

## A walk through the Golden Gate Park disc golf course at Marx Meadow

### Intent

---

I am not a disc golfer. I only recently learned about the game and the existence of the Golden Gate Park course. I visited the course to get a feel for area and to see the game. I did not walk all 18 holes nor did I attempt any quantitative analysis of environmental or social use of the area. I did not discuss or debate issues with any of the golfers there, nor did I disturb their games in any way. I went as an observer only.

### Conditions during my visit

---

Friday, 16 April 2010, 11am to 1:00 pm  
Weather: Sunny, pleasant, mid-60s, no wind or fog  
Estimate of number of golfers present: between 60 and 80.  
Gender mix: Between 1 to 10 and 1 to 15, women to men.  
Age: Average age of players I observed approximately 30.  
I saw only one player who was clearly over 40.  
Dogs: Only dogs present belonged to the golfers.  
Children: No children were present.  
Non-golfers present on course: None besides myself.

### Setting

---

The Golden Gate Disc Golf Course surrounds Marx Meadow on the north side of JFK Drive extending from 30<sup>th</sup> Ave. east to approximately 23<sup>rd</sup> Ave. Although the course itself is large, it presents a small footprint to the heavily traveled parts of Golden Gate Park.

The launch pad for hole 1, the only part of the course visible to passersby, is on the west edge of Marx Meadow's green lawn. It is carefully groomed, surrounded by woodchips, and has well-maintained signage displaying the rules and the layout of the course. A well-maintained path leads from the pad into the trees where the course continues. Golfers are not allowed to play in the meadow.

Holes 1 through 10 are on the west side of the meadow (towards 30<sup>th</sup> Ave.) and holes 11 through 18 are on the east side of the meadow (extending to the area above Lloyd's Lake approximately at 23<sup>rd</sup> Ave. Hole 10 is intended to connect with hole 11 via a short walk on Crossover Drive, the main roadway connection between the Richmond and Sunset districts.



Launch pad with screen.

## Observations

- In the nearly two hours I was in the bounds of the course I did not see **one other person** besides myself who was not a golfer.

The lack of non-golfers in the course area became more noticeable the longer I was there. On the peripheries of the course I saw elderly couples strolling and sitting on benches, joggers, people with dogs and children, and park employees working but **none of these people ventured inside the course area**, not even to use the meadow's picnic tables.

- Disc golfers were **surprised by my presence**. Someone casually walking through the course was clearly unexpected. Golfers were polite, some said hello, but the subtext was always, "do you know where you are?" or "why are you here?"

- **Only once in two hours did someone yell "Fore!"** or any other warning indicating a disc launch was imminent. That single alert happened when I was inadvertently a few feet in front of a launch platform (the "tee"), directly in a player's way. I turned, and seeing him, quickly got out of the way.



Path tripled in size by heavy use.

- **Most of the terrain does not allow for visual contact.** Pads are invisible, baskets are difficult to see. I had two discs whiz by me, one just a few feet from my head. In both cases I could not see the thrower and s/he could not see me.
- One of the two disks went high and hit a eucalyptus causing an **audible crack** sounding like a branch breaking.
- **Discs seem to have damaged trees.** Many lower tree branches are broken off; smaller trees are broken, and bushes in the busier areas of the course have been trampled or pulled apart.
- **Each hole has three baskets** in addition to the launch pad, signage and screens. Each basket has a different par and is offset by the others by

distances dependent on the terrain, usually measured in yards. I could not tell if all baskets are up at all times.

- Total equipment **placed in ground for each hole** is as follows:
  - A cement pad.
  - A sign displaying the hole.



Hole course description showing pad (lower right) and the three baskets (A, B, and C, upper center)

- Three baskets, or the connections for three baskets.
- One or more screens designed to prevent discs from going in certain directions.

- The **planned path system is overwhelmed** by the traffic. The original paths are usually visible but constant use has led to erosion and destruction of ground vegetation in wide areas. In steeper areas water erosion has created small water gullies. All this results in paths that are duplicated, triplicated, or erased.



Three disc golf players searching for discs in the far northern end of Marx Meadow. Crossover Drive is above behind the trees. This area is off-limits to golfers, but a) discs from holes 10 and 11 frequently go missing here and b) the area is used as a shortcut between the two halves of the course. See text.

- **Players chase lost discs** everywhere within the course and well beyond the course's boundaries, disregarding both intended and "social" paths:

- I watched three players **climb the edges of the Marx Meadow canyon** below Crossover Drive searching for discs. There is no designated trail in that area and they were forced to use bushes and rocks as climbing points.
- I watched another player searching for his disc – he was bodily half in and half out of a much trampled stand of bushes – **pull out three discs without finding his own.**
- There is a **noticeable lack of wildlife** in the course area. I encountered no birds other than ravens in the treetops and saw only two squirrels. The lack of natural sounds seemed odd for Golden Gate Park.
- The terrain west of 30th Ave. is similar to that in the course but the **difference in vegetation and animal presence is striking.** Trees there have a dense undergrowth of green, there is little erosion, bushes are everywhere as are birds, squirrels, and insects.
- Hole 1 is the only hole that presents as described in **Setting**, above. Without exception, all other holes I visited are **dusty concrete slabs with no vegetation nearby** and are not surrounded by



Trail erosion caused by overuse creating a depression followed by water channeling.

woodchips, though the remains of an intended woodchip boundary are present at some. Paths leading to the baskets are worn or missing.

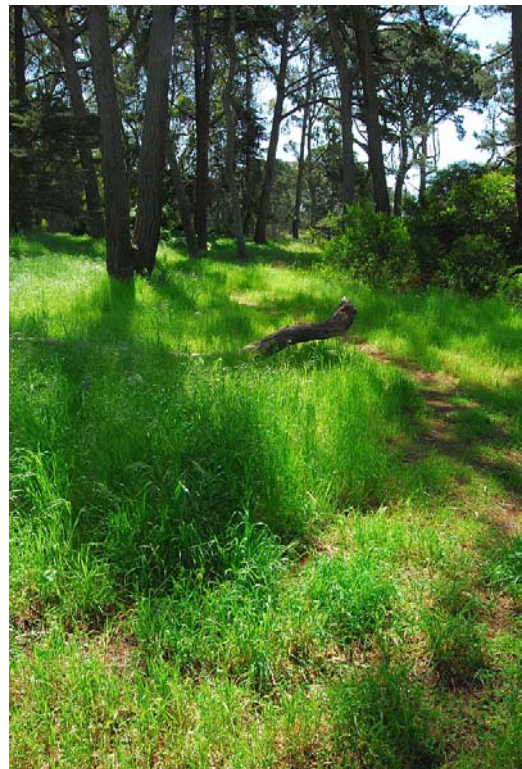
- Based on terrain erosion present, many golfers **ignore the Crossover Drive connection** between the two halves of the course (holes 10 and 11, see **Settings** and picture, both above) preferring to hike down and up the far end of the small canyon that encloses Marx Meadow, the same area I saw the three players searching for missing discs.

## Conclusions

---

Regardless of the intent of the disc golf course creators, the nature of disc golf has the effect of discouraging non-golfers from using the area. As a non-golfer I felt I had to be on constant guard for safety reasons, the opposite of what I expect to experience in a park. The course is devoid of benches, tables, or other amenities, further discouraging people from hanging around.

Despite efforts of the course creators to confine players to designated paths, the nature of the game also guarantees that virtually all participants are off the trails a majority of the time. This has contributed to the creation of many unintended paths, a decline in vegetation and animal life, and significant terrain erosion.



Above: areas around launch pads and baskets show wear from heavy use. Right: similar terrain west of 30th Ave where the course does not run.

The Golden Gate Disc golf course shows heavy wear and tear from constant use. I would hope park managers and golf proponents do a thorough study of existing conditions to figure out how to keep the course without doing more damage to the park.

Disc golfing requires a large amount of space devoted to a single use. In order for other users to share the park, significant space must also be set aside for picnics, hiking, gatherings, plants, and more traditional sports. Golden Gate Park is large enough that it can offer these many uses. I can think of no other area in the city that can do the same.

[ed@savemclarenpark.org](mailto:ed@savemclarenpark.org)