

## A Short History of Mini-Putt Small Golf How the World Fell in Love with Small Golf

Miniature Golf—often dismissed as a roadside amusement—has a far deeper and more surprising history than most golfers realize. Its roots stretch back more than a century, rising from the intersection of golf culture, social norms, ingenuity, and eventually American entrepreneurship. What began as a Victorian workaround for women golfers became a global pastime and a cultural icon.

### The First Miniature Courses: Golf Scaled for Victorian Society (1860s–1890s)



*Old Tom Morris*

The earliest ancestor of mini-putt was born not from whimsy but from Victorian propriety. In the late 19th century, women of the golfing class were often discouraged from full swings—considered unladylike or too physically demanding. To give women a place to play, clubs across the UK built “putting courses”: small, manicured greens designed for putting only.

The most famous example was the Ladies’ Putting Club of St Andrews, founded in 1867. Its jewel—the Himalayas Putting Course designed by Old Tom Morris—still exists today and remains one of the finest (and most chaotic) putting experiences on earth. Undulating, natural, strategic, and fun, it demonstrated that “small golf” could be real golf.



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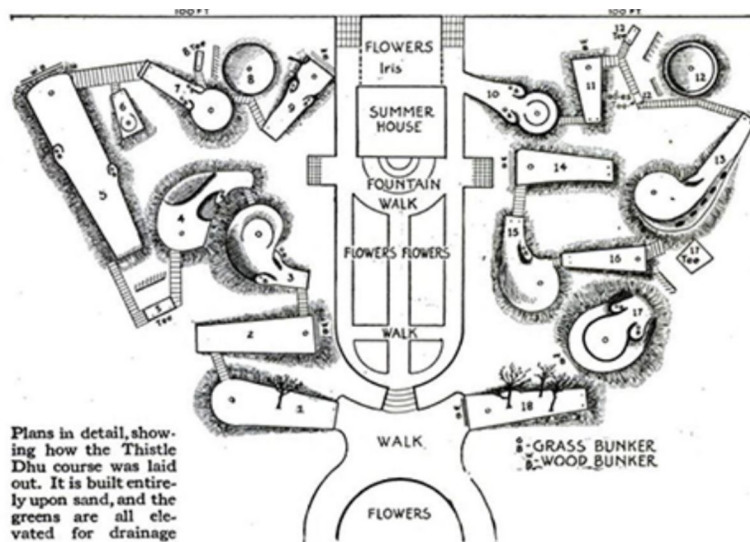


These early putting greens were not mini-putt as we know it—but they planted the idea that golf could thrive even when downsized.

### The Birth of Commercial Miniature Golf (1910s–1920s)

Miniature golf as a *designed attraction* emerged in America in the early 20th century. Two key pioneers deserve credit:

#### 1. James Barber – “Thistle Dhu” (1916)



Pinehurst's original Miniature Golf Course

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In Pinehurst, North Carolina, Barber built what many historians consider the first standardized miniature golf course. Named “**Thistle Dhu**” (“This’ll Do”), it was a beautifully landscaped, geometrically shaped course that embraced the charm of the full game in miniature form. It featured contours, hazards, and design elements that echoed Golden Age golf architecture.



*The famed Thistle Dhu course*

Thistle Dhu marks the moment miniature golf became an *intentional architectural craft*.

### **2. Thomas McCulloch Fairbairn – The Inventor Who Made Mini-Golf Possible Everywhere**

Fairbairn revolutionized the space by creating a new type of artificial putting surface. His “mineralite” material allowed miniature courses to be built on rooftops, in cities, and on small parcels of land. Fairbairn’s innovation became the springboard for a national craze.

#### **The Great Mini-Golf Boom (1926–1930): America Goes Crazy for Small Golf**

During the Roaring ’20s, mini-golf exploded. By 1930, the United States had over 25,000 miniature golf courses—ranging from country-club versions to rooftop installations in New York City.



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THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 1929

### MINIATURE GOLF WINS FAVOR Diminutive Courses of the Beach Resorts Now Set Up in Manhattan Buildings

**A**FTER the most successful outdoor season of its youthful career the sport of miniature golf is now adjourning for a highly promising indoor semester. The following, acquired by the abbreviated version of the pastime at Long Beach, Atlantic City, Asbury Park and many minor resorts during the Summer, enlisted a legion of devotees, ranging from near-par linksmen to duffers entirely innocent of the difference between a mashie and a caddie. In fact, the new sport became a vigorous rival of the roller-coasters, the wheelchair, the guess-your-weight contest and other older attractions for the favor of the diversified resort clientele. And yet, unlike the cannering or ball-throwing diversions, it offered no cigars, candy or dolls as rewards of proficiency, basing its appeal purely upon the game for the game's sake.

The promoters of this sample-size

reception accorded them then is indicative of the fact that the appeal of the pastime is without geographical limitations.

The frequency with which Class C golfers upset Class A men is one of the outstanding reasons for the rapid advance in popularity of this greensward version of pocket billiards, according to one concessionaire.

"The game as constituted at present is an outgrowth of the 'clock golf' which has been popular for some time," said this man. "That consisted merely of putting from twelve points on a circumference to a hole in the centre. By laying out a lilliputian course, with all sorts of hazards and bunkers, an element of chance has been injected that gives the game a combination of the appeals of both gambling and golf. Par for most of the eighteen-hole miniature courses is 42, allowing for two

*Published weeks before the Wall Street Crash*

These early courses tended to be:

- Garden-like and aesthetic
- Architecturally inspired
- Strategy-driven rather than obstacle-driven

Mini-golf was sophisticated—and wildly popular.

Then came the Wall Street Crash!!!!

### The Depression Era: Enter the Windmills (1930s)

As disposable income evaporated, miniature golf had to reinvent itself. The ornate, landscaped Pinehurst-style courses were expensive. But simple, whimsical, obstacle-laden courses were cheap.



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*Washington DC's Depression Era Course*

And thus the era of DIY miniature golf began. People used whatever materials were available:

- Old tires
- Drainpipes
- Wooden ramps
- Scrap metal
- Barrels and crates

This is when we see the rise of the famous windmills, the clowns, and the playful hazards that define American mini-putt today. Miniature golf became:

- Affordable
- Accessible
- Profitable for small operators
- Genuinely fun for families

Ironically, the Great Depression democratized mini-golf—and created the cultural image we still associate with the game.

### **Post-War Mini-Golf & The Modern Era (1950s–Present)**



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After World War II, America rediscovered leisure. Roadside attractions boomed, neon signs lit up highways, and miniature golf evolved into a staple of family vacations and date nights. The design split into two dominant styles:

### 1. The Challenge Course

A more athletic, tournament-caliber format seen in Europe (especially Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland), where strict standards govern hole shapes, playing surfaces, and competitive integrity.

### 2. The Adventure Course

The American classic:

- Waterfalls
- Castles
- Pirate ships
- Dinosaurs
- Story-driven environments

Adventure golf embraced spectacle—and cemented mini-putt as a cultural phenomenon far beyond golf's traditional borders.

Today the sport maintains both identities: serious competition and playful entertainment.

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Tom Morris may have inadvertently invented miniature golf and now some 160 years later, Tiger Woods is trying to reinvent the experience with his version called, "Pop Stroke."



*Tampa Bay Party Company's Golf Course*

As a strange aside, if you happen to live in the Tampa- Sarasota region of Florida, a good friend and his wife own their very own mobile Miniature Golf Course that you can rent for your parties. Their company, "THE TAMPA BAY PARTY COMPANY" was the first to create the mobile putt putt golf course in Tampa Bay. I guarantee my friend, Lord Andrew Kent has no idea their idea dates back to Old Tom Morris! It just goes to show you that what is new, is never truly new.

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### Why Miniature Golf Matters to Golf History

Miniature golf may not look like St Andrews or Augusta, but it carries enormous historical significance:

- It broadened golf's accessibility
  - It introduced millions of kids to the game
- It inspired creativity in course design
- It preserved the spirit of putting-focused fun dating back to Old Tom Morris' creation of the Himalayas
- It showed that golf could be artful, whimsical, and democratic.

Miniature Golf is not a sideshow, it's one of golf's most important cultural ambassadors.

### Conclusion: The Small Game With a Big Legacy

From the undulating greens of the St Andrews Himalayas to the bright windmills of Route 66, miniature golf has mirrored society's shifting tastes while always delivering joy. It has evolved from a Victorian necessity to a Golden Age experiment, a Depression-era pastime, and finally a global cultural tradition.

Miniature golf is proof of something profound:

You don't need 150 acres to capture the magic of golf—sometimes all you need is a putter, a ball, and a little imagination.

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