

Monday, June 21, 2010

Miniature golf, big fun: Pro Putt-Putters swing through Roanoke

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They aren't golf outcasts; these guys -- and a couple of ladies -- are Putt-Putt professionals.

About 70 putters from all over the nation took a swing through the Roanoke Valley this weekend for the Professional Putters Association Eastern Open at Putt-Putt Fun Center on Peters Creek Road.

"Some people find out you play Putt-Putt. They are, like, you do what?" said Joey Graybeal, 40, of Bristol, Tenn.

Like many of the others who hit the greens Saturday and Sunday, Graybeal started playing when he was a teenager. There is a junior division, but the weekend tournament showed that Putt-Putt is not merely a child's game. Course owner David Mitchell stowed away the rubber-covered clubs; no one seemed to be using the primary-colored golf balls.

The first-place finisher after eight rounds in the professional division pocketed \$650, and \$60 was the top prize in the amateur category. Twelve pros and six amateurs also earned spots in the upcoming player's championship tournaments.

During the four decades that Donald Niznik of Lakewood, Ohio, has been playing, he has seen the number of Putt-Putt franchise courses dwindle from about 1,500 to fewer than 100 nationally.

Mitchell said that is partly because of the rise of video games. Still, families bring in 80 percent of his business.

Niznik, 64, said he plays as much as he can. He described himself as "basically retired," but has three part-time jobs: preparing taxes, delivering newspapers and working at a golf course.

Putt-Putt "is an outlet," he said. "It is relaxation."

Niznik drove eight hours from Ohio to Roanoke after work Friday for the tournament -- and the familiar faces.

"It is good to see people I haven't seen in two or three decades," said David Barnett of Tucson, Ariz., who played the tour circuit 35 years ago and returned this year.

The four Putt-Putt courses on which Barnett used to play in Arizona have closed, and he has nowhere to practice.

"I could practice on golf courses, but it is not the same. You have to have the elephants, giraffes and pipes," he said referring to the course decor and obstacles.

Barnett may make another trip to Virginia in September for the weeklong national tournament, which will be held in Lynchburg this year.

There were a handful of Roanoke-area putters playing in the weekend tournaments, but as Clayton Craft of Roanoke County said, a home course advantage is not always enough to win. The record on course two, where the tournament was played, is 20 strokes.

"You can shoot 36 here [par] and lose by 10 strokes," he said.

Craft plays in the Roanoke Putting Club's weekly tournaments, held at 7 p.m. on Mondays and open to all ages. Mitchell said there are 15 to 20 regular players who compete in the three-round weekly contest.

At least one father and son played the green on Sunday, Father's Day: Tony and Ty Newcomb of Lake Charles, La.

Ty Newcomb, 15, won the junior tournament Saturday. Both Newcombs said what they enjoy most about the Putt-Putt tour is spending the time together.

"My daughter is mad at me," Tony Newcomb said, because he did not spend the holiday with her.

THE ROANOKE TIMES
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