

Footgolf gaining popularity as a stress-free golf alternative



BREMERTON — Tina Smallbeck, Kyle Nielsen and Mary Anne Alexander don't play golf, don't want to play golf, don't have any interest in playing golf.

At least not the golf involving clubs and tiny white balls.

These three are faithful friends of footgolf, signing up for tee times at Gold Mountain Golf Club in Bremerton on a regular basis.

“If we can do it, anybody can do it,” said Alexander, a Port Orchard resident and retired North Kitsap High School teacher.

Nielsen, who lives in Eglon and teaches at Kingston High School, noticed a story in the newspaper last summer that Gold Mountain would be offering footgolf on the Cascade Course in the evenings.

Despite not having a background in soccer or golf, Nielsen gave the sport a shot and footgolf is now a regular social function.

Smallbeck, a Poulsbo resident who teaches at Kingston High School and has played soccer before, likes the fact that footgolf takes about half the time as normal golf and isn't too stressful — although she joked at the beginning of her round last Friday that she'll let out an occasional swear.

“It's pretty low key,” Smallbeck said.

Becoming an organized sport roughly six years ago, the sport has exploded in terms of popularity over the past year. According to the American Footgolf League, there are 415 courses in 48 states offering footgolf, including 23 in Washington.

Last year, there were 140 courses in 31 different states.

Coming off the heels of last month's U.S. Open at Chambers Bay in University Place, Meadow Park Golf Course in Tacoma is hosting the Tacoma Footgolf Open from Aug. 6-9. Over 1,000 amateurs and 150 professionals are expected to compete.

On the recreational level, Gold Mountain instructor Sue Skjonsby said footgolf has proven to be a popular activity for families and youth sports teams as a bonding event. Skjonsby estimates the club is averaging 300 footgolf rounds per month.

“It varies depending on the day,” said Skjonsby,

Rates are \$12 for adults and \$8 for youth for 18 holes — the footgolf course is located on the front nine of the Cascade Course — and balls are available to rent, although most people bring their own.

So what the heck is footgolf? Well, it’s pretty much just like it sounds. It combines soccer and golf, with players using soccer balls on a traditional golf course with 21-inch diameter cups. Greens are closely-mowed areas in the rough and there are tee box markers and flags to guide players around the course.

Holes vary in length (there’s par 3s, 4s and 5s) and degree of difficulty. Some greens are behind trees or mounds, making straight shots difficult.

Players wear sneakers or indoor golf shoes — cleats are a big no-no — and the dress code is fairly relaxed. Tradition golf attire is preferred, but you won’t get run off the course for wearing athletic shorts and a t-shirt.

Since Gold Mountain only allows footgolf to be played at 5 p.m. or later, Skjonsby said footgolfers typically don’t get in the way of normal golfers. Gold Mountain has evening golf leagues, but with 27 other holes on the property (the back nine of the Cascade and the Olympic Course) there is plenty of room to accommodate players of both sports.

So who holds the record on the par-71 course?

Not surprising, Skjonsby said Kitsap Pumas player Mike Chamberlain set the record in May with a score of 63 (8-under).

Skjonsby said for the record to be official, she needs something from Chamberlain.

“I need his scoreboard,” Skjonsby said.

Smallbeck, Nielsen and Alexander hope to take advantage of school being out of session by playing a good bit of footgolf this summer.

For now, it’s probably going to remain a ladies-only outing.

“My husband will never do this,” Alexander said with laugh. “Golf is his thing.”