a disc golf sand trap. Remember, it's not about the playing surface; it's about the routes.

If we use this definition of "disc golf sand trap," we'll find that some courses have such areas in random places. You could, for example, be out in the middle of the woods and find that you have a tight but fair alley to the pin. If you had landed a couple feet away in any direction, you'd be out of luck, but you managed to find yourself in a sand trap. Our definition is getting stretched a bit, but I think it still works. Now that we have a basic definition, let's see if we can find a more helpful use for this concept. I'd like to show you a hole in Pittsboro, North Carolina, that deliberately employs this idea in a couple specific ways.

Before I do that, we need a quick timeout for clarity. First, please understand that when we talk about a "great recovery shot," we're talking about a shot that requires a good deal of skill, not a good deal of luck. Second, let's acknowledge that sand traps in ball golf have another important function, and that is to enhance the strategy involved in playing



# PITTSBORO, NC



# Rock Ridge Park

a hole; we're just not talking about that aspect today. Third, let's come up with a better name. Disc golf doesn't use sand or traps. Since our version is a place where we are increasing the throwing strategy by offering recovery opportunities, it only makes sense to call it a PITTSBORO (Place Increasing The Throwing Strategy By Offering Recovery Opportunities).

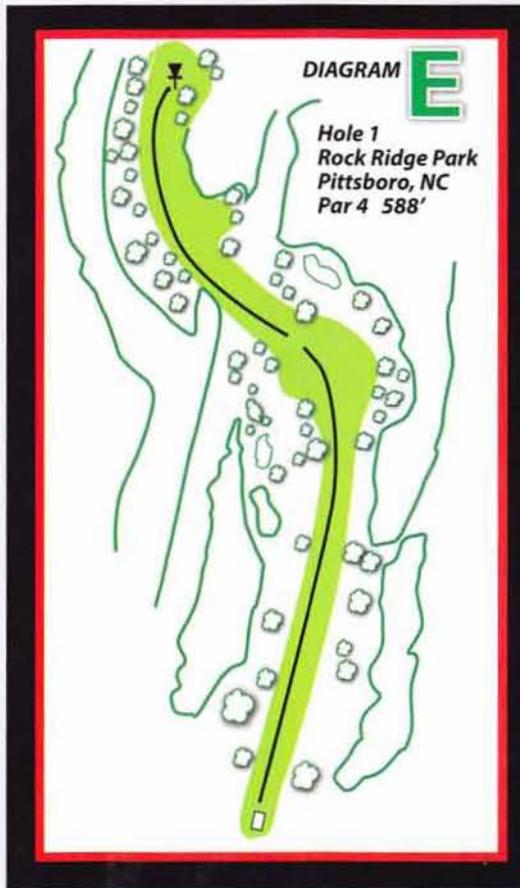
Too often mistakes in disc golf either go unpunished (usually because the hole is wide open) or are too severely punished (usually because the hole is heavily wooded). It's a shame to lose a stroke after making just a small mistake; the punishment doesn't fit the crime. So the big question is this: how do we create courses where small mistakes result in opportunities to throw a real golf shot, instead of opportunities to pitch/punt/pray? Creating drama and risk/reward situations near the basket is very difficult; several courses over the years experimented with artificial OB, which ultimately led to the creation of Buncr's (marked areas with rules similar to out-of-bounds rules but without the penalty). I haven't used either of those techniques, but I know there are players and designers who have been happy with how they work. Recently I've been looking for solutions based on natural features that don't involve having to move your lie. Let's look at a couple that occur, not by the basket, but by a landing area.

### You Can Judge a Hole By Recover

The disc golf course at Rock Ridge Park in Pittsboro, North Carolina, is currently under construction, but hole 1 already has a couple PITTSBOROs we can examine. It's a very pretty par four dogleg that's flat and about 20 feet wide for the first 240 feet; then it bends left to a generous landing area (up to 45 feet wide) that slopes away from the tee. The second half of the fairway is all downhill, bending back to the right and gradually narrowing down to about 20 feet again. The basket has a couple mature hardwoods nearby and sits on the downslope, so the right touch is important on the approach as shown in **Diagram E**. Two good shots will put you in position for a birdie before you tackle the remainder of the picturesque par 65 track.

Any good drive will hit the landing area and get a clear route to the green. Really good drives will get an easier shot at the green, and great drives will earn the easiest shot of all. But nobody gets a gimme approach; no matter how great your drive is, you'll still need to execute a good second shot to have a run at a birdie.

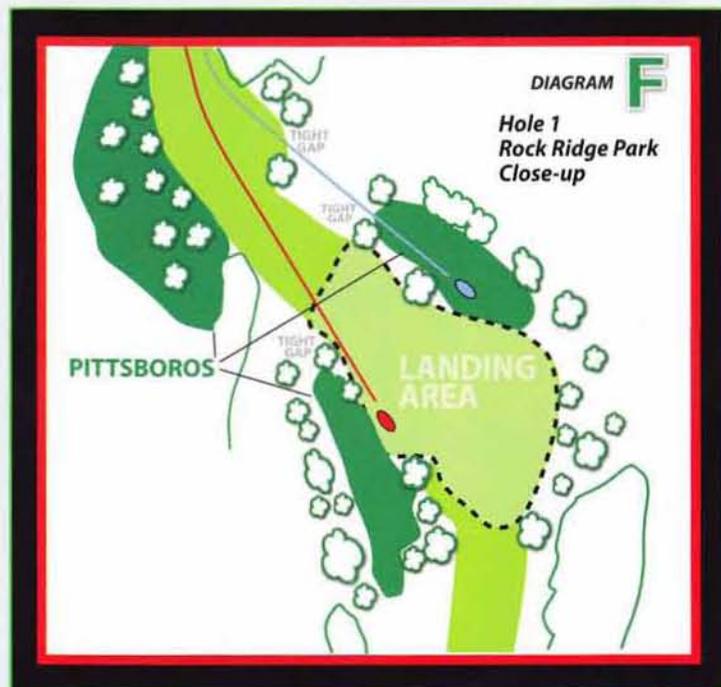
As we all know, not everyone makes a good drive every time, and there will be players who miss the landing area. Rock Ridge Park started as 100 percent woods, so getting off the fairway has the potential to be unpleasant. But on this



hole there are PITTSBOROs on both sides of the landing area. Anyone who misses a little—right or left—will have the opportunity to make a recovery shot and save the day. So even if your drive doesn't quite end up where you were hoping it would, you'll be looking at a tight gap that will be your gateway to the green. To be a hero, you'll have to hit that gap—and you'll have to do it with the correct angle and speed—but it's absolutely doable as shown in **Diagram F**.

Of course, some of us will nail the drive but then make a mistake on our second shot. That's why there's another PITTSBORO giving you a chance to scramble to the green. The area off the left side of the fairway comprises several stands of maples and a few other hardwoods. There are enough openings there that you'll probably be able to find a route to at least get yourself into putting range.

The bottom line is that being in the woods with no options is no fun. Having the opportunity to recover makes the game more enjoyable, and actually executing a great recovery shot is just plain thrilling. You can always choose not to go for it, but having that option will make the course a lot more rewarding.



— John Houck #1688 has designed more than 80 courses, including 12 for PDGA national and world championships. He has written extensively about course design, and many of his articles can be found at [www.houckdesign.com](http://www.houckdesign.com).