

Bonita Bay's own Loch Ness Monster?

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Bonita Springs – One misty morning a resident of Bonita Bay called the golf pro to inquire about the bubbles on top of the water hazard and the monster in the mist rising from the pond. E.J. McDonnell, Bonita Bay Head Golf Pro, had to laugh as he explained, “It’s the 6’8” professional golf ball diver, Glen Berger, retrieving the hundreds of balls that golfers send into the water hazards.” A golf cart with extra diving tanks is parked nearby. “Experienced golf balls’ are popular in our pro shops,” adds McDonnell, “some collectors even buy them to find specific logos.”

Berger has the exclusive ball retrieval contract at all five Bonita Bay courses and a total of 30 contracts in the Southwest Florida area. He is accustomed to golfers’ amazement as he rises from the ponds though he wonders how they think the “experienced golf balls” appear in the pro shop. Bonita Bay protects its pristine environment; many of the water hazards are natural lakes. Golfers’ mishaps create Berger’s career.

The international wholesale business in used golf balls is not only lucrative, but it’s also a job Berger loves. His daughter asked him when he was going to retire. “What do you mean, retire? I have no plans to stop.” Previous careers in the military reserve, as a chef, as a mailman and in security did not compare. After 10 years diving for golf balls, he says, “I wish I had started sooner. The only down side is the challenge of competition. I do all my own diving; competitors hire divers. This is a hands-on business; I prefer my hands on the valu-

able golf balls.”

In full scuba gear, Berger drops into the 15 feet of water, black water diving in silt, wearing extra weight to stay on the murky bottom up to 45 minutes, feeling for golf balls with ungloved hands and rising to the surface with up to 800 balls in his mesh bag. His wet suit and hood vary from 1 ml to 3 ml, depending on the season. His diving tank is camouflage black and floats above, the first target for a curious alligator.

“Alligators. Yes, that’s what the golfer wants to talk about. Aren’t you afraid of the alli-

gators?” I try to ignore the question; I don’t want the idea in my head as an uncomfortable distraction. Sure, I’ve had my hand in an alligator’s mouth and one alligator was on my back. I climbed out of the water, ran and looked back at the alligator’s face. That was a bad luck day. They generally leave me alone, staying just outside the bubbles. When

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Glen Berger has made his living diving for golf balls for 10 years.



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Gabriel Berger helps haul her father’s catch out of Bonita Bay as Bonita Bay Club Golf Pro EJ McDonnell looks on.

they don’t, I leave that water hazard until another day.”

“A good luck day is when I find a valuable golf club that I can sell on eBay. The club shafts are generally rusted; but the heads may be recycled. In my earlier years I made the foolish mistake of attempting to break a rusted shaft on my knee in the water. I still have fingers that remind me not to do that again. I also allowed myself to run out of air in the middle of a lake. I don’t make those mistakes today.”

Berger spends three days a week diving and two with the golf ball sorting, processing and sales. His international wholesale customers, 99 percent of his business, surprise him with their readiness to advance substantial funds for their used golf balls. Golf ball diving is a green business, saving tons of plastic by recycling golf balls that after many uses spend their final days as practice balls. “I often wonder how much petroleum is saved by recycling golf balls,” says Berger.

What makes his career so special? Sometimes it’s the appreciation of surprised golfers who say, “what a neat job,” or “oh, my gosh, you do that?” Does he scuba dive in his spare time? He went on a few Florida dives; but today it would take a unique trip such as Australia to temp him. He spends his weekends as a professional soccer referee; his daughter plays soccer, baseball and softball. Family time is a priority.

So, if you see bubbles in the middle of the water hazard and a golf cart with an extra air tank, beware: Berger may rise from the murky water. Just give him a wave and please don’t ask him about the alligators; he’d rather keep that thought out of his mind. 🐊