

Putting
 For
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After decades as a highly competitive if little-known professional sport, miniature golf has reached a turning point. Will mini-golf pros ever get respect?

By Robert Mackey

Photographs by Danielle Levitt

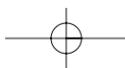
Fences



On a damp Friday night in May, on a nearly empty miniature golf course beside Highway 17 in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., a 36-year-old professional putter named Mike Brown was having no fun at all. It was barely 12 hours before the first round of the 2005 U.S. Open of professional miniature golf, and Brown was still cramming, hard. But for the fact that they turn the lights — and the volcano — off at midnight, he might have stayed all night. His practice partner Fred Stewart had been there all week, studying the breaks and the grain, but Brown was trying to learn all three courses on which the tournament would be played in just one day.

By the time they reached the 17th hole of the Hawaiian Rumble course, it was clear that Brown was in real trouble. To start with, he couldn't figure out where to place his ball on the tee. Stewart bent down and scanned the turf, saying, "There's a little mark where everybody's been teeing off." Now that the sun had set, it was almost impossible to see the single specks of paint or small dents in the carpet they were using as points of reference. Brown was anxious to move on, since it was getting late and he still had, as he said, "a whole other course to learn."

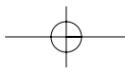
Plus he had to deal with the traffic noise from the highway not a hundred feet away, the theme song from



The Short Game Putt-Putt courses, like this one in Virginia, are the Zen gardens of the American highway system.

“Hawaii Five-O” blaring from speakers all around him and, suddenly drowning out both, the rumbling of the 40-foot mechanical volcano that towers over the course. As the volcano shot real flames into the night air, Brown checked his notes. While many of the other pros had prepared whole notebooks with elaborately drawn charts of each hole, Brown was relying on what he could scribble on a single piece of paper. He decided to move on, rushing up the side of the waterfall to the 18th hole, knocking in a long putt, then racing back to the clubhouse, where he fished his white ball with the black Nike swoosh out of a basket of brightly colored balls used by the paying customers and hurried down the road to study the Astroturf at the Hawaiian Village.

For something that barely pays, professional miniature golf turns out to be a lot of work. Earlier that day, when I met Matt McCaslin, the Open’s defending champion, he told me that he makes the three-hour drive from his home in Raleigh, N.C., often enough that he now plays the three Hawaiian-themed tournament courses entirely without notes. He is usually accompanied by his older brother Danny, who has won the miniature Masters on the same courses twice — and has the green Windbreakers to prove it. Danny says local knowledge of the subtle breaks in the turf and the particular condition of each brick at the edge of the greens matters so much that “I tell you what, if Tiger



walked out here and tried to beat me without practicing, he'd have no shot."

To make up for the McCaslins' home-court advantage, Mike Brown should have been here all week, like almost everybody else in the field, playing one practice round after the next, preparing charts and analyzing "the carpet" under various weather conditions. But he couldn't afford it. Since he left the Wharton Business School 10 years ago, six credits shy of an accounting degree, Brown has had remarkable success on the professional miniature golf tour, but he has done so partly by refusing to take "a real job." He supports himself, and his putting habit, by applying his head for math to a number of pursuits that border on gambling, like day trading or buying and selling sports memorabilia on eBay. Lately though, Brown told me, "day trading hasn't been so hot."

BESIDES THINNING ASTROTURF and the occasional volcano explosion, one thing that professional miniature golfers are used to dealing with is mockery. Mike Brown knows this better than anyone. He is a former national champion of the Professional Putters Association and a 75-time winner on the P.P.A. tour. In 1996 he won a tournament that was broadcast by ESPN and is still shown regularly on ESPN Classic, surrounded by footage of great moments in sports history like Secretariat running away with the Belmont or Michael Jordan hitting a shot at the buzzer to win a game in the N.B.A. finals. But Brown's triumph, unlike theirs, appears on the network's late-night program "Cheap Seats," in which two comedians screen footage of marginal sporting events and make merciless fun of the participants. So when Brown appears on screen saying that the P.P.A. championship is "the biggest win of my career so far," one comedian observes, "Wow, he actually considers Putt-Putt his career," and the second adds, "Well, working at Kinko's — that's just his hobby."

Hans Olofsson, a Swedish champion who has managed to spin his expertise with a putter into a gig advising a golfer on the L.P.G.A. tour, told me that before he ever set foot in America he suspected that the game got a lot less respect here than it did in Sweden, where competitive putting is considered as unfunny as competitive curling; he once saw an episode of "The Bundy Show" (aka "Married . . . With Children") in which, as he recalls it, a character noted that his father did not have the absolute worst job in the world since "he could have been a professional miniature golfer."

What makes the words "professional miniature golfer" so funny? Is it the fact that the 167 members of the Professional Putters Association and the 80-odd members of the U.S. ProMiniGolf Association compete so hard for so little money? Despite the time they put in and the excellence they achieve, not one of them actually makes a living from the prize money. When he defended his U.S. Open title this year, Matt McCaslin picked up a check for \$1,000 and waited for Danny to get his \$500 as runner-up, and then they drove straight to the Olive Garden back home to work a late shift. While Mike Brown has won more than \$150,000 with his putter, it has taken him more than 10 years to do it. Of course many legendary sporting figures never made a penny for their victories — like the great amateur golfer Bobby Jones — and champions are motivated more by their will to win, or their drive to perform at the highest possible level, than by the desire to accumulate money. But the size of the checks awarded for play does seem to affect our perception of which games are worth taking seriously.

If putting for dollars would seem less ridiculous if it paid as well to do it on carpet as on grass, consider this: In the 1970's there were weeks when the putts sunk by professional golfers were actually less lucrative than those sunk by professional miniature golfers. In 1973, for instance, an 18-year-old named Mike Baldoza won the P.P.A. world championship in Tulsa, Okla., and took home \$50,000. That same week a 33-year-old named Jack Nicklaus won the P.G.A. championship in Cleveland and got a check for

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\$45,000. Baldoza's competitors split the rest of the \$320,000 purse. Nicklaus's had to make do with what was left of \$225,000.

Maybe the name of the sport is the problem. If it were simply called "putting," the idea of a pro circuit might not seem any more hilarious than it does for pool or bowling or any other nearly anaerobic sport played for money. The baggage carried by the word "miniature," though, is considerable. In 1930, the year that the game exploded in popularity, the first pro tournament was conducted by the National Tom Thumb Golf Association. Will Rogers complained, "There is millions got a 'putter' in their hand when they ought to have a shovel." From the start, part of the appeal of the game was that it was played on comically shrunken versions of golf courses that allowed even children to tower over the fairways like Gulliver. While the Professional Putters Association, which has sanctioned tournaments since 1959, cleverly avoids any mention of where that putting takes place, it doesn't help that the tour was started by a company called Putt-Putt.

Putt-Putt is not a generic name for miniature golf. It is the brand name of a company that builds and franchises a particular style of miniature golf course designed specifically to make competitive putting possible. For something that sounds as if it was named by a child, Putt-Putt has a surprisingly grown-up creation story. The first Putt-Putt course was designed in 1954 by Don Clayton, a 28-year-old insurance salesman trying to stave off a nervous breakdown. Clayton was otherwise successful and healthy, but one day he went to a doctor in his hometown, Fayetteville, N.C., complaining of a strange symptom: sometimes while driving in his car, he found himself crying. The doctor ordered a monthlong vacation. Clayton decided to relax by playing miniature golf, which turned out to be a bad idea, since there are few things more challenging to sanity than missing short putts, especially when the cause is poor design or an errant windmill.

To keep his wits intact, Clayton sat down at his dining-room table and drew up on 3-by-5 cards a set of holes that were tough but fair. His version of the game would feature holes bordered by standard rails, smooth, felt-like carpets and obstacles that would punish only poorly struck putts. Clayton had intended to call his version of the game Shady Vale Golf, but while filling in forms at the bank he realized that he was not sure how to spell "Vale," so he called it Putt-Putt instead. The Putt-Putt design made the game more like billiards in the consistent nature of the surface and the central role of the bank shot.

Before long, Clayton had created an entertainment empire based on the concept that it should be possible to ace every hole, but only with a perfectly conceived and struck putt. By keeping windmills and fiberglass jungle animals off the fairways, Clayton all but removed luck from his

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version of miniature golf, and his spare, tranquil courses, sold as franchises but built according to his strict rules of design, became the Zen gardens of the early American highway system. The Putt-Putt chain still stretches around the planet from North Carolina to Australia, by way of Cape Town, Beirut and Seoul.

It was Don Clayton's idea to start holding competitions on his courses. When he founded the P.P.A., he dreamed of handing the best putter in America a check for a million dollars. Unfortunately for contemporary stars like Mike Brown and the McCaslins, the fortunes of Putt-Putt have declined sharply since the invention of the video game. That at least is the theory I heard, repeatedly, from middle-aged putters at a recent P.P.A. event in Charlottesville, Va. "Look at all the fat kids," Vince Batten told me. "I live in the suburbs, and my wife and I go for a walk after dinner every night. We don't see a single kid out playing." As Mike Brown told Maximum Golf magazine, Putt-Putt "became uncool" with kids just about the time he was spending his childhood mastering it in the Philadel-



The Pro Mike Brown must do it for love because there isn't much money.

phia suburbs. "It's still uncool, but in the 80's it was totally uncool."

The Putt-Putt corporation began adding rides and other amusements to its courses in the late 70's and found that kids would come for the rides but still not pick up a putter. Then the tour lost its soft-drink sponsorship, the winners' purses shrank and Don Clayton's arid, purist's game seemed doomed to lose its fan base. Recently, Bob Detwiler, owner of the Hawaiian Rumble, began promoting pro tournaments on "adventure golf" layouts, which are free of arbitrary obstacles like windmills but are considerably less rigid than Clayton's models. While adventure-golf courses may not quite be cool, they do make more of an effort to appeal to children who expect special effects.

This is why the pros now find themselves learning to deal with earsplitting volcanoes. The owners of what Mike Brown calls "goony golf" courses offer bigger purses. In October, the winner of the Masters will collect \$4,000 at the Hawaiian Rumble; Detwiler told me he's working on a reality-TV miniature-golf tournament with a \$100,000 first prize. By contrast, this year's national Putt-Putt champion — to be crowned this Friday in Louisville, Ky. — will get \$3,000. This past spring, Mike Baldoza, the 1973 world champion and once the envy of Nicklaus, tied for seventh at a P.P.A. event in Longview, Tex., and took home \$16.67.

Since they don't put in long hours on the course for the money and since the glory is limited, what drives tour pros to travel from course to course, spending almost every summer weekend beside one highway or another? When you watch them compete, and the very same hush falls over the miniature golf course that falls over any golf course where scores are being kept, two things are obvious.

The first is that the pros are very, very good putters. Particularly on a regulation Putt-Putt course — with its limited number of standard hole designs — the pros are so much better than casual players, making ace after ace, that someone almost always scores within a few shots of a perfect round of 18. What makes this really remarkable to watch is that some of the courses have been exposed to the elements for 40 years or more. When they were new, it might have been possible to play many of these holes by hitting the ball straight at the cup. But as the concrete beneath the carpets settled over the years, and the landscape shifted, new ways had to be fig-

ured out to compensate for the odd rolls and new breaks that developed. If Putt-Putt is like billiards, it is like billiards played on tables that have been left out in the wind and rain.

The second thing you can see when you watch one of these competitions is that the best putters are as addicted to the challenge of trying to do what they do perfectly, to make precise, graceful movements under pressure, as any athlete playing any sport. Just how obsessed they are with perfection became clear to me when I spoke with John Napoli, who once shot a perfect score of 18 in competition (one of two ever recorded). I asked Napoli what he recalled of that round, in 1979, and he told me that one of the last putts he made was a complicated bank shot he had just been taught that night by one of his rivals. As another pro told me, the ethos on tour is "if you can hit my shot better than me, you deserve to win." In fact Napoli said one reason he was able to ace all 18 holes on that course was that the national championship had previously been played there, and as a result of so many pros hitting so many identical shots on each hole, "little grooves" had been worn into the carpet along the paths most commonly used from tee to cup.

THERE IS, OF COURSE, one other thing that keeps professional miniature golfers from getting the respect they deserve. What it is became obvious as I followed Mike Brown and his playing partner Olivia Prokopova during one of the middle rounds of the Open on the Hawaiian Rumble in Myrtle Beach. Olivia is a 10-year-old Czech prodigy who was good enough to be five shots up on Brown after three rounds. She was accompanied by an entourage that included her father, who videotaped her every move, and her coach, a big man who spent the early rounds standing, or kneeling, on the greens directing her while she putted and doling out high-fives after every success. As they headed for the 13th hole — which cuts through a cave by the volcano — I asked Brown how the round was going. He was clearly thrown off by the fact that none of the members of Team Olivia spoke a word of English. "It's like I'm out here by myself," he said miserably.

I looked over at Olivia, who was wearing a golf shirt that bore the names of several of her Czech sponsors, a miniskirt and green socks with teddy bears on them. I wondered if the reason Brown, like every one of the middle-aged men I spoke with who had been paired with Olivia during the tournament, was somewhat annoyed to be playing with and competing against her might have been that the presence of an actual child, one who took the game as seriously as they did, was disorienting to them. Or perhaps they wondered if it was not she but all of them who were out of place on what was, after all, a child-size version of a Hawaiian golf course.

A week later, at the Dogwood Festival Open in Charlottesville, the field was made up entirely of grown-ups, but there were several girls Olivia's age attending a birthday party on the course directly next to the one where the tournament was being contested. At one stage, I watched as Vince Batten, one of the top pros on the P.P.A. tour, had to bear down while standing over a putt because at that very moment an excited girl about Olivia's age was jumping up and down on the course next to him, not 10 feet away, shouting: "A hole in three! I got a hole in three!" Vince knocked in his putt and then looked up at me and said, "Tiger has no idea how fortunate he is that he doesn't have to deal with kids running around."

This is the strange paradox of professional miniature golf: it is a game designed to appeal to children, who more or less don't care about it anymore, played most expertly and passionately by middle-aged men who got hooked on it as kids and never let go. As Mike Brown came to the last few holes of the Charlottesville tournament, though, there was a sign that miniature golf might get a second chance. Brown had a one-stroke lead with two holes to play, and a few of the other pros came to watch him finish. Seeing the spectators, four girls with putters in their hands wandered over from the birthday party to join the small, hushed gallery. Brown hit a long, delicate putt, right along the edge of a water hazard, with such perfect pace that it looked sure to roll to a stop right at the edge of the hole. But then it rolled over once more and tumbled into the cup. The girls looked as awed and impressed by the beauty and the nerve of the shot as any of the other pros. As Mike Brown walked up the tiny fairway to pick his ball out of the hole, the girls broke into applause. ■