

Golf Ball Hunter Thrives on Gaffes of Tiger Woods Wannabees**By Jeff Klinkenberg, Times Staff Writer**

LEHIGH ACRES

On what could well have been the worst day of his life, Glenn Berger felt something hard and heavy crawl upon his back. It turned out to be an amorous alligator apparently hankering for a mate. At that moment, Berger entertained doubts about the wisdom of his chosen profession, diving for lost balls in Florida golf course ponds.

But the Golf Ball Man didn't brood. "Alligators are a hazard in my line of work," he remembers thinking, "but what are the chances of really getting mauled?" Probably small. "What are the chances of getting killed?" Even slimmer.

Still, there was the matter of the dinosaur on his back. At Ibis Country Club in West Palm Beach, as Berger scrambled out of the water that spring morning in 2007, the lovelorn 7-foot alligator slid off without giving him a hickey.

He escaped with a terrific story — and about 4,000 golf balls. Some were worth only a few cents, but 15 percent — about 600 — were Titleist Pro V1s and worth about \$2 each, even used.

So what if a sex-starved alligator had tried to take a few liberties?

At Pelican Preserve Golf Course in Fort Myers, the Golf Ball Man pulls on his mask, adjusts his air tank and vanishes into a pond.

Two kinds of golf ball divers work in Florida: those who have experienced underwater unpleasanties and those who soon will. Berger, 35, has a decade of golf ball work and scary stories under his dive belt. His strategy for coping with fear? Denial.

"Really, the best thing you can do," he says, when he surfaces minutes later with 125 balls, including

a half-dozen Pro V1s, "is not to think too much. If you think too much you'll scare yourself."

Florida boasts more golf courses than any other state, about 1,250. Berger, who was born in alligator-free Indiana and lives in alligator-infested Southwest Florida, has dive contracts on about 30 of them. His territory extends from Key West to Pinellas County.

He competes for business with about 100 other full-time divers. Berger and other divers usually pay a fee — often a nickel per ball or a flat fee — for the privilege of working a particular course.

Berger retrieves balls on both inexpensive golf courses and at ritzy country clubs. Public courses attract budget-minded golfers who may play infrequently and hit many balls into the water. "Ball farms," Berger calls them. But the balls he harvests are usually cheapies.

At private clubs, golfers are more apt to hit expensive balls. But they're often more polished players and less likely to hit balls into a water hazard — unless the hazard is something special.

The TPC Sawgrass course at Ponte Vedra Beach, home of the Players Championship, is such a place. The par-3 17th, called "the Island Hole," is virtually surrounded by water, which sucks down about 100,000 balls annually, many of them Titleist Pro V1s, which go for \$45 a dozen new.

The Golf Ball Man dreams of getting the contract for his company, Berger Industries. Alligators be damned.

The Golf Ball Man wades in again. His bubbles soon stream up from the bottom, 20 feet down, where he's crawling on all fours in almost black water, feeling ahead with his hands. As he searches this golf ball purgatory he's hoping for

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the wonderful, dimpled feel of a Titleist and not something, you know, scaly and toothy.

He's more likely to be hurt by poisons than by ornery reptiles. Polluted runoff tainted with pesticides, herbicides and various heavy metals washes into golf course ponds every time it rains. Berger tries to keep his immune system ticking by taking megadoses of vitamins. He keeps ear infections at bay with cotton swabs dipped in isopropyl alcohol and white vinegar. He never misses a chance to take a long, hot shower.

Berger is married to an understanding woman. They have a child. Berger likes to cook and used to support his family as a chef. He thinks there is more money in golf balls than meatballs.

At his warehouse he dumps the day's harvest into a machine, which conveys balls along a kind of an assembly line where they are bathed with bleach, water, a degreaser and a series of chemicals. After the balls dry, Berger sorts them according to value. Shelves in the warehouse sag under the weight of heavy bags.

Near the front door are cardboard boxes bulging with golf balls ready to ship. "I'm good at math," Berger says. "Time is money. I don't eat breakfast. I don't eat lunch. They take time away from hunting golf balls. My personal best is 17,000 balls in a single day. You can eat a big dinner after work."

Assuming you're not eaten for dinner at work.

Berger has found chairs, tables, umbrellas, bird skulls, dead fish, lawn mowers and golf carts. He finds a good number of golf clubs, probably flung into the water by hapless hackers who shanked their balls and lost their temper. Berger is fond of foul-tempered, impetuous golfers. He gets \$50 for

a \$300 Scotty Cameron Titleist putter if it's in good shape.

He seldom actually sees a club on the bottom because of the near-zero visibility. As he crawls along, feeling with his bare hands, he simply touches them. One time he picked one up, felt a rusty shaft and tried to break it in half. Later, at the emergency room, the doctor tried to repair the severed finger tendons.

Years later, his right hand remains a semiclaw. But the bad hand still works. It picks up golf balls. And when the damaged fingers touch something unusual, Berger knows it.

A few years ago, while scouring a water hazard next to the 17th hole at the St. Petersburg Country Club, his hands touched something that felt like a tire. The tire, it turned out, was attached to the rest of the car. "I thought about putting my hands inside that window.

Then I remembered an old friend who has been doing this work for years. One time he put his hands inside the window and touched the body of a suicide. You don't want put your hands inside the window of a submerged car."

Deep in the pond, Berger began feeling his way around. Eventually he approached the driver's side. The window was open.