

Building a community

Brian Clevenger ramps up the disc golf scene in Brisbane

As a teenager Brian Clevenger often found himself just hanging out at Karst Farm Park on Bloomington's west side. Scattered among Karst's acres of trees, rolling hills, and immaculate soccer fields are some odd-looking structures—thick, cold, steel poles, around four feet tall or so, securely planted in the ground. Another smaller steel halo encircles the poles' tops, and a series of a dozen or so chains run from the "halo" downward to the main pole. But despite that alien-sounding description, these structures don't seem out of place. Quite the contrary—many of them almost blend into their more natural surroundings.

It turns out their origin is much less mysterious—they are disc golf baskets—and after spending so much time at the park, Brian couldn't help but notice them. Eventually, he ran into **Chris Golden** from the Bloomington Disc Golf Club.

"He walked me through some of the mechanics of playing," recalled Brian, who started his Cook career in 2009 at Park 48 in Quality Control. "I took to it naturally."

A sports lover, Brian was looking for any activity that allowed him

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► *An up close look at a disc golf goal on the McLaren Falls Park course in New Zealand.*



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to be competitive and to release some pent-up aggression. Disc golf provided him with that outlet, while also allowing him to take part in an activity where his success or failure was going to be almost completely due to his own efforts.

"If I can know that everything is on me—the mechanics, the throw, how it's going to land—that's where I thrive," he explained. "Then it's 100% my mental game against somebody else's mental game."

His introduction to the sport in came in 2008, when he was an 18-year-old, finishing up high school. A dozen years later, he is still heavily involved in the disc golf scene in his new home of Brisbane, Australia.

Finding a supportive community

Disc golf has been around for almost 100 years. As the name implies, the game is essentially golf, but with flying discs instead of balls and clubs—and rather than a hole in the ground, players are aiming for a raised basket. Like regular golf, the lowest score wins, each hole starts from a tee, and players have a variety of "clubs" to choose from depending on the distance to be covered and the prevailing conditions.

Also, like golf, the game is open to almost all ages and body types.

A major difference between the two, though, is the cost. A bag of discs costs a fraction of a bag of golf clubs. A beginning disc golfer can actually get by for a while with a single \$25 disc. And, unlike regular golf courses, most disc golf courses are free to play.

Not long after Brian started playing disc golf in Bloomington, he realized that he had found much more than just a new sport—he had found something that had been sorely lacking in his life: a supportive community.



▲ **Brian Clevenger** executing the traditional back hand throw.

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— **Brian Clevenger**, Safety senior specialist at Cook Australia



▲ An example of a disc golf goal at Granite Mountain, one of Queensland's first 18-hole courses. It is installed on a mountain slope.



▲ A group photo from Queensland's State Championships in 2013. Cook Australia's **Brian Clevenger** is kneeling to the left of the BDGC banner.

"They saw someone who was angry at the world, who didn't understand what his position in life was going to be, and they were trying to teach me that it doesn't matter where I come from—what the past is; everyone comes out for a good time," Brian said. "I was getting mentored by the club to figure out more: What is the sport actually about? You find that all of these people are different, we all have our little niches, our quirks that make us special, and we learn how to build off of one another."

Community is actually a huge facet of the sports overarching mission. They not only want to create a group dedicated to promoting a sport and to camaraderie within their own ranks, but also one that gives back to the larger Bloomington community.

"Through the disc golf club, I learned that there are things that I can do to help those individuals who were maybe even worse off than I was at that point in my life," said Brian, now a Workplace Health and Safety senior specialist at Cook Australia.

It's that mindset, as much as a love and appreciation for the sport, that Brian took with him 10 years ago when he moved to Brisbane, home of Cook Australia, with his then girlfriend, an Australia native.

Home to over 2.4 million people, the Brisbane metro area is sun-drenched and warm (especially by Indiana standards) year-round. It would seem to be the ideal locale for a thriving disc golf scene. But when Brian arrived there, the sport didn't even enjoy niche status.

In Bloomington, a town of just under 85,000—about half of whom are students at Indiana University—there were over 300 active members in the local disc club and dozens of additional recreational players, meaning the six local courses were getting regular usage. Brisbane, in 2010, had three courses and around 25 players.

Brian was shocked.

"When I first came over, I thought, 'What the hell have I just done?'" he said. "I'm competitive, I like to get

pushed, and that was happening every day in Bloomington. I knew that if nothing changed here, I would be on the same average course with the same 25 people. I could enjoy a weekend with them, but I couldn't be competitive. I realized that if I wanted to change that, I was going to have to jump up and be a leader in this community—and that was really something I didn't think I was capable of being at that point in time."

The kids are all right

Remembering his own roots in the sport, Brian decided the best way to build disc golf in Brisbane was from the ground up—by getting the kids involved.

"I had a rough childhood, but I could always go down to the disc golf course night and day to play at Karst Farm Park," he said. "When I moved

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▲ "Come-try" days are designed to introduce today's youth to this sport. This is how the disc golf journey begins for the younger generation.

over here, I wanted kids to be able to do the same thing. I reached out to the Logan Council (roughly the equivalent of a county council in the US) and talked to them about some of the programs that we ran in Bloomington and some of the really great community initiatives that came out of those."

It took a while to convince the council, but finally they agreed to allow Brian and other members of the disc golf community to put up a couple of baskets and to organize a "krank"—which is a program targeted toward kids that takes place after school or during school breaks—at a local park.

They quickly realized that getting

council approval was just the first hurdle they had to clear. Convincing kids to give the sport a try was the next.

"On the first day, we got five people," Brian said. "And I'm not going to lie, I was so let down to only see five people at the first one."

They stuck with it, though, and encouraged the kids who did come out to spread the word about the disc golf program. By the end of the nine-week krank, they had 40 participants. That was good enough for the council. Not only did they decide to continue the program—they decided to pay Brian and his colleagues to run it, as opposed to just volunteering their time.

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A big reason for the council's decision was due to the approach that Brian and his colleagues took—stressing the idea of “ownership” to the kids.

“The council caught on that we could take a bunch of the youth who were vandalizing the area, whether it was through littering, breaking equipment, or tagging and graffiti; we were actually turning them against that by saying that if we can get you this area, can you take care of the course?” Brian said.

The impact on the park was dramatic. Families began to turn up on the weekends in large numbers. And upgrades, including a water feature, soon appeared.

This initial krank program served as the catalyst for larger-scale growth of disc golf in the Brisbane area. Brian began working with two of Australia's most legendary players, **Tim Marchbank** and **Bruce McNaughton**, who was the country's first world champion in the sport. The trio were tireless in their promotion of disc golf. And, more importantly, Tim and Bruce encouraged Brian to embrace the leadership opportunities that were being presented to him.

“Pretty much all the way up until about five years ago, I struggled to see any leadership qualities in myself,” Brian said. “I'd step forward if the right thing needed to get done, but I didn't feel like I ever had anything that anyone else ever needed to hear. I got lucky to be able to spend time with people who put me through a lot of coaching and mentoring to help me find my voice—and as soon as I found it, I never gave it up.”

Brian has gone on to assist with the creation and coordination of several new disc golf courses, programs, and tournaments in Queensland, the territory in which Brisbane is located. This has included figuring out a way to get blind children involved in the sport—by putting a humming

device and a bell on the basket. The humming device lets the kids know where they should be throwing the disc, and the bell lets them know when the disc hits the basket.

“One of the kid's moms came over—basically in tears—thanking me for even thinking about trying to set it up so that they could be a part of that for that day,” Brian said. “These kids don't get to do a lot of activities at their school.”

The disc golf scene in Australia has swelled to over 3,000 players and 15 courses over the last 10 years. The growing fervor for the sport is evident from a tournament held earlier this year, which traditionally drew 15 competitors over five divisions, but had to be expanded to 72 players. And that number would have been significantly higher were COVID-19 gathering restrictions not in place.

“The growth has been ridiculously fast,” Brian said. “I couldn't be happier with how it has taken off over here.”

Curiosity at Cook

With the propensity for lovers of the absurd and the off-beat—you know, “quirky” types—to end up working at Cook, Brian has had no shortage of colleagues who have reached out

to him to learn more about disc golf and to offer their support.

“My Cook family has been awesome,” he said. “I get questions all the time about stuff like where to buy discs, which courses are the most family friendly, and if someone can borrow some equipment to give the sport a try. Having played for 10 years, I have a wall of discs that I just lend out to people. I'll give them my beginner pack and tell them to play with it for a couple of weeks—and if they are really interested in it after that, I tell them to come back to me and we will see what we can work out for them.”

His advice for anyone, anywhere, who is looking to get started in disc golf is simple: connect with the disc golf club in your area (odds are, you probably have one and don't even know it).

“And be ready to have a good time,” Brian said. “Once you hear the sound of the disc hitting the chains, you are hooked. It's the most awesome feeling.”

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