Wrong Ball vs. Wrong Place

There are a few preliminary things to keep in mind when thinking about wrong ball/wrong place:

1. You can only hit from a wrong place if you are making a stroke at your ball in play.

2. You are hitting a wrong ball if you make a stroke at a ball that is other than your ball in play – such as if it is OB, lost, abandoned, has been lifted and just tossed aside onto the ground, or is someone else’s ball.

3. You are hitting a substituted ball if you have held a ball in your hand, and then put it back onto the course with the intention of putting it into play. If you make a stroke at it, it cannot be a wrong ball because by substituting a ball, whether or not you were allowed to substitute under the Rules, you have put it in play and it becomes your ball in play. It might be in a wrong place, but it is not a wrong ball.

With those three thoughts in mind, go to the definition of wrong ball in your rulebook. A wrong ball is any ball other than the player’s ball in play (or a provisional or second ball). That comports with our three concepts above. The definition of wrong ball even helpfully gives some examples of a wrong ball, such as another player’s ball or an abandoned ball, or the player’s original ball when it is no longer in play (that would be lost or OB, or lifted and not put back into play). Then the Note adds, “Ball in play includes a ball substituted for the ball in play, whether or not the substitution is permitted.” That is what the 3rd point above is getting at. It is telling you that, no matter where you have gotten that ball (found it, picked up someone else’s, took it out of your bag), if you have it in your hand and put it back onto the course with the intention of putting it into play, it is a substituted ball that becomes your ball in play. And once it becomes your ball in play, it cannot be a wrong ball. It might be in a wrong place, but it is not a wrong ball.

Next go to Rule 15: 15-2 states very clearly that when a player substitutes a ball, even when not permitted to do so, that ball becomes the ball in play. The Rule even goes so far as to point out specifically that the ball is not a wrong ball. So, you can see that the idea of a substituted ball becoming the ball in play is obviously going to be a key concept as we look at wrong ball vs. wrong place.

Now, with all this in mind, let’s look at some examples and see how this really works:

1. I walk up to a ball that I think is mine, but it is actually my fellow-competitor’s ball, and I make a stroke at it. In this case, I have hit a wrong ball because it was not my ball in play. The definition of wrong ball clearly states that a wrong ball includes another player’s ball. So that’s the easy one.
Now, look at this next example:

I walk up to a ball that I think is mine, but it is actually my fellow-competitor’s ball. I reach down and lift it, then put it back into play and make a stroke at it. In this case I put the ball into play by substituting it for my original ball (even though I wasn’t allowed to substitute under the rules). It is now my ball in play, so it can’t be a wrong ball even though I am clearly hitting from a wrong place.

What is instructive about this example is that in both cases the player has made a stroke at the same ball from the same place. But in the first instance it was his fellow competitor’s ball in play so that made it a wrong ball. In the second instance, because the player lifted his fellow competitor’s ball and put it back into play, this substituted ball now became his own ball in play and therefore he was hitting from a wrong place, not hitting a wrong ball.

We’ll look at a few more examples, but before we go on you can see that in deciding wrong ball/wrong place issues, the key is: **Is the ball that the player made a stroke at his ball in play or not? If it is his ball in play, even if it got into play because he wrongly substituted a ball, it cannot be a wrong ball.**

1. A really excellent question that was on the test a while back asks you to identify in which instance a player has played from a wrong place and the choices are from 1) a lateral hazard, 2) a wrong putting green, 3) casual water, or 4) OB.

   The correct answer is the wrong putting green since Rule 25 specifically says you can’t play from there. It was easy to exclude 1 and 3 since we know that it is okay to play from a lateral hazard or casual water, even though you can take relief if you wish. The OB choice was a great distracter because nothing looks more like a wrong place than OB. But you can only play from a wrong place with a ball in play and a ball that is OB is not in play. Had the person played from OB it would have been a wrong ball, not a wrong place, situation. But, you will always get it right if you first determine whether the ball in question is the player’s ball in play. If so, wrong place, if not wrong ball.

A couple of things get people confused. One is not realizing that a substituted ball (which can be gotten from anywhere, e.g. your bag, picking up your fellow competitor’s ball, picking up an abandoned ball, etc), even if it is wrongly substituted, becomes the ball in play. This is a key concept. As noted above, once you’ve had a ball in your hand and substituted (i.e. put it back down intending to put it into play), it becomes the ball in play, whether or not you were allowed to substitute under the Rules. Another reason for confusion is that people think that the term “wrong ball” means a ball that is not the player’s own ball, when in fact it really means a ball that is not the player’s ball in play – a huge difference, as the player’s own ball can in fact be a wrong ball, such as when it is deemed lost and the player makes a stroke at it anyway.
2. Here is an incident that occurred at a junior tournament. The player hit his tee shot into light rough. He and others searched for a short time without finding the ball so the player went back to the teeing ground to play a provisional ball while his parents and fellow competitors continued the search. He played again from the teeing ground to nearly the same area and immediately someone found his original ball plugged in the grass. Fewer than five minutes had elapsed since the search began. The parents and others believed the player should play the original ball. The player picked up his provisional ball, then walked over and lifted, cleaned and dropped his original ball correctly under the embedded ball rule. He played the next shot to the green, took two putts and wrote down 4 for the hole. He played from the next teeing ground and prior to returning his card, discussed the scenario with an official. What was his score for the hole?

As a preliminary matter, we know that once the player had gone forward to search, he could no longer go back and hit a provisional ball. So when he did go back and hit from the teeing ground, that ball became his ball in play under penalty of stroke and distance and his original ball was deemed lost. Now, let’s look at what happened next. He lifted his ball in play (mistakenly thinking it was a provisional that was no longer needed) and then went over to his original ball. He lifted it (it was in his hand!) and dropped it and played it. Right away we know that he didn’t play a wrong ball because by lifting the original ball and then substituting it, he transformed it from a lost ball into his ball in play. Therefore, the player hit 5 shots (original tee shot, the second tee shot, the shot to the green and two putts) and got 3 penalty strokes (the stroke and distance penalty for the lost ball, plus 2 additional strokes for lifting his ball in play (the so-called provisional he hit from the tee) and not replacing it (which essentially means he hit from a wrong place). Although he dropped his substituted ball in a wrong place, he did not gain a serious advantage because his second tee shot (the so-called provisional) was nearby, so he did not have to rectify. We also know that there is no additional penalty for wrong substitution when hitting from a wrong place. So, his score was 8.

Now let’s give this example a little twist that has big consequences. What if, after he lifted his ball in play (i.e. lifted his so-called “provisional”), the player went over to his original ball and instead of taking relief for the embedded ball by lifting and dropping it, he just made a stroke at it without lifting it. Big difference – in that case he would have hit a wrong ball because that ball, even though it was his own original ball, was no longer his ball in play – it was a lost ball since the definition of lost ball tells us that a ball is deemed lost if the player puts another ball into play under penalty of stroke and distance, which is exactly what this player did. This is another example of how people get this wrong – they think that because the ball is the player’s own ball, it could not possibly be a wrong ball. But the test of a wrong ball is not whether it is the player’s ball; it is whether it is the player’s ball in play.
3. Decision 15/14. This one appears on the rules test nearly every year. “A player, believing that a ball lying very badly in a bunker is his ball, drops it in the bunker and plays it out. He then discovers that the ball he has played is not his original ball. Has he played a wrong ball?”

I will leave it to you to read the entire answer, but one thing should be perfectly clear just from the question. This cannot be a wrong ball because the player **had that ball in his hand and then dropped it and made a stroke at it.** That alone tells you that it was a substituted ball that became his ball in play. Of course, he has other serious problems that must be addressed, but hitting a wrong ball is not one of them.

4. Another famous question that used to appear on the rules exam (and still might) is the one where a player plays his ball onto the green and authorizes a fellow competitor to mark it for him. The person who marked it simply throws the ball down onto the green near the ball marker. The player is distracted and instead of lifting the ball and replacing it in front of the ball marker, he putts it from where it was thrown down. Wrong ball or wrong place?

As always, the solution lies with the answer to the question “Was the ball the player’s ball in play?” In this case, the ball that had been lifted and just tossed aside with no intention to put it into play was not a ball in play. It does not matter that the ball was the player’s own ball. At that point it was not his ball in play and therefore he hit a wrong ball. He gets a two-stroke penalty and he must correct within the prescribed time limits or he will be DQed. Read Decision 15/4 for a very similar scenario.

As the final part of this exercise, let’s go over what a player must do after he has made a stroke either at a wrong ball or from a wrong place.

The easy one is wrong ball because there is only one answer: in match play the player loses the hole; in stroke play he gets a 2-stroke penalty and he must correct his error before teeing off on the next hole or, if he is on the last hole, declare his intention to correct before he leaves the green. Strokes made by a competitor with a wrong ball don’t count in his score. If he fails to correct within the time limits, he is disqualified. This is Rule 15-3.

The reason that the penalty for playing a wrong ball and not correcting is disqualification is philosophically similar to Rule 3-2 (Failure to Hole Out). If you have played a wrong ball, you haven’t hole out with your ball in play, and, as you well know, if you don’t hole out in stroke play with your ball in play you are disqualified.

If the player hits from a wrong place, he must play on with that ball so long as there is no serious breach – which means so long as he has not gained a significant advantage by playing from the wrong place. If he is not sure whether he gained a significant advantage, he must also play out the hole with a second ball played in accordance with
the Rules and then report the facts to the Committee so that the Committee can determine whether there has been a serious breach. If he fails to report to the Committee, he is disqualified. Some serious breaches are very obvious – for example a player takes relief under the water hazard rule when it is not known or virtually certain that his ball is lost in the hazard. Since he should have played a ball under the lost ball rule of stroke and distance) he definitely gained a significant advantage. But others aren’t so clear – say the player gained a 10-yard advantage – and he isn’t sure if this is a serious breach or not. He must play out both the original (from the wrong place) and a second ball from the correct place and let the Committee decide. This is Rule 20-7. Two things to note: With a possible serious breach, the player must play both balls (from the wrong place and the right place) because it is up to the Committee to decide whether the breach really was serious. Second, in deciding whether the player gained a significant advantage, the Committee’s job is to ascertain whether the player gained more than a two-stroke advantage by playing from the wrong place.

Here is David Staebert’s mnemonic for remembering this:

Wrong Ball – Go Back
Wrong Place – Play on
Wrong place serious Breach – Go Back

Here are some typical test questions:

1. This one has been around for years and is used to make sure that you understand that a player who plays from a wrong place, but with no serious breach, **must** continue to play on with that ball. The situation: The player moves his marker out of his fellow competitor’s way on the putting green then forgets to move it back which means he puts from a wrong place that is no more than a mere putter head from the right place so it is not a serious breach. The ball ends up an inch from the cup at which point the player, mistakenly believing that he has to correct, lifts his ball and takes it back to where the ball mark originally was and puts again. In this case he not only gets the two-stroke penalty for playing from a wrong place, he gets an additional two-stroke penalty for lifting his ball in play and not replacing it for a total of 4 penalty strokes. A slight variation on these facts is seen in Decision 20-7c/2, which you should also read.

2. This is also a nice question. A player makes a whiff at a ball lying OB, then discovers the ball is OB. What now?

Player gets a 2-stroke penalty for playing a wrong ball because the whiff is considered a stroke (since he intended to make a stroke at the ball) and he must proceed under Rule 27-1 incurring a total of 3 penalty strokes – one for the stroke and distance penalty and 2 for playing a wrong ball). **BUT**, the whiff, though it is considered a stroke for the purpose of incurring the penalty for playing a wrong ball, is not counted in the player’s score because strokes made with a wrong ball don’t count in the player’s score.
It’s a good idea to review the three definitions in the front of the book that are critical to this area: Wrong Ball, the first paragraph of Ball in Play, and Lost Ball, mainly taking note of c and e.

Regarding that Lost Ball definition, it is critical to understand when a ball is deemed lost because if it is lost it is not in play and if a player hits it at that point he has hit a wrong ball. Although that sounds simple, the problem comes when the player, who has done one of the things under the lost ball definition that renders his ball lost, finds his original ball and wants to hit it, not realizing that despite his original ball being right before his eyes, that ball is now considered lost and if he hits it he is hitting a wrong ball. That is exactly what would have happened in the second part of the junior golf example above, because once the player put another ball into play under penalty of stroke and distance (which is #c in the lost ball definition) his original ball was deemed lost. Number e is also important in our wrong ball/wrong place discussion because a player must make a stroke at a substituted ball to have his original ball considered lost. That is an important concept – although the minute he drops a wrongly substituted ball that ball becomes the ball in play, Rule 20-6 (Kendra’s famously named “eraser rule”’) allows him to correct his error with no penalty prior to making a stroke. But once he makes a stroke at a substituted ball, his original ball is deemed lost and all opportunity to correct is also lost.

The key is to wrong ball/wrong place is whether or not the player has hit his ball in play. Keep in mind that once a player has a ball in his hand, when he substitutes it (i.e. puts it back down with the intention of putting it into play) that ball becomes the ball in play and it can never be a wrong ball.