

Far Off the Course, Golf Becomes Adventure Sport

By OTTO POHL

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HAMBURG, Germany — During their last cross golf tournament, Torsten Schilling and his team of golfers built a mock living room complete with couch, lamp, television and table. After setting it adrift on a river, they stood on a boat and took turns trying to whack a golf ball through the television.

The setup was perfect. Only the execution was a little lacking.

"The TV survived for hours," Schilling said, still disappointed.

This is not your father's golf.

In this version of the game, the point seems to be to choose the most outlandish setting in which to try to get the ball into a makeshift, albeit predetermined, hole, say, from a riverbank onto a barge. The clubs are second-hand, the beer comes in cans, and everything is par for the course. It is played everywhere — through cities, from rooftops, and across vacant lots.

There are no cardinal rules, other than to be safe and have fun. Around the world, thousands are heading out into the urban wild, brandishing golf clubs but otherwise unencumbered by any sense of golfing tradition. When the mood strikes, the golf rebels sneak onto golf courses at night and play with glow-in-the-dark balls.

For cross golfers, freedom's just another word for didn't pay the greens fees.

Cross golf, which takes its name partially from cross-country, is also known as urban golf, X-golf and turbo golf. The game has sprouted throughout Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and has made inroads in Asia. The sport has also taken hold in America, where a cross golf tournament was recently founded in San Francisco.

The roots of European cross golf trace back to Hamburg 10 years ago, when Torsten Schilling, now 39, played golf in hotel corridors at night while traveling as a television producer. The rounds always seemed to end with damaged walls.

"I spent a lot of time apologizing to hotel directors," he said. That persuaded him to continue his hobby elsewhere.

While by no means the first person to hit a golf ball outside the manicured confines of a golf course, Schilling may have been the first to quit his day job because of it. He founded and runs the cross golf group known as the Natural Born Golfers. The team logo is a skull with golf clubs for crossbones, and tattered jeans and motorcycle jackets are the unofficial clothing.

The Natural Born Golfers has grown to more than 50 members in Hamburg and is affiliated with hundreds more around the world.

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Otto Pohl for The New York Times
Jens Niggeman, a member of the Natural Born Golfers, playing a shot at a construction site in Hamburg, Germany.

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Schilling organizes international cross golf tournaments, and has negotiated a series of sponsorship arrangements with beer, software, and car companies.

It's hard to put a number on how many people play cross golf, because the anarchic spirit of the sport does not encourage the formation of leagues and clubs with registries. One measure of its popularity is that 143,000 people have registered on the Natural Born Golfer site, according to Schilling. The Internet is also littered with Web sites devoted to groups of various sizes that document their hometown cross golf team.

The growth of cross golf comes in the midst of an ongoing golf boom in Germany. In percentage terms, golf has been the fastest-growing sport in Germany over the last decade, and in the same time frame has added more participants in absolute numbers than any sport other than gymnastics.

Although comradely anarchy lies at the heart of the sport, semiorganized versions of it are starting to develop. In Austria, the Hotel Toni has added cross golf tournaments to its guest activities. According to the owner Franz Wenko, the hilly north Tyrolean landscape around the hotel makes for adventurous back-woods golfing both in summer and winter.

There are few rules, although, Wenko said, "it's not good form to try and hit the cows."

"Then we get problems with the farmers."

Cows are not a problem for the San Francisco tournament, begun in 2001. Because of other hazards, however, the tournament is played with a lawsuit-proof foam ball.

The Natural Born Golfers have taken the sport to a new level by marketing their cross golf services to multinationals. Last year, Microsoft hired the Hamburg team to organize a series of tournaments for the company's most important customers.

This year, the leasing division of Volkswagen hired the Golfers to devise games through six German cities. During their recent match in Berlin, the Golfers led their clients through a day of hitting golf balls from a hotel rooftop, across a river and into the Reichstag.

"This is the perfect customer relationship management tool," said Dirk Pinkvos, the VW division head who hired the Natural Born Golfers.

The VW customers clearly enjoyed their chaperoned brush with rebellion. Wearing shirts, windbreakers and hats embroidered with a VW Cross Golf logo, they stood on the roof of the hotel Intercontinental in Berlin and tried to hit a target on a rooftop 50 yards away.

"I thought this was a joke until I actually arrived," said Armin Hoffman, 58, from Leipzig, watching his wife trying to chip a shot from a boat into a target floating on the river on the second hole. "I don't think anyone will believe this back home."

The third hole was played inside the Reichstag. Just down the hall from the solemn chamber where the German parliament convenes, the cross golfers tried to hit golf-ball-sized Wiffle balls across marble floors into a bowl leaning against the far wall. In accordance with tradition, the final hole was played into a restaurant, where dinner and an open bar awaited.

For Pinkvos, the challenge is to figure out how to top this next year. "Maybe we should tee off from a helicopter?"

Schilling has some ideas. He recently acquired three Harley Davidson golf carts and plans to use them for the tournament this spring, once they have been repaired and given an appropriate paint job. "We're going to paint them black and put car flames on the side," he said.

But, with ever-larger tournament groups now traveling through cities and the exuberance often carrying over to the hotels they stay in, Schilling admits that he still hasn't really escaped the problem he first faced when he hit golf balls in hotels a decade ago.

"I still spend a lot of time apologizing to hotel directors," he said.

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