

Dennis Vilorio

At golf courses throughout the country, little round treasures lurk underwater. Although they got there accidentally, their location is no secret. But to cash in, someone like Scott Evans needs to get them out.

Scott is a golf ball diver, specializing in finding submerged golf balls in Jacksonville, Florida. During golfers' rounds of play, the balls roll or are hit into water hazards (small ponds that are scattered throughout a golf course). Golf balls are waterproof, so they don't get damaged underwater. Salvaging and recycling them offers golfers a less expensive alternative to buying new.

What they do

Golf ball divers are professional recyclers: They retrieve golf balls, which are then cleaned, repackaged, and resold. Before beginning work at a golf course, they meet formally with its owner or manager to agree on the terms of the job. For example, the course charges the diver a fee for the opportunity to harvest the ponds. The course representative and the diver need to negotiate the price—and discuss whether that fee will be paid with money, in recovered golf balls, or a combination of both.

A typical golf course has between 4 and 12 ponds. Divers spend 8 to 10 hours per day harvesting the ponds and may need multiple days to finish a job. Depending on the size of each pond, divers recover balls with the help of a dive crew or a roller. Using a roller is faster than a dive crew, but dive crews are more thorough.

Dive crew. A dive crew usually includes three people. Equipped with standard scuba gear, two divers enter a pond and feel for the balls by hand. "The water is so black and murky that you have to dive by feel," says Scott. The divers then load the balls into baskets and pass them to the remaining crewmember on land. This crewmember also ensures the divers' safety and helps direct them so they can comb the entire pond.

Roller. Two-person dive crews may work with a roller, which consists of metal discs on wheels. The roller's metal grooves grasp balls as it moves through the water. Crewmembers stand on the ground at opposite ends of the pond and guide the roller by pulling on a wire connected to it.

If the roller gets stuck in mud or rocks, one of the crewmembers goes underwater to free it. After they have combed the pond, crewmembers pull the roller to the ground and pop out the golf balls.

Rollers are limited by the size of the pond: Some ponds are too large to accommodate a roller.

What it's like

Diving for golf balls may sound more like play than work. But there are several factors that aspiring divers should consider. For example, finding steady work may be difficult.

Work environment. Golf ball divers generally work in adverse conditions in the pond. "You must be comfortable working where you

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can't see," Scott says. "I've seen a lot of divers who couldn't handle the low visibility."

Golf ball divers work in crews for safety reasons. They may face danger from wildlife, such as alligators, and from objects hidden underwater. And scuba equipment is heavy, so obstacles such as a fishing line could trap and drown divers.

The tasks are also physically demanding, repetitive, and tiring. For example, divers are often on their knees in mud when searching for balls.

A diver's work schedule depends on golf course events. Divers may have to work when the course has nothing else scheduled, so they must be available any day of the week.

Employment and wages. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not collect employment and wage data specifically on golf ball divers. Instead, BLS groups them with commercial divers.

Typically, golf ball divers earn money for each ball they recover. Buyers include the golf course, retailers, and golf ball companies. Anecdotal information suggests that divers earn about $200 a day. But, as independent contractors, divers must account for taxes and benefits (such as insurance, paid leave, and retirement savings) from that amount.

Golf ball divers commonly work part time and have another job. "The work and income are not stable," says Scott, "so you may end up doing something like cleaning boats or inspecting bridges in between diving jobs." Divers sometimes arrange for multiple diving jobs in different cities to allow for more favorable conditions year round.



Photo courtesy of Scott Evans

Golf ball diver Scott Evans enjoys working outdoors and helping to preserve the environment.

How they prepare

Golf ball divers must be at least 18 years old and be certified for unrestricted commercial scuba diving. Certification may require up to 200 hours of dive experience, including low visibility diving, underwater navigation, and search and recovery.

Divers may become certified through an accredited scuba diving program or on-the-job training. Aspiring divers who join an accredited program usually attend full time for 7 to 9 months. Another option is a certification course, which typically lasts 4 to 6 weeks. Apprentices start as part of the ground crew; later, they move on to golf ball recovery.

For safety reasons, divers must be certified in first aid and dive rescue. They also must get a doctor's approval for sound physical health and be able to lift up to 60 pounds so they can move the roller and scuba equipment on the ground.

Why they dive

Golf ball divers enjoy working outside. Because golf courses are generally well maintained, the manicured landscapes are attractive and designed for comfortable walking. But the conditions that draw golfers to the course are often the ones that challenge divers. "What makes the work good is also what makes it bad," says Scott. "The days when you're out working in the cold or heat are excruciating."

What appeals most to Scott about his work is preserving the environment. "I feel good about cleaning the environment and recycling the balls," he says. "If you're willing to work hard, this is a good place to be."