Disc golfer David Hayslip tries for par on the No. 9 hole of the Wallowa Lake State Park disc golf course.

A GOOD WALK IMPROVED

Wallowa Lake State Park adds 9-hole disc golf course

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JOSEPH — If you've moseyed up to Wallowa Lake State Park recently and gazed into the stand of big pine trees west of the river, you might have noticed some strange but colorful metal baskets on poles. The "baskets" are made of chains, and the metal poles are red or blue. You might also have noticed people with an assortment of frisbees nearby. Not to worry. Disc golf has come to Wallowa County.

Disc golf was first invented in the early 1900s in Saskatchewan, Canada, where it was played by tossing tin discs into targets laid out in sand. In the 1960s, college students revitalized the game by tossing disks and/or balls at targets ranging from trees and light poles to trash cans and water fountains. In 1973, Ed Hedrick, the inventor of the modern frisbee, designed and installed the first disc golf course in the town of LaCanada Flintridge, California. So disc golf, which now is played on 9-hole or 18-hole courses, and has its own professional association, has been around for a while.

When Jason Barber began work as a ranger at Wallowa Lake State Park in 2017, he saw the pine-shaded grassy area west of the river as the perfect place for a disc golf course. He'd started playing when he was a National Guardsman in Clackamas and continued playing on the collegiate team at Mount Hood Community College.

"It's a fun game and it keeps you outside," he said. "The park here has a great area for a course — some trees for hazards, but nice flat ground. And I got tired of having to drive all the way to La Grande to play."

Barber and Interpretive Ranger Patricia Bass pitched

Jen Hayslip watches as her disc approaches the No. 5 hole at the Wallowa Lake State Park disc golf course.

Oregon State Park Ranger Jason Barber came up with the proposal and design for the new disc golf course at Wallowa Lake State Park.

the idea to Park Manager Mack Freeborn, who gave the go-ahead.

Barber and Bass set up the 9-hole disc golf course in June. Its fairways are 200 to 280 feet long, (standard distances for most courses) and all are par-3 holes. The object of the game is to toss your frisbee into the "basket" in a par number of throws. Hazards at this course include big tree trunks, low-hanging branches and the Wallowa River if you overthrow the basket on the No. 6 hole. There's also the occasional renegade off-leash dog who may catch and abscond with an errant disc. Playing the entire 9-hole course requires about an hour if you and your friends take your time.

"If you don't have official disc golf frisbees of your own, the park has some you can borrow," Barber said. "We usually have three or four groups playing through here each day."

The new disc golf course is slated to move from its present location to a more permanent home at the Little Alps section of the park, near the Wallowa River trailheads in August. Construction on the new Wallowa River secondary channel, riparian improvements and bridge will occupy much of the present disc golf area, Barber said.

"We'll have a similar layout at Little Alps," he said.

Disc golf is new to Wallowa County, but it is a well-organized sport that is popular in more urban areas. It is based on golf — but played with frisbees of different weights and designs rather than a ball and clubs. The basic set of discs includes a lightweight frisbee designed for long flight, known as the driver, one for mid-range distances, and a heavier, more bulbous frisbee designed for short ranges and for hitting the chains (or other things), known as the putter. The metal basket is known as the "hole."

The Disc Golf Association (DGA) and Professional Disc Golf Association (PDGA) regulations call for a "tee" area where disc golfers make their initial throw, a fairway, and out-of-bounds area, and an area designated as a "putting green."