

[Home](#)

## Classifieds

[Apartments](#)  
[Cars](#)  
[Classified Ads](#)  
[Homes](#)  
[Jobs](#)  
[Personals](#)

## News

[Headlines](#)  
[Greensboro](#)  
[High Point](#)  
[Randolph](#)  
[Rockingham](#)  
[Education](#)  
[Government](#)  
[Religion](#)  
[Technology](#)  
[Desktop News](#)  
[AP News](#)  
[Special](#)  
[Reports](#)  
[Archives](#)

## Opinion

[Editorials](#)  
[Letters](#)

## Sports

[Headlines](#)  
[ACC](#)  
[College](#)  
[Preps](#)  
[Pro Baseball](#)  
[Pro Basketball](#)  
[Pro Football](#)  
[Golf](#)  
[Hockey](#)  
[NASCAR](#)

## Life

[Features](#)  
[CityLife](#)  
[HealthyLife](#)  
[HomeLife](#)  
[Travel](#)  
[Movies](#)  
[The Arts](#)  
[Dining](#)  
[Triad Style](#)

## Photos

[Web Cams](#)  
[Traffic Cams](#)  
[Multimedia](#)  
[Photo gallery](#) [Plan Nine Publishing](#)

## SPORTS

### PPA turns a fun activity into a sometimes serious business

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*By JAY REDDICK, Staff Writer*  
News & Record

HIGH POINT -- If you grew up in this area, chances are you have some memory that revolves around playing Putt-Putt.

Whether it was for a birthday party, a family outing, or your first hole-in-one, it's highly likely that you've played one of the many Putt-Putt golf courses scattered throughout the Triad. For most, it's recreation. For others, though, it's competition for high stakes.

The Professional Putters Association sponsors tournaments all over the state and the nation throughout the warmer months, giving the area's best players a chance to compete for trophies and money. The state PPA tour stopped in High Point last weekend.

The first thing you would have noticed, if you had watched the group of 50 golfers touring Course 1 in High Point early Sunday morning, was the camaraderie among the group. No animosity was present, even as the players prepared to play for the \$150 first prize.

"It's almost like a brotherhood," said David Gregor, a 42-year-old amateur player from Seagrove. "There's so much support here. When you get started everyone's very eager to bring you in and show you what shots work. Before you know it, your talent snowballs and you get hooked."

The next thing that would have quickly struck you was the sense that these guys are really, really good. Sunday's champion, Greg Newport of Liberty, finished three rounds with a score of 73 -- 35 aces in 54 holes. Even the relative duffers among Sunday's bunch were in the low 90s, never coming within a whiff of par (108 for three rounds).

Shot after shot rolled calmly along the same line and dropped into the cup, banking off the orange metal railings the same way, hitting the ramps in exactly the same spot.

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[Finance](#)

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[Records](#)

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[Welcome FAQ](#)

[Become a](#)

[Partner](#)

[Partner Pages](#)

[Find any](#)

[Organization](#)

[People &](#)

[Places](#)

## **Calendars**

[Obituaries](#)

[Site Index](#)

"It doesn't take any of us long to learn what the shots are," said Greensboro's Rick Rybaczek, a member of the PPA's North Carolina committee and a competitor himself. "It's consistency, learning to hit every shot the same, and keep your mental game under control, that's the tough part."

The novice player looks at most of Putt-Putt's 108 registered hole designs and sees a flat surface, with obstacles or an easily-defined hill or ramp. But the pros read each hole more like a PGA golfer, noticing slants or breaks almost immediately. It's those touches that separate one course from another.

"All the holes are laid out the same, but depending on how well they laid the concrete, how well it settled over the years, whether it had a tree root grow up underneath it, they play a little differently," said Rick Baird, who lives in Pineville but comes to High Point every Thursday for a friendly game.

Finding consistency in that environment would be challenging -- not to mention expensive, at \$5 per game -- but competitors get certain advantages for their membership fee.

"Most of the guys in this tournament came Friday night, or (Saturday) night," said Bear Landin, the manager of the Asheboro Putt-Putt franchise, who won the amateur division in High Point on Sunday with a total score of 79. "The courses really work with us. We can pay a straight practice fee, and usually play a course four or five times in a night. Then in the morning before an event, we play once or twice more. That makes it easier to read putts and find a rhythm."

Playing has made very few putters rich. The leading money winner on the state tour before the weekend had made \$646 in eight events. Several years ago, when the tours had sponsorships from several large corporations, there were winners' checks for as much as \$50,000.

Those days are gone. The winner of the PPA's national championship this year will get \$2,500, and the average national tournament's first-place money is only \$300.

So why stay? For one, everybody has friends on tour. Walkertown's Lee Witcofski played as a kid in the 1970s, then quit to "start a life," as he put it, before coming back last year.

"I was following a lot of the events on the Internet," said Witcofski, 43. "I knew a lot of the guys who were still out here playing. So I came back to see everybody, and also to hit it a little bit."

Witcofski, who in 1974 was the first Amateur Putters Association member to break 70, shot 80 on Sunday to finish eighth, earning \$60.

"It's hard to get your game back," Witcofski said. "You lose a lot in 20 years."

Another reason to keep playing is that elusive feeling that, on any given day, you can be the best at what you do.

"When you're in the hunt with nine holes to play, that's a great feeling," Baird said. "When you win, there's no feeling like it. We're all out here for one reason -- to win."

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