

# Beneath THE murky DEPTHS

The second-hand golf ball industry is big business, especially in golf havens like Florida. And since the balls share their watery home with ever-present alligators, collecting them has become a dangerous game, writes **Martin Pashley**. Photographs by **James Cheadle**.

Lake ball diver Glenn Berger prepares for another risky day on the job.



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 at 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 where the real money is to be made, with most of its 1 200-plus courses pitted with lakes due to the limestone

geology, and millions of visitors who breathe fresh life into the phrases 'slicing' and 'hooking'. At last count there were over 100 full-time lake divers who made a living from scouring the Sunshine State's watery course-side depths. And with good-condition balls fetching over two dollars each (the gold standard being Titleist Pro Vs), it can look like an easy way to make quick money. But that's forgetting one thing – the alligators.

"There are two types of golf ball divers in Florida," explains Glenn as he's loading his pick-up truck with scuba gear. "Those who've had bad experiences and those who are about to." We're outside the warehouse for his company, Bustinballs, prepping for today's dive. Glenn, who at six-foot-eight 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. 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. 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."

Like many who make their living on or near the water, and especially those who come into almost daily contact with creatures that have a man-eating reputation, Glenn is a superstitious person. He goes through a specific routine before setting out on a day's dive. If anything breaks the set routine, no matter how small, 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." 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-three 9th hole of Colonial Country Club in Fort Myers at around noon. The course is quiet, as we're bumping up against the end of the busy season that runs October to mid-May down here in south-west Florida. Glenn is nevertheless confident – it's been six weeks (the average time between visits to each of his contracted courses) since he last dived the lakes here and he reckons there'll easily be a few thousand balls to be found. "They'll likely be good balls as well. 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 Vs, 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 now referring to as 'the things that cannot be named'. There aren't any visible and Glenn reckons even if there were, he

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might risk it. “They usually back off. 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. Then, as if remembering what could happen, and considering that 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 is 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 Glenn – and a woman from Liverpool, who’s 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, Glenn resurfaces, almost stumbling forward under the weight of the balls he’s collected, and makes his way slowly to the shore. He lays down 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.” Glenn 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. I can’t give my secrets away. 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 to poach each other’s take. “I’m legit now,” he explains. “But years ago, and I mean many years ago, I wasn’t. I was nighthawking (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 come onto my contracted courses and help themselves,” he laughs. “It’s a pretty competitive game.”

There is also the matter of fraud. Glenn 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. 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. “I’ve found a couple,” says Glenn. “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 get back in the cart 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 at another of the course’s lakes. Suspecting it to be a diver encroaching on his territory, he floors the accelerator and we race over. Glenn button-holes him and gives him the third degree. It turns out the guy is working for a dredging company looking to keep the lake from silting up. But like Glenn says, it’s a very competitive game.

Back at the warehouse, Glenn puts the balls he’s collected through what he calls his ‘hush, hush’ process. It’s a three-stage procedure and is carried out using equipment and chemicals that Glenn 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.”

As we watch the balls being lifted and cleaned, Glenn, 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, 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?”

- 1 It’s not unusual for Glenn to collect around 700 balls per haul.
- 2 Glenn has developed his own chemical cleaning process, but is loath to reveal the details.
- 3 Glenn can estimate the value of a haul as he works – the more upmarket the course, the better quality the balls.
- 4 Two million balls a year are shipped internationally by Glenn’s business, Bustinballs.
- 5 Recycled golf balls are known as ‘white gold’ in the industry.