

THE DEEP END





GLENN BERGER IS A RETIRED WAR VETERAN WHO HAS ONE OF GOLF'S MOST DANGEROUS JOBS – DIVING FOR LOST BALLS IN ALLIGATOR-INFESTED LAKES. HE RECKONS THE RISK IS WORTH EVERY CENT.

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At first glance it'd be easy to mistake the giant figure rising out of the lake by the 9th green as some sort of Floridian equivalent of the Loch Ness monster come to judge the putting of the startled trio assembled by the pin. It stands nearly seven feet tall, is covered head to toe in a strange rubbery material and, as it lumbers through the reeds towards them, is making mewling noises as if in pain. But this bizarre apparition is no Godzilla, it is Glenn Berger, former chef, postman and Iraq war veteran, and today half-baking to death in his wetsuit. He is here for their balls.

The market for recycled golf balls is worth tens of millions of dollars a year with hundreds of companies competing to get their hands on what has been described as 'white gold'. But it's in Florida, with its 1,200-plus courses, most of which due to the limestone geology are pitted with lakes, and the millions of visitors who breathe fresh life into the phrases 'slicing' and 'hooking', that the real money is to be made. At last count there were more than 100 full-time lake divers who make a living from scouring the Sunshine State's watery courseside depths. And with good condition balls, the gold standard being Titleist Pro V1s, fetching more than \$2 each, it can look like an easy way to quick money. But that's forgetting one thing – the alligators.

"There are two types of golf ball divers in Florida," explains Berger as he loads his pick up truck with scuba gear. "Those who've had bad experiences and those that are about to."

We're outside the Bustinballs warehouse prepping for today's dive. Berger, a smiley 6-foot-8, who looks like he should be playing professional basketball, got his start in the business nearly a decade back. He now ships nearly two million balls a year, trawled solo from 30 different courses to countries across the world, including Australia. He has a glint in his eye reminiscent of the old sea captain in the film *Jaws* when he talks about the state's estimated population of 1.25 million gators.

"Y'see, the old ones won't bother you," he says. "They know who you are. They are used to you. It's the young ones you have to watch out for. They..." He breaks off mid-sentence and looks around as if worried. "We shouldn't really be talking about this. It's a bit too much like tempting fate," he whispers.

And like many who make their living on or near the water and especially those who come into almost daily contact with creatures with a man-eating reputation, Berger is a superstitious person. He goes through a certain routine before setting out on a day's dive. If anything, no matter how small, breaks the set routine, the doubts begin to bubble to the surface.

"My work bag wasn't where I left it one day. I knew then that something was going to happen when I was diving," he said. That something was a gator bumping his oxygen tank and Glenn getting out of the lake so fast that, "It was like I was walking on water."

We arrive at the lake by the par-3 9th hole of the Colonial Country Club in Fort Myers around noon. The course is quiet, as we're bumping up against the edge of the end of the busy



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LEFT: Berger emerges from a lake with another haul of lost balls. ABOVE This one is worth 25 cents, apparently. Once the balls have been washed Berger has a better idea of what his latest catch is worth. BELOW LEFT: Preparing to dive, and now is the time not to mention the 'A' word. 'A' for alligators, that is. BELOW RIGHT: Berger empties his bags, counts the balls and sorts the good from the bad.



season that runs October to mid-May in south-west Florida. Berger is nevertheless confident, it has been six weeks (the average time he visits each of his contracted courses) since he last dived the lakes here and he reckons there will be a few thousand balls to be found.

“They’ll likely be good balls as well,” he says. “This is a private course. On public courses, people often use cheaper balls but here there is an element of fashion, keeping up with your friends. If they use Pro V1s, then you will as well,” he grins, “which is good for me.”

Before wading in, he scans the lake for what we all – myself and the photographer included – are all now referring to as “the things that cannot be named”. There aren’t any visible and Berger reckons even if there was, he might risk it. “They usually back off,” he says. “They’ll shadow you for 10 minutes, lose interest and swim away.”

He sounds a lot more confident than he did back at the warehouse. Though as if remembering what could happen, and out there right now there could be a gator waking up from a doze by the fairway and fancying a swim, concern creeps across his face. “But if you do see any when I’m down there,” he says, “make a lot of noise.”

In the 15 minutes he’s beneath the surface combing the lake’s muddy shore by fingertip, the only clue to his presence as treasure hunter the occasional oxygen bubble, nothing much happens, certainly no signs of gators. A man slices a couple of balls into the lake – more money for Berger – and a woman, who has hit her shot into the sand by the water’s edge, asks us why we are standing by the lake staring at it as if expecting an arm clutching Excalibur to pop up. Right on cue, Berger re-surfaces, almost stumbling forward under the weight of the balls he’s collected and makes his way to the shore and lays the net, which contains a haul of nearly 700 balls, on the grass.

“This one is worth 25 cents at the most, this one maybe a dollar.” Berger is picking through the muddied balls assessing their value. He has an expert eye and quickly makes an estimate of what he has just made – though he won’t tell us.

“This is a very competitive business,” he says. “I can’t give my secrets a way. A local paper once said I was making hundreds of thousands of dollars. I wasn’t but I was going through a divorce at the time and it caused a few problems. Gators are just one of the things you have to worry about in this business.”

Another is the lengths some of his fellow divers will go to poach each other’s take.

“I’m legit now,” he explains. “But years ago, and I mean many, many years ago, I wasn’t. I was night-hawking (creeping onto courses after dark to liberate lake balls) as much as I could.

“People still do that. I’ve had balls stolen after leaving them on the truck and had people pretending they are with my company go onto my contracted courses and help themselves,” he laughs. “It’s a pretty competitive game.”

There is also the matter of fraud. Berger is unusual in the lake ball world in that he pays a flat fee to each of his courses and a percentage of the balls retrieved go to the club pro. Others don’t, they pay per ball, which can lead to under-counting weighted in favour of the diver.

“I think my way is fairer. The club knows they are getting a cheque every three months, something they can bank on,” he said. “It’s unrealistic to think they can come out and check how many balls are collected. They haven’t got the time.”

And if alligators, theft and fraud aren’t enough there are also other hazards on the course, like cars dumped in lakes.

BEWARE OF
ALLIGATORS



Alligators lurk everywhere around Florida's courses (LEFT). Berger poses with packaged balls ready for overseas export.

"I've found a couple," he says. "And the golden rule is to never put your hand inside. My friend did once and he touched a body – the guy had decided to commit suicide by driving his car into the water. Since I heard that, I just report it to the police and leave it alone."

The haul counted, we hop back in the buggy and begin our journey back to the car park. In the middle of telling us how a fellow diver had his hand punctured clean through by a gator bite, ("It was his own fault, he wanted a picture to show his kids and was throwing stones at it.") he spots a man in a wetsuit by another of the course's lakes. Suspecting it to be a diver encroaching on his territory, he floors the accelerator and we race over. Berger buttonholes him and gives him the third degree – turns out the guy is working for a dredging company looking to keep the lake from silted up. But like Berger says, it's a very competitive game.

Back at the warehouse, Berger puts the collected balls through what he calls his "hush, hush process". It's a three-stage procedure and is

carried out by equipment and chemicals that he has either made or modified himself.

"It's taken a lot of trial and error. I've spent hours experimenting to find just the right formula. I'm not about to give it away," he says.

As we watch the balls being lifted and cleaned, Berger, unprompted, begins talking about his time in Iraq. His face loses its customary smile and he looks troubled. "It wasn't good. I saw people killed and I may..." He stops and instead of telling the rest of the story returns to a more comfortable subject – alligators.

"I really thought one was on top of me one time. I came flying out of the water, and fell onto the green screaming, 'Get it off me.'

"Someone rolled me over and was shouting, 'I can't see any blood, I can't see any blood.' People ask me why I do this, and I always say, it's hard but enjoyable and it's an OK living. But will I be doing it in 20 years time? No, I've been lucky so far, but you can't always be lucky, can you?" ●

AUSTRALIA'S USED BALL TRADE

The used golf ball market in Australia is surprisingly large with volumes in the millions bought by local golfers every year. The two main players here are Squizzy's Golf and GolfBallBusters.

Squizzy's, based in Albury in New South Wales, is one of the game's great accidental success stories. Owner Aaron Taylor grew up next door to a golf course and, as any kid would do, spent plenty of time picking up lost golf balls. But when he discovered eBay in the early part of last decade, things got serious.

"I saw other people selling used golf balls on there so thought I'd give it a try,"

he said. "And we've just grown from there." Taylor estimates he sells around around two million used golf balls a year, mostly online, and has now also branched out into other golf equipment.

GolfBallBusters was a more deliberate business venture which CEO Simon Webb says was made possible by the internet. With bulk volumes of golf balls sourced from the US, Webb says the company sells product all over the world.

"Our very first order after we launched came from Argentina," he says. Both men agree getting the grading of the balls right is the key to succeeding in the



market and Webb says his company tries to avoid "water" balls.

"If you're selling a ball and describe it as mint condition, it had better be close to new," he says. "That's why we try to avoid balls that have been in water as much as possible."
- Rod Morri