

# The SKY'S *the* LIMIT

Disc golf is subject to the forces of nature, but there's not a lot of gravity in the game. And that just might mean that what goes up is about to become very popular.

by Kevin Brooker

*W*hen a ball dreams," wrote Dr. Stencil Johnson in his seminal 1975 book on flying-disc culture, "it dreams it's a Frisbee."

Perhaps, but if so I'm wondering what that little plastic device is feeling when it's wide awake and about to be hucked into low Earth orbit from the mighty right hand of Elijah Isaac, the 34-year-old Ramsay resident who is one of the elite disc golfers in the country. My guess is it would say something like "Help me!" or, perhaps, "For the love of God, don't make me hit a tree at this speed."

We're teeing off at Old Refinery Park course, Calgary's newest disc-golf layout, a series of 18 targets sprinkled diabolically through the mixed trees and pastures of this reclaimed industrial site in north Ogden. It has become instantly clear that Isaac, who, though wiry, is not otherwise physically imposing, has the ability to hurl his driver with uncanny power and distance. His throw begins by reaching far back, away from the target, then with a deft sequence of footwork and an explosive body turn, yanking it toward the basket on its precisely calibrated trajectory. In this case it's a low screamer that moves slightly from left to right for the first 80 metres or so, narrowly avoiding branches on both sides of a tight corridor. And then, slowly but surely, the disc starts rising and eventually drifts in the opposite direction, finding the only tiny gap between guard trees and ultimately skidding to the grass just a couple steps from the target. The final distance covered: an astonishing 135 metres.

"Nice pull, Elijah," says one of his foursome. "Thanks," he replies. "I think that's parked." That's disc-golf slang for what conventional

golfers call a tap-in—in this case, a small and routine toss into the chain basket for a birdie 2. Isaac, it turns out, parks it a lot. He's a regular birdie machine. And although I don't know what the disc is thinking after that wild ride, I do know what's on my mind: "Damn, these guys have gotten ridiculously good."

Full disclosure: I'm a longtime recreational disc golfer, having seen my first chain basket at one of Canada's earliest courses, in Tsawwassen, B.C., in 1982. I was even part of the crew that brought official disc golf to Calgary in the early '90s. Although my clubmates and I were primarily interested in another disc sport, the team game of ultimate, we knew that golf was not just an awesome pastime in its own right; it represented a way to hone our disc skills for the field, even though golf plastic behaves somewhat differently from its Frisbee-like cousin. Golf discs, which come in hundreds of designs, are sharper-edged, often heavier, and feature a much shallower dome. Nevertheless, we hand-built nine of the circular, chain-drooping baskets, installed them in a challenging configuration at Inglewood's Pearce Estate Park, then sat back, ready to watch the sport blow up once Calgarians discovered it.

Well, it only took two decades, but finally it appears that disc golf is in Calgary to stay. In our public parks there are two 9-hole courses and two 18s, plus several more tracks privately held. On any given sunny weekend, for example, a course like Baker Park in the northwest plays host to dozens if not hundreds of players. They range from fivesomes of high schoolers with one disc each and a hazy grasp of the rules, to super-serious players like Isaac, who carry 25 or more discs—each one from a different mould with broadly varying flight proclivities—in

Professional disc golfer Elijah Isaac's technique proves that success in disc golf takes more than a mere flick of the wrist.



Photography by Brent Mykytyshyn

# A BRIEF HISTORY of DISC GOLF

“Flat flip flies straight. Tilted flip curves. Play catch—invent games.” Those immortal words were embossed on the underside of every Frisbee brand Pluto Platter, the 1960s toy craze that made the plastic flying disc the hippie generation’s sporting implement of choice. And when it came to game invention, they definitely heeded the call. Many were soon devised, including the now-popular team sport, ultimate, and individual pursuits involving freestyle, distance and accuracy.

But in what is a great example of parallel evolution, some form of throwing discs at a sequence of targets arose in many locations at the same time. Whether those targets were trees, garbage cans or light poles, the activity was widely ideated as a form of golf, such that it is virtually impossible to say exactly who was the first to play.

Canada, however, stakes one claim. Back in the 1920s, schoolkids at Bladworth, Saskatchewan invented a game using paint-can covers that they called Tin Lid Golf. Though it died out, other forms of play involving proto-discs soon followed. The most important was a brief craze in the 1940s started by Yale students playing with tin pie plates from the Frisbie Pie Company of New Haven. On-campus games of accuracy ensued, and instead of shouting “Fore!”, players would shout “Frisbie!” when their discs veered toward bystanders.

Several toy-makers jumped on the '50s flying-saucer craze by making plastic versions that had nifty

spaceship elements but poor aerodynamics. However, that changed when California inventor Fred Morrison licensed his more flight-worthy Pluto Platter to the Wham-O toy company in 1957. Upon learning that many kids called any flying disc a Frisbie, it declared an altered spelling of the word as its principal brand identity. And part of the reason why they pushed the toy so hard in the 1960s, complete with national TV advertising, was that Wham-O had tonnes of surplus plastic on hand after the Hula Hoop wave broke.

The late Ed Headrick, an early adopter and then marketing man for Wham-O, created the Official Pro Model Frisbee in the mid-'60s, a version with superior flight properties and, for the first time, the look and performance of a sporting object rather than a toy. But Headrick’s more lasting contribution was the invention, in 1976, of the disc-catching target often called a “chain basket.” He further harmonized and codified the sport, and began marketing course kits wherever civic managers could be cajoled to try something new. And then, in 1982, Headrick founded the Professional Disc Golf Association, the body that still runs the sport worldwide.

Today there are several thousand courses in North America and Europe, most of them public and free to play. Though sometimes called Frisbee golf, players use the more generic term, disc. In fact, as hundreds of models of thin-profiled golf discs have emerged in the past 30 years from boutique manufacturers like Innova and Discraft, the Frisbee brand has faded to irrelevance.

custom bags slung over their shoulders.

There were plenty of fits and starts getting to this point. That isn’t surprising when you consider the unusual provenance of these facilities, which are all too rarely bought and designed by the municipal authorities themselves. Typically—and Calgary is no exception—courses only arise when local clubs approach city parks brass and offer to install one, at their own cost, in what they’ve identified as an appropriate public space. What’s that? Free public recreation at no cost to the taxpayer? Except, somehow, what you’d expect to be a no-brainer is sometimes a non-starter. People don’t always get it.

Here, it took much dedicated lobbying to build that first course in Pearce Estate. But then came the next hurdle. Because courses tend to be approved on a provisional basis that can be revoked at any time, when Pearce turned into a demonstration wetland, the course was banished. It then took another round of lobbying to find an alternate site. That turned out to be Centenary Park on St. Patrick’s Island near the zoo, which conformed to a well-known disc-golf development strategy that appeals directly to the needs of park managers: if you’ve got an inner-city park overrun by homeless alcoholics and other sketchy denizens, try installing a disc-golf course and see if that traffic helps shoo them along. It actually works, too. Centenary was a decent 9 while it lasted (it was a casualty of the 2013 flood), even if some golfers commonly referred to it as “Sodom.”

Still, thanks to dedicated builders like the volunteers of the Calgary Disc Golf Club ([calgarydiscgolf.com](http://calgarydiscgolf.com)), the city has gained two worthy new courses in the last two years and play is increasing everywhere. City Hall is even taking it more seriously. “It’s a great sport and we’ve had no negative issues,” says Keath Parker, manager of parks planning and development services. “People should understand that we have many user groups, all searching for park space for activities that vary from highly organized sports to more passive and naturally inclined hobbies like birdwatching. It’s not always easy but we are trying to accommodate all our citizens’ recreational needs.” Nonetheless, players are heartened that Ward 9 Councillor Gian-Carlo Carra, himself a former competitive disc player, is an ally on city council.

Now, if someone bothers to count, they’ll learn that thousands of Calgarians regularly play, regardless of the sport’s scant status in the public imagination. Indeed, articles like this one are perpetually obliged to introduce the sport as if it were not nearly 40 years old. But the allure remains readily apparent to those who would look. For any kid who ever threw a rock at a target—and granted, that activity is considerably more of a dude thing—this is a grown-up version, only with near-magical flight properties about which ballistic projectiles can only dream. Like pitching pennies on a cosmic scale, it’s every bit as addictive as that other sport, the one we call “ball golf.” And best of all it’s almost entirely free, with no need for tee times; if the 1st looks crowded, just wander over to the empty fifth or 12th and start your round there.

More impressively, I can’t think of any sport with a lower barrier to full entry. Step up to any first tee with your brand-new \$25 driving disc and you are suddenly playing with exactly the same gear as a veteran professional.

That’s right, professional disc golf is actually a thing. Elijah Isaac,



## How and where to play

Each player needs at least one disc. Choose from seemingly endless designs at stores like Lifesport or Don’s Hobby Shop, generally grouped according to the type of shot for which they’re intended: drive, mid-range approach or putt. Start with a single, light, straight-flying approach disc. Only when you can throw that with decent confidence and range should you graduate to the more blade-like driving discs, which are much more difficult to control. Putters, for throws of 20 metres and in, are made of softer plastic to hit and stick in chain baskets.

Discs will fly a long way with a gentle yet snapping release. At first,

the harder you try to throw, the worse your result. Learn the rules, they’re simple and intuitive. Par 3 (or 4 for novices) is standard for most holes. And don’t forget: the sport only survives due to the indulgence of non-playing park users, so always let them have the right of way and never throw when it’s unsafe.

**CALGARY AND AREA COURSES** (see [calgarydiscgolf.com](http://calgarydiscgolf.com) for specific locations and further information)

**FOREST LAWN (9)** Ideal for beginners, the course traverses an undulating, manicured park where it is impossible

to lose a disc. Some shorter, more technical holes give even light throwers the chance for a chain-rattling hole-in-one.

**THORNCLIFFE-GREENVIEW (9)** Why is your community association not like this? Not only did it create its own excellent, brand-new 9-hole disc-golf course, it boasts a bar and a bowling alley. Set in a broad valley, its big elevation changes make for dramatic long-distance throws.

**BAKER PARK (18)** The park was once a formal garden for patients at the Baker Sanatorium. Though predominantly flat, its geometric layout creates a variety of tree-lined alleys and open

meadow shots. Home to several tournaments each season.

**OLD REFINERY PARK (18)** Calgary’s newest course is also its most challenging. Because of that, the city’s top players are drawn here. There’s a lot to think about due to varied vegetation that yields a complex maze of potential flight paths.

**CANMORE NORDIC CENTRE** Routed along cross-country ski trails, it’s one of the most beautiful and dramatic disc-golf courses in the world. Mountainous terrain makes for a total workout that is definitely worth a day’s outing from the city.

member No. 21256, has worn the title since 2003, when he first registered in the pro category of a Professional Disc Golf Association event. Despite the name, amateurs make up 75 percent of PDGA members. Pro simply designates a skilled player who's prepared to pony up a higher entry fee at tournaments in order to have skin in the game.

Like most devoted players, Isaac started casually at first, at Pearce Estate around 1997. "I began playing seriously a couple years later when I lived with my dad in Colorado," he recalls. "That's where I met these older hippie guys from California who were deep into it, and I started playing with them every day. They taught me stuff like how to throw different edges and do roller shots and other stuff I'd

had no idea about."

He brought that dedication back to Calgary. "I probably average about a round a day over the course of the year. Lots in summer, but less in winter, especially last one." Though a round of 18 can take 90 minutes or less, once you factor in multiple rounds, putting practice and workouts to stay limber, it eats up a lot of time. Fortunately, Isaac has the flexibility. He makes his living dealing vintage stereo gear and as a DJ named BassLion, having held down Calgary's Tuesday night-club fixture, Dub at the (Castle) Pub, for the last 15 years.

His best golf result came a year ago at the biennial Canadian Championships in Kamloops. "I came fourth but my goal was to be

top Canadian, and that happened," he says. Americans, mostly from the Sun Belt, tend to dominate the sport, and there's a simple explanation, according to Isaac. "Those guys are playing serious golf for money every weekend all year long, just driving from tournament to tournament and living out of their trunk and trying to make a cheque." In that regard they are much like ball-golf pros from the 1940s and '50s, with, alas, comparable earnings—less than \$50,000 for top players, but nothing to sneeze at.

In Canada it's a smaller deal, but growing. And like much else in the sport, it's often DIY. Aiming to raise the stakes and improve organization, Isaac took over running a popular tourney, the Lost Egg Classic in Wayne, Alta., back in 2010 (July 19-20 this year). "Total purse is seven grand," he says, "but that's the third-highest in the country. My goal is to make it No. 1." Enormously scenic and challenging, the Wayne course snakes through badland canyons in a way that reminds you of those novelty golf calendars that depict holes impossibly perched in crazy landscapes.


If I thought Elijah Isaac could chuck it a mile, with all due respect,

I hadn't yet played with his fellow pro golfer and sometime rival, Rob McLeod, a.k.a. "Frisbee Rob." A powerfully built 31-year-old, McLeod moved to Calgary from the Maritimes nearly a decade ago. "I came for a girl but stayed for the Frisbee," McLeod reports. For several years he played competitive ultimate for one of the nation's top teams, Lawn Party, alongside its then-captain, Councillor Carra. McLeod's signature length-of-field passes burned opponents time and again. When disc golf beckoned, McLeod began to realize the value of one of the biggest arms in the sport. "I made money in the first pro event I entered. In high school I'd competed in both shot put and discus, which I guess is a pretty good base."

Along the way, McLeod also became intrigued with the full roster of disc sports, including timed disciplines like Maximum Time Aloft and Throw Run Catch, where you throw the disc as far as you can and still catch it yourself. Of the five disc-related Guinness world records he holds, one is for throwing the disc 73 metres to himself on ice skates. Last year, in Sweden, he came seventh in the heptathlon-like overall competition at the World Flying Disc Federation annual championships. But for disc golfers, distance is king, and he has mad quantities. "In October in Las Vegas I set a new Canadian record—213 metres." Are you serious?

This summer, McLeod's goal is to make his living entirely from disc sports, including overall, golf and exhibitions with a fellow hyper-athlete, a dog named Davy Whippet. Combined with demonstrations, blogging at frisbeerob.com, and conducting anti-bullying workshops paired with disc fun, McLeod is by a long measure the most committed Frisbee freak in the nation.

Golf-wise, he's focussing on the PDGA World Disc Golf Championships to be held in August near Portland, Ore., a marquee event that is unusual in that the pro field is assembled entirely by invitation. "I know Elijah's been invited too, so we'll see how us Canadians do down there," says McLeod.

As for Isaac, he's devising new strategies to counter the advantages of gorilla throwers like Frisbee Rob. "I'm working on a new putting style," he says. "That's where the strokes are." 

## An ALTERNATIVE to an ALTERNATIVE

For Calgarians looking for a gentle, fun introduction to disc golf, there's a gorgeous course near Millarville called WJ Homestead Disc Golf ([www.wjdiscgolf.com](http://www.wjdiscgolf.com)) that specializes in teaching beginners the ropes. It's the brainchild of Heather and Tim Driedger, who were inspired eight years ago when some friends in Radium, B.C. took them on a makeshift disc-golf outing.

"At first I was like, 'Disc what? Not interested,'" recalls Heather. "But then we played a bit and it wasn't long before I looked at Tim and said, 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'" Entirely on their own they came back and designed an 18-hole layout on their iconic foothills property, the one Heather's great-grandfather, William Jackson, homesteaded back in 1896. The targets are heritage farm implements like barrels, barbed-wire hoops, and, on the signature 18th, a modified outhouse that came from the Leighton Centre. Along with a small clubhouse, a picnic area and a club pro in the form of their 24-year-

old son, Jerrid, the Driedgers added alternative, official baskets to their course last year (players can choose either target), part of an overall strategy to create a for-profit business.

Players are either member-stewards for an ultra-reasonable \$75 a season, or people from school and corporate outings who pre-book in groups of 10 or more at \$12 a head.

"We give everyone discs and an orientation session," says Heather, who, as an accredited teacher, is also on hand to talk about early ranch life and the rich natural environment. "I can't tell you how much fun we've had with these groups. We've become so passionate about the sport, the exercise and fresh air you get, plus sharing of this incredible property. And it's every age group and background, too. I just sold a membership to a woman who plays in the Philharmonic.

"You know, people talk about the search for a lifetime sport—well, that's exactly what disc golf is."

