Campamento Bochica: Colombia’s First Disc Golf Course

Story and photos by Joe Feidt

“Chévere” (cool) is a very nice compliment from a Colombian. That’s what many of them called their first disc golf experience in Colombia. It was at Campamento Bochica, the scenic YMCA camp located south of Bogotá, and now home to Colombia’s first disc golf course. This Marco Polo project to get disc golf off the first tee in Colombia succeeded far better than expected and cost significantly less than projected. It was a one-week, whirlwind disc golf project that had its roots in an earlier trip.

Seeds Planted During March 2018 Trip
The first seeds were planted in March, 2018 when I was fortunate enough to travel to Bogotá with a group of eight YMCA volunteers/members from Minnesota and Wisconsin. Most of our itinerary involved visiting social service agencies operated by the Bogotá YMCA. Unlike YMCAs in the states, the Bogotá Y offers neither treadmills nor swimming pools; rather it runs two schools and offers a bunch of outreach programs in Bogotá to people who can use a helping hand: career training and job placement help for single mothers and their children and for prostitutes and their kids, and after-school programs for young kids through teens (and many other programs). Our group saw some of what they are doing. It is very organized and very impressive.

One of the days we were scheduled to visit YMCA Camp Bochica. That got my attention. When I heard we were going there and learned a bit about the camp, I got the idea of bringing a “disc golf object course in a bag.” I thought there might be enough time and acreage to set up a course. I called Discovering the World—a business that’s been selling Frisbees and golf discs for decades. The owner, Dan Mangone, was all-in when he heard what I was planning. They sent me 30 Fastbacks and DDC discs at no cost at all; they even paid the freight. I threw the discs into a big red duffel bag and added tee marker flags, a roll of fluorescent tape to wrap the trees/objects, some PDGA “Qué es Disc Golf” brochures, a couple of DiscGolfer magazines, a few sharpies and golf pencils, and some generic scorecards. I checked it through at the Minneapolis airport and headed south.

Joe Feidt’s “disc golf object course in a bag”
We arrived late at night at Camp Bochica. The camp is more like a rustic resort circa 1970 with its motel-like rooms with indoor plumbing and electricity. Early the next morning I set up the course and gave a demo to about 20 teens. Before we left that morning, I met with the camp’s director, Hamel Oviedo, walked the course with him, and told him I was leaving him with a bagful of Frisbees, brochures, mags, etc. and gave him my contact information. Hamel was receptive to my idea and said disc golf would make a good addition to their recreational activities. By 11:00 that morning, our group was off to Bógota.

**Innova Support**

On the flight home, it occurred to me the camp was an ideal place to introduce disc golf to Colombia and could be a stepping stone to other South American countries. I felt my effort at an object course, while well-intended, was insufficient and that a basket course was called for. When I got home, I contacted Mónica Agudelo at the YMCA there and asked her if she thought a more permanent basket-style course would be a good idea. She liked the idea but wanted to talk to Hamel. He fully supported the idea. She got back to me with an emphatic “Sí” and asked for my help to launch it. I was able to contact Sam Ferrans at Innova and he was very supportive and said they would donate whatever we needed. That was the green light I needed, so I applied for a PDGA Marco Polo grant. Before long, my application was approved.

We ran into a problem getting a quote for shipping. A week passed and still no quote. It became clear that none of Innova’s shippers wanted to ship to Colombia because of customs, duty fees and taxes. It was then I came up with a novel idea: what if I personally could transport some baskets and discs with me as checked-through baggage? From my earlier trip I knew Delta allowed two 50-pound bags free on flights to South America. Sam told me their Traveler portables weighed 20 pounds each. Hmm? I added up the poundage and realized I could take four Travelers and still have 10 pounds remaining on each bag, enough for 50 light easy-to-throw EDGE discs (Sharks, Skeeters, Birdies and Sonics), many minis, and swag. So, for this Marco Polo trip it would be four portables and 50 golf discs in two huge bags. I also threw in six Discraft UltraStars for ultimate, more tee flags, a box of golf pencils, a very cool 2x6 vinyl banner with grommets, more brochures, another DiscGolfer magazine, and a roll of duct tape. Would this be enough to make an impact? I guessed it would be and—surprise! —I was right.

Mónica asked if I could be there the first weekend in June (a long three-day weekend with a national holiday on Monday) to show a group of 70 YMCA volunteers how to play. Still waiting for a freight quote and because of the general uncertain nature of shipping to South America, after the board approval, I decided to go ahead and make an airline reservation to cover that weekend and take the equipment with me as checked-through baggage. I ordered two 50x30 heavy duty canvas bags to tote the equipment.

**One Disc Golf Course Fits in Two Bags**

The two canvas bags and the five huge boxes of Innova equipment arrived the same day. My first thought was: How in the name of Steady Ed am I going to fit this stuff into two bags? I unboxed the Travelers and two of them fit nicely into each bag. That was a relief. I divided the discs between the two bags and there was space and weight to spare. Each bag weighed about 48 pounds and I had one carry-on roller with my personal stuff. At the airport, I got a nasty look from the Delta baggage attendant, but he slapped on the BOG baggage tags. Before landing I declared everything on my customs form. When I arrived at customs, two somewhat perplexed officials advised me to ship by conventional courier next time but said they would let it slide this time. That was another huge relief. At midnight, Jaime, a driver from the YMCA, picked me up and dropped me off at my hotel.
The next day I had a late breakfast with YMCA director Gloria Hidalgo, my contact, Mónica Agudelo, the Y’s volunteer coordinator named Agudes, and several other staff members at the YMCA office in Bogotá. They welcomed me with open arms and told me how much they appreciated my efforts. Jaime drove me to the camp after breakfast. Leaving the traffic-clogged streets of Bogotá, we dropped about a thousand feet and followed the serpentine Rio Bogotá down through a steep gorge in the Andes. Arriving at the camp gates, I met Hamel, the director, and got settled in my room. We soon met at the recreation center and talked course design and walked through the area where the course would track. I was surprised and pleased to learn that, when he heard I was returning, he had begun looking at plans for building steel baskets and had even picked out a local metal worker—Mauricio—to construct them. This “hombre” had also been checking out pdga.com and was totally into disc golf! I realized then I was not going to have to convince him how cool DG was. Instead of laying out a longer course using objects to hit to augment the portables, we decided to make a short, fun, four-hole course using the Innova Travelers. Because we were limited by time for the demo and tournament, a shorter course made sense.

YMCA Youth showing off their new discs at Camp Bochica

**70 YMCA Youth Volunteers Arrive**
The YMCA youth volunteers arrived in two busloads the next evening, Friday. These are the best of the best of Colombian youth; they ranged in age from nine years to some in their mid-twenties. They were there to get to know each other, be trained to learn more about the Y Way, to take on more responsibility and learn leadership skills. The group was divided into subgroups with leaders chosen—classic Y procedure. I quickly discerned these were amazing kids: smart, fun-loving, out-going and rambunctious. Most were Colombian along with a group of six Germans who were living and working in Bogotá during their gap year before college. Everyone was working on their English skills.

YMCA camps by their nature are well-organized and activities are slotted into a busy schedule. I would have from 9:00 a.m. Saturday morning until noon to present some background on disc golf, demonstrate how to throw, and to play a demo round using volunteers. A few had heard of disc golf. We went over the basic rules, the Disc Golfer’s Code and courtesy. Although many of the kids spoke English, I presented in Spanish. Everything went well, and it was obvious they
really liked this new (to them) game. But enough “hablar” (talk), it was time to “jugar” (play). After the session, some very eager volunteers and I played the course while the others watched. It was obvious the “jovenes” (youths) liked the game and caught on quickly how to play.

In the afternoon, Hamel and I went over preparations for Sunday: I would read a welcome letter from international director Brian Hoeniger, followed by the ribbon-cutting ceremony, then the throwing out of the first disc, and finally, the much-anticipated competition. Because the Y Way is very team-oriented, we decided on coed teams of four. Eleven teams signed up (44 players) which was over half the group. We also had a team from the nearby town, Santander Cito. We only had two hours for the ceremony and tournament so we planned things to run smoothly. I felt people would want to see their new friends teeing off on the first hole, so they all teed off from hole 1 in front of the banner proclaiming Colombia’s first course. I served as roving answer man/photographer.
Ribbon-cutting at Colombia’s first course. L-R: William, the emcee, camp director Hamel Olviedo, YMCA Bogotá’s Mónica Agudelo, and Joe Feidt/ Photo by Valentina Moreno

Due to the tight time limitations, we decided to run a prelim followed by the top three teams competing in a start-from-scratch finals. We were running a half hour late so we decided to have all 12 players have a CTP contest with the CTP to decide which team would win. All but two of the players were in their teens or early twenties; one player, Nicolas, was just nine years old and could not have weighed more than 100 pounds. You guessed it, the kid based his drive to win it for his team! He was so overcome with emotion, he cried his eyes out for about five minutes. I gave him a hug, signed an Innova mini for him, and told him I thought he’d one day be the Colombian national champion. Nicolas has not only a knack for the game, he has a passion for it. The next day, when we got off the bus taking us to Bogotá from the camp, I met his proud parents. They already knew what had happened and wanted to know all about disc golf.

Nicolas, age 9, won the tournament for his team by basing his CTP. This was taken at a practice round when he aced hole #2. This kid can throw!
Summary
First of all, Marco Polo Colombia cost significantly less than anticipated: $2,364 was budgeted vs. $1,860 actual expenses. This was due to Delta shipping everything free of charge which is pretty amazing (Thank you, Delta!), and Old Joe serving as the mule. So, our total freight cost was just five UPS boxes shipped from California to my home in Hudson, Wisconsin. Another big savings was that YMCA Bogotá paid for almost all of my in-country expenses: my five-day stay at the camp including meals and a visit to a local restaurant as well as all of my transportation in Colombia: to and from the camp and to and from the airport.

This project unfolded far better than I imagined. I had several worrisome questions going in: would Delta even allow me to ship these two huge bags; would Colombian customs seize everything or impose duties and taxes; would the YMCA camp director be as enthusiastic as I was; how the kids who had never heard of disc golf would react… I was a bit apprehensive going in.

Delta could have said: Forget it! Colombian customs could have made a big stink but chose not to; the camp director, Hamel, could have been luke warm to the new sport; instead, he has a passion for it and is planning on having permanent steel baskets made, enlarging the course to at least nine holes (we discussed basic design tenets and walked through a prospective course), and incorporating the sport into his other activities for the hundreds of young people who will be coming through the camp every year. We have already made plans to re-stock the discs. Two Colombian YMCA volunteers are currently at YMCA Camp St. Croix here in my hometown of Hudson working as counselors, and the plan is for them to bring back discs when they return home in August. (MN and WI disc golfers, we need your lightly-used, easy-to-throw discs!)

And the young people. They were so enthusiastic, it touched my heart and amazed me. These kids were playing this little four-hole course before breakfast, after breakfast, actually any free time they had; they were playing catch with the Fastbacks and DDC discs; they were playing pickup ultimate games on a concrete basketball court with the UltraStars at night under lights. They were loving playing with discs! They showed their appreciation for my coming down there by making a very nice photo album to take home and also making two beautiful wooden plaques of appreciation (one for me to take home and one that will stay at the camp). Many kids thanked me personally for doing what I did. Some gave me hugs. It was very touching to experience such appreciation; it made my time and efforts totally worth it.
I have no doubt at all DG will work well at YMCA Camp Bochica; it will expose hundreds of people every year to DG, and hopefully some of these people will decide to start clubs and design courses and build baskets and buy discs. I told Hamel I was only planting a few DG seeds on this trip, and he understands he is the “jardinero” (gardener) who will need to cultivate the sport at the camp so that others are exposed to it.

Besides the camp, I also believe DG would succeed in private country clubs and pay-to-play recreation areas in Colombia. The wealthy folks down there are very wealthy and many belong to country clubs with ball golf courses. (There are public courses too.) Ball golf is popular there, so why not disc golf? I think country clubs and pay-to-plays are the most likely venues for DG. I’m less certain about “free” DG in public parks. I would hope to see it attempted and would encourage that effort to see if it can work.

Will DG work in other YMCA camps in South America? This is my longer-term vision/goal. I will check back with Monica and Hamel at the end of the summer to see how the first three months went and will file a follow up report. Assuming it is going well, I will consider planting more seeds at another YMCA camp in South America.

Finally, on behalf of all the youngsters who got (and will get) an opportunity to play DG in Colombia and from the appreciative staff of YMCA Bogotá and camp director Hamel Olviedo, “Muchísimas Gracias” to the PDGA staff and board for supporting this successful Marco Polo project. As they say in Colombia: disc golf es chévere!

— Joe Feidt #362