

Some Principles behind the Rules of Golf

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Suppose you were called upon to write a code of rules for playing golf. Suppose you had to start from scratch, with no previous rules to help you and with only your experience in playing the game to guide you.

What would you do? Would you start with what happens on the teeing ground? Or would you begin by pointing out the difference between match play and stroke play? When would you deal with things like pipes and bottles, and how would you deal with them? What about twigs and leaves? How about the right to remove the flagstick?

If you had the job of writing the Rules from scratch, a stream of details would come flooding in upon you. You could easily be engulfed by them if you didn't have a couple of life preservers.

All too many of us are confused by the Rules. Sometimes they seem like a hodge-podge, full of don'ts and can'ts and prohibitions and exceptions and technical qualifications. Sometimes we get lost in the maze of the letter of the law.

There is a way out. There is a spirit behind all the technical little details. There are a few simple but basic ideas that can guide us.

It's important for everyone to know what these basic ideas are. We may not be called upon to write the Rules of Golf, but, just by reason of being players, it is incumbent upon us to know the Rules. Golf is a unique game in that every golfer is his own referee.

Purpose and Principles

The first thing to clarify is the purpose of the Rules. Why do we need them?

The purpose of the Rules is to make sure, as far as possible, that everybody plays the same game. That is how it is phrased by Richard S. Tufts, a Vice-President of the USGA and a long-time student of golf.

Thus, when somebody departs from playing the same game that everybody else is playing, penalties are applied. The penalties are for two main purposes: to discourage anybody from taking unfair advantage, from trying to play a different game, and to try to equalize matters when somebody *has* played a different game, either consciously or unconsciously.

Underlying the Rules are two very simple principles:

PLAY THE COURSE AS WE FIND IT.

PLAY THE BALL AS IT LIES.

Certainly, if everybody plays the course as he finds it and if everybody plays his ball as it lies, where he himself hit it, then everybody will be playing the same game. The object of the Rules, then, should be served by those two elementary ideas.

But even the Garden of Eden had its imperfections, and, golf being an imperfect human affair, not all questions of golf Rules can be solved by applying one of those two basic principles.

For example, when your ball is at the bottom of a lake, twenty feet under water, it just isn't possible to play the course as you find it or to play your ball as it lies. You've got to have a way to proceed. So, too, when your ball is twenty feet up in the air, sleeping in a little bed of pine-tree needles.

From this we arrive at a third fundamental principle:

If we can't play the course as we find it or if we can't play the ball as it lies, then play fair. Just that: fair play.

A large percentage of the Rules of Golf deal with cases where the first two principles won't apply, and those cases are pretty well governed by this third principle. There is one general Rule which provides: "If any point in dispute be not covered by the Rules or Local Rules, the decision shall be made in accordance with equity."

To summarize, the three main ideas behind all Rules are:

PLAY THE COURSE AS WE FIND IT.

PLAY THE BALL AS IT LIES.

IF WE CAN'T CARRY OUT THE FIRST TWO, PLAY FAIR.

Playing the Course as We Find It

Let's look at the first principle and see how that idea is carried out in the Rules, the idea of playing the course as we find it.

In the final round of the 1951 Tam O'Shanter Open, Jim Ferrier teed his ball on a teeing ground. As he started to play, he discovered that a branch of a tree interfered with his backswing. He reached up and broke off part of the branch. A question arose as to whether this was a violation of a Rule, and, if so, what was the penalty.

On the face of it, the question seems simple: may a player break a tree branch which hampers his backswing? But this happened on a teeing ground, and a ball was not yet in play. What difference does that make? It makes no difference at all whether the ball is in play or out of play. The basic principle is that we play the course as we find it. We can't wander out on the course and break off a branch that may be in our line of play, and we can't do it on the teeing ground. So Jim had violated Rule 17-3¹ of the present code, which provides:

A player shall not improve, or allow to be improved, his line of play or the position or lie of his ball by moving, bending or breaking anything fixed or growing," subject to exceptions which do not apply here.

That Rule simply is meant to express the elementary idea that you play the course as you find it. Ferrier could have moved his ball to a part of the teeing ground where there was no interference to his backswing.

¹ In the 2012 – 2015 Rules of Golf this is now Rule 13-2 and reads:

"A player must not improve or allow to be improved:

- the position or lie of his ball,
- the area of his intended *stance* or swing,
- his *line of play* or a reasonable extension of that line beyond the *hole*, or
- the area in which he is to drop or place a ball..."

The same basic issue was involved in a question about purposely bending a young tree behind you while addressing the ball, but it had a new twist. The Rule just quoted has a couple of exceptions. One of the exceptions is that there may be some moving, bending or breaking “as may occur in the course of fairly taking his stance.” The new twist in the question revolved around the meaning of the word “fairly” as used in this instance.

The USGA answer said in part:

The basic object of the Rule is to prohibit improving the position of the ball.

In the course of taking a reasonable stance, for example, the player might bend growing objects, such as tall grass, and as a consequence the line of play might be affected. The Rule excuses this provided it occurs as an incident in the course of taking the stance.

The player is entitled to take his stance fairly. The word 'fairly' should be read in a normal sense. To put it in other words, the player may take a stance which is as reasonable as could be expected in the light of the ball's situation. This is no guarantee that he is to have a perfect stance; if that were so, the Rules might permit players to carry axes and sickles and to cut down bushes, grass and trees which happened to interfere with a perfect stance.

In short, the quality of the stance is bound to be affected by the general situation. He may not bend and twist it to suit his convenience.

Therefore, the term 'fairly taking his stance' is a relative term, not an absolute one. The player is always limited by the main object of the Rule, which is to avoid improving the position of the ball except as may be done incidentally.

In the circumstances described, A could have taken his stance fairly without bending the young tree. A should be considered to have violated Rule 17-3² and to have lost the hole.

There is a Rule which requires us to start at the times and in the order arranged by the committee.³ We may not start early, and we may not start late. This has a relationship to the principle of playing the course as we find it. In the 1940 Open Championship six players disqualified themselves when, on their own initiative, they started their final rounds about a half hour ahead of schedule, without authority. A storm was in the making, and it could have been a decided advantage to them to start a half hour early, but they were obliged to take the course as they found it at the times drawn for them. When they did otherwise, they were not playing the same game as the others. One of the six players turned in a score which apparently tied him for the Championship, but it couldn't be accepted.

It is not permitted to build a stance,⁴ it is not permitted to remove or press down irregularities of surface which could affect your lie and so forth.⁵ All these negative Rules are simply expressions in reverse of the large positive principle: *Play the course as we find it.*

² Now Rule 13-2 in the 2012 – 2015 Rules of Golf. In the 2014 – 2015 Decisions on the Rules of Golf this discussion appears in Decision 13-2/1 (Explanation of “Fairly Taking His Stance”).

³ See Rule 6-3a in the 2012 – 2015 Rules of Golf.

⁴ See Rule 13-3 in the 2012 – 2015 Rules of Golf.

⁵ See Rule 13-2 in the 2012 – 2015 Rules of Golf.

Playing the Ball as It Lies

Much of what has been said about the first principle is also true of playing the ball as it lies. Sometimes the two ideas appear to be identical. The key Rule about the ball is Rule 16.⁶ It is one of the briefest Rules in the book, but it is perhaps the most important. It says:

A ball shall not be touched purposely and must be played as it lies except as otherwise provided for in the Rules or Local Rules. The player may, without penalty, touch his ball with his club in the act of addressing it, provided he does not move the ball.

There have been a number of famous instances in golf history in which the ball was not played as it lay. Gene Sarazen says that the greatest gesture of sportsmanship he ever saw was made in the 1925 Open Championship at the Worcester Country Club, in Massachusetts. In the last round Bob Jones was playing the sixteenth hole and drove into the rough. He took his stance for his second shot, was just about to hit the ball, then suddenly backed away from it. No one knew just what had happened.

After Bob had holed out, his scorer, in checking with him, said he had had a 4 and was told by Bob that he had had a 5. Bob's ball had turned over while he was addressing it. The Rule about a ball moving after address derives from the larger principle of playing the ball as it lies.

The self-imposed penalty stroke kept Bob Jones from winning the Championship. After the 72 holes of the Championship he was tied with Willie Macfarlane and Willie won after two 18-hole playoffs.

Another well-known case involved Lloyd Mangrum in the play-off of the 1950 Open Championship at the Merion Golf Club, near Philadelphia. This, too, happened on the sixteenth hole. Mangrum was a stroke behind Ben Hogan. He had driven into the rough, played a safety shot onto the fairway, fired the next to the green and faced a good-sized putt for a par and a half with Hogan. He addressed his ball for the putt, then suddenly leaned over, picked up the ball, blew on it, replaced it and holed the putt. He went to the next tee under the impression that he was still just one stroke behind Hogan, only to be informed that he had sustained a two-stroke penalty for touching his ball while in play. Mangrum had unconsciously forgotten himself. It was a bitter blow, but he took it like a great sportsman.

Suppose there were no such principle as playing the ball as it lies. Where would the line be drawn?

When we start a round of golf, we are sure, theoretically, of fifty-four perfect lies, one on each tee and two on each putting green. You would think that would be enough. But no.

⁶ In the 2012 – 2015 Rules of Golf this is now part of Rule 18-2a and reads:

Except as permitted by the *Rules*, when a player's ball is *in play*, if

(i) the player, his *partner* or either of their *caddies*:

- lifts or *moves* the ball,
- touches it purposely (except with a club in the act of *addressing the ball*), or
- causes the ball to *move*, or

(ii) the *equipment* of the player or his *partner* causes the ball to *move*, the player incurs a penalty of one stroke.

Even now those little signs "Winter Rules Today" appear at various courses over the country. So-called "winter rules" constitute the supreme violation of the guiding spirit behind all golf rules.

You will find the subject of "winter rules" treated in the Appendix to the Rules book in the section about Local Rules. The Rules of Golf do not recognize "winter rules" or "preferred lies," and the USGA recommends that the Rules of Golf be observed uniformly. It is recognized, however, that some clubs sometimes feel impelled to have "winter rules," and so the section on Local Rules contains a text which seems appropriate.⁷ It should be emphasized that the USGA does not endorse it.

Play Fair

Obviously, there are many instances where we can't play the course as we find it or we can't play the ball as it lies. We have to devise an artificial way out in order to keep us in the game, and so we look to the third principle, that of fair play.

The subject of artificial remedies is a big one and tends to become complex. We'll deal with just a few to indicate how the pattern of fair play works out. Let's suppose that something is in the way of the ball, something which prevents us from striking at it as we should like. The first thing to ask ourselves is whether the interfering thing is natural or artificial.

If it is natural and if conditions are normal, then generally there is no relief from it without penalty, as in the case of a tree trunk or an embedded rock against which the ball is resting.

If it is artificial, such as a bench or a water pipe, then it is an obstruction under the Rules. It is foreign to the playing course, and relief may be obtained without penalty. We can either move the obstruction or, if it is immovable and interferes with our swing or stance, we can move the ball, within certain limits.

Now let us consider the cases of balls lost, unplayable and out of bounds. This is a subject worth reviewing now because we have finished a year's experience with a new uniform Rule covering all three cases.

Let's take our old friends, A, B and C, in a three-ball match. On one hole A's tee shot winds up unplayable. A is the sole judge of the matter; his discretion governs as to whether the ball is unplayable or not. If A decides to go back to the tee and play another ball, he will be playing three, because the penalty is stroke and distance. The penalty encourages him to exercise his discretion carefully as to whether his ball is unplayable or not. If the penalty were loss of distance only, A might be inclined to replay the stroke and perhaps a good number of other strokes. For instance, A doesn't play bunker shots very well, so if he could get out of a bunker by a distance-only penalty, he might declare the ball unplayable in a bunker pretty frequently. So the governing idea of fair play says that A plays three off the tee if his first one is unplayable.

In this same three-ball match, B's tee shot becomes lost. He has to go back to the tee and play three, because the penalty is stroke and distance. The penalty encourages him to look carefully for his ball. If the penalty were loss of distance only, he might be careless about trying to find the ball whenever it went into heavy grass or deep woods. Besides, it's only right and proper that B play three off the tee for his lost ball since A has to play three off the tee for his unplayable ball.

This is getting to be quite a difficult hole, and C doesn't help matters any. He drives over the fence, out of bounds. He is off the course completely. Is there any reason why he should be allowed to play two off the tee, under a penalty of distance only, when his opponents, A and B, are playing three? Fair play says C also must proceed under a stroke-and-distance penalty.

All these remedies are artificial, but they are uniform and fair.

⁷ See Appendix I-B-4c in the 2012 – 2015 Rules of Golf.

Conclusion

In recalling the three simple bases on which the Rules are built, we have not meant to leave the impression that there is nothing else to the Rules. We have merely tried to clear away some of the mental underbrush so the main outline of the trees can be discerned better.

Actually, to know the Rules of Golf requires study. If you really want to know them, give yourself a little test when a problem of Rules next comes to your attention. Before you look in the book, try to see the problem in the light of the main purpose of the Rules – to insure that everybody plays the same game. Try to see it in the light of the three principles which are intended to express that purpose:

PLAY THE COURSE AS WE FIND IT.

PLAY THE BALL AS IT LIES.

IF WE CAN'T CARRY OUT THE FIRST TWO, PLAY FAIR.

The best way to learn the Rules is to keep their spirit uppermost. For there is a spirit about golf, and it's very much like the spirit of life. We have free choice to decide. Do we decide on the basis of fairness, or of total selfishness? As in life, so in golf we are really our own referees.