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Watery game of lost and found plays out on links

BY CHRISTINA REXRODE, Times Staff Writer

Glenn Berger is a treasure hunter. His cache is old golf balls, though they might as well be gold.

Berger is a man behind Fort Lauderdale's Berger Industries, an online business that sells used golf balls. But it's not the selling that makes his job so interesting - it's the gathering.

The golf balls sold by the company are ones that golfers of all levels have given up for lost. Berger pays golf courses from St. Petersburg to Naples for the privilege of diving in their lakes to collect the balls that have sunk to their murky depths.

Berger, 31, won't say how much he makes, just that the money is good - good enough that he owns a house in West Palm Beach and another in Fort Lauderdale.

As a child, he lived near a golf course and would pick up and resell the balls that landed around his neighborhood. He made a profession out of golf ball diving about five years ago, after taking a few scuba diving lessons. Before that he was a chef.

His current job comes with a couple of unconventional workplace hazards. Alligators are one.

"We try not to even talk about them," Berger says. But he also insists that the gators don't really worry him, since he's learned how they react to people. "It's the they're-more-afraid-of-you-than-you-are-of-them kind of thing," he says.

Glenn Berger gathers golf balls in a lake at St. Petersburg Country Club. He pays golf courses to dive in their lakes so

that he can retrieve the balls. He later sells them online. The lakes are usually so full of silt that Berger is practically blind when he's underwater. He wears nothing when he searches to find the lost balls, so his hands are constantly scraped up by rocks and clams.

"I use probably 500 or 600 Band-Aids a year," Berger says.

"Neosporin is my best friend." The plunder that he earns for his troubles is remarkable: He estimates that he collects 1,000 to 1,200 balls an hour, on average, though once in Key West he collected 3,500 in an hour.

Berger sells the balls wholesale through his Web site, mostly to overseas buyers. His tongue-in-cheek address: www.wholesaleusedgolfballs.com.

He has no plans to ever change careers.