

Introduction

Miniature golf has become such a familiar part of American pop culture that it sometimes seems everyone must have been exposed to the pastime in one form or another. As we are about to see in the pages that follow, this basically simple game has more varieties than any other sport. That is, assuming we consider it a sport at all—miniature golf has been called “the feeblest outdoor activity outside of waiting for a bus,” but we shall simply ignore such wisecracks.

Although minigolf has a ready audience throughout the United States and has even enjoyed great popularity overseas, it only makes sense to begin an examination of its history where it debuted in the southeastern quarter of the country. Though practice putting greens had been in use for many years and though several concepts foreshadowed miniature golf, it is generally conceded that in 1925 hotel owner Garnet Carter of Chattanooga, Tennessee, developed the game as we know it. At his Fairyland Inn atop Lookout Mountain, Carter

and his wife Frieda introduced Tom Thumb Golf, a course which broke with the notion of being merely a substitute for “real” golf. Instead, the Carters created a completely new diversion. Going along with the name and the miniature theme, tiny obstacles were placed among the fairways to make things more challenging.

The familiar playing surface covered in carpet or artificial turf came later. Such things were either too expensive or had not been invented yet, so the first miniature golf courses were surfaced with crushed cottonseed hulls, frequently dyed green. Regardless, miniature golf became a national fad during the early years of the Great Depression, when people were starving not only for food but for any type of amusement that cost very little.

Like most crazes, the initial fascination with miniature golf had burned itself out within a couple of years and became more or less a joke to those who had seen it. Unexpectedly, the decade following World War II saw a rebirth of miniature golf, not as a fad but as a part of the booming tourism landscape. In the pages that follow, we will see all types of courses, from simple hometown affairs to showy tourist attractions complete with giant concrete dinosaurs. So pick up your club and ball, and step this way, to Hole Number One!

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