

YOUR CHANCE TO HAVE AN INPUT ON CHANGING THE RULES OF GOLF. YES, YOU!

Because of the monumental changes likely to occur in the rules of golf in the not too distant future, I am holding in abeyance for a month or two, the discussion of the last two months on the rules associated with dropping the golf ball because the ball was lost, out of bounds, in ground under repair, in a water hazard, etc., and will instead, for at least the next month, give each of you the chance to review the impending changes and the opportunity to make your feelings known to the two governing bodies associated with the rules of golf, namely, the United States Golf Association and the Royal & Ancient Golf Association. What you will be reading below is what those two bodies have disclosed are possible changes to the rules of golf, subject to open discussion by the world's golfers with the goal of completely modifying the rules by January 2019.

So, here's your chance to affect how the game is played. Read the proposals carefully. Digest them. Apply to them your pet peeves (you know you have them). And then make your feelings known. **(the links to the two governing bodies will be found at the end of this discussion)**

What began in 2012 with small discussions from key members of golf's governing bodies about what to do with a set of rules that many felt were unwieldy, undesirable and, often, unintelligible has evolved into a large-scale attempt to revise the way the game is played. The result of this five-year dialogue was finally revealed on March 1st.

The most likely scenario: Starting in 2019, the *Rules of Golf*, authored jointly by the United States Golf Association and the R&A, and used by millions of golfers worldwide, will look very different than it does now.

"There was a recognition on both sides of the pond to take a new look at it, an agreement to put everything on the table and do something good for the game," says John Bodenhamer, USGA senior managing director of rules, competitions and equipment standards. "We're very happy with what we've come up with and excited to see how golfers of all levels feel about what we're proposing."

The proposal includes publishing a simpler version of the rules called the *Players Handbook*. It will be a reference guide to the most common rules situations encountered during a round. It will be written in language more recognized by golfers around the globe, instead of the legalese found in the current book.

And if you're wondering what becomes of the voluminous *Decisions on the Rules of Golf*, it will now be known as The Handbook.

CURRENTLY THERE ARE 34 RULES, AND THE PROPOSAL IS FOR A SMALLER AND EASIER-TO-UNDERSTAND BOOK WITH 24. TO DO THIS, USGA AND R&A OFFICIALS WANT TO CONSOLIDATE MANY OF RULES SECTIONS.

Before anything is changed, everyday golfers will have several months to write, email or call the USGA and give their opinion about the rules they want to change, the rules they haven't changed and what you would change. Once that comment period is done on Aug. 31, rules makers say they will review the feedback, finalize a new set of procedures and penalties, and announce them early in 2018 for 2019 implementation.

The Highlights include the following with greater details of each area following these highlights:

- **Elimination or reduction of "ball moved" penalties:** There will be no penalty for accidentally moving a ball on the putting green or in searching for a ball; and you are not responsible for causing a ball to move unless it is "virtually certain" that you did so.
- **Relaxed putting green rules:** There will be no penalty if a ball played from the putting green hits an unattended flagstick in the hole; you may putt without having the flagstick attended or removed. You may repair spike marks and

other damage made by shoes, animal damage and other damage on the putting green, and there is no penalty for merely touching the line of putt.

- **Relaxed rules for “penalty areas” (currently called “water hazards”):** Red- and yellow-marked penalty areas may cover areas of desert, jungle, lava rock, etc., in addition to areas of water; expanded use of red penalty areas where lateral relief is allowed; and there will be no penalty for moving loose impediments or touching the ground or water in a penalty area.
- **Relaxed bunker rules:** There will be no penalty for moving loose impediments in a bunker or for generally touching the sand with a hand or club. A limited set of restrictions (such as not grounding the club next to the ball) is kept to preserve the challenge of playing from the sand; however, an extra relief option is added for an unplayable ball in a bunker, allowing the ball to be played from outside the bunker with a two-stroke penalty.
- **Relying on player integrity:** Your “reasonable judgment” when estimating or measuring a spot, point, line, area or distance will be upheld, even if video evidence later shows it to be wrong; and elimination of announcement procedures when lifting a ball to identify it or to see if it is damaged.
- **Pace-of-play support:** Reduced time for searching for a lost ball (from five minutes to three); affirmative encouragement of “ready golf” in stroke play; recommending that players take no more than 40 seconds to play a stroke and other changes intended to improve pace of play.
- **Here's the greater detail of each area:**

THE PUTTING GREEN

If you accidentally move your ball or ball-marker on the putting green, there is no penalty. Just put it back.

Currently: It's a one-stroke penalty if you do either (with exceptions).

If you've lifted and replaced your ball on the putting green and it moves, move it back to its original spot no matter whether wind moved it, or there was no clear reason.

Currently: The ball is played from its new location unless it was moved by you or an outside agency. Then it would be replaced.

You can repair almost any damage on the putting green including spike marks and animal damage. You cannot repair natural imperfections.

Currently: You can only repair ball marks or old hole plugs.

So long as you don't improve the conditions for your stroke, you can touch the line of putt to indicate a target.

Currently: Touching the line comes with a penalty of loss of hole (match play) or two shots (stroke play).

You can leave the unattended flagstick in when your ball is on the putting green, and there is no penalty if your ball strikes it.

Currently: Loss of hole (match play) or two-shot penalty (stroke play) if you strike the flagstick with a stroke from the putting green.

WATER HAZARDS

The term water hazards is being changed to penalty areas and will consist of red- and yellow-marked areas. This could include additional areas that don't contain water such as desert, jungle, lava rock, etc. If your ball winds up in one of these areas, a one-stroke penalty is applied if you take relief.

Currently: Relief is allowed only from a water hazard (marked yellow) or a lateral water hazard (marked red).

You can move loose impediments in penalty areas, touch the ground with your hand or club, or ground your club without penalty.

Currently: If you did any of the preceding, it's a loss of hole (match play) or a two-shot penalty (stroke play).

Committees are allowed to mark all penalty areas as red so that lateral relief is always allowed. They can, however, mark a penalty area yellow (no lateral relief) when they feel it's appropriate.

Currently: All water hazards have to be marked yellow unless it's impossible or unreasonable for you to drop behind the hazard. Then it can be marked red.

You can't drop on the opposite side from where the ball last entered a penalty area marked red.

Currently: You can take relief on the opposite side of a lateral water hazard from where your ball last entered it.

BUNKERS

You can touch and move a loose impediment in a bunker when your ball is in that bunker.

Currently: Penalty for doing so is loss of hole (match play) or two shots (stroke play). You can touch the sand with your hand or club so long as you're not testing the conditions of the bunker, you're not placing the club right in front of or behind the ball, and you're not making a practice swing or backswing.

Currently: With some exceptions, such as accidentally falling when entering the bunker, touching the sand with hand or club results in loss of hole (match play) or a two-shot penalty (stroke play).

You can take a two-stroke penalty to obtain relief outside a bunker on a line from the hole through where the ball was at rest in the sand.

Currently: The only penalty relief you can take outside a bunker is to play from where your last stroke was made.

BALL AT REST

You are only considered to have caused your ball to move if it is virtually certain (at least 95 percent likely) that you were the cause.

Currently: You are considered to have caused your ball to move if it is more likely than not (50.1 percent) that you were the cause.

No matter where you are on the course, there is no penalty if you accidentally move your ball while searching for it. Just replace it.

Currently: There is a one-stroke penalty for accidentally moving it.

If your ball is lying off the putting green when it moves, and its original spot isn't known, you just replace it on the estimated spot. An example: If your ball was buried in matted-down grass, replace it in the estimated spot, buried in matted-down grass.

Currently: You would drop when you're not sure of the location.

BALL IN MOTION

If your ball accidentally strikes you, your caddie, your opponent or any equipment, there is no penalty. Play it as it lies. But you cannot deliberately try to carom a shot off your equipment.

Currently: Accidentally hitting yourself, your caddie, the person attending a flagstick on the green—or an attended or removed flagstick when making a stroke from the putting green—resulted in a one- or two-stroke penalty depending on the circumstances.

TAKING RELIEF

The only requirements when taking a drop are to hold the ball above the ground without it touching any object, and it must fall through the air before coming to rest. Height is not a requirement.

Currently: You must stand and hold a ball at shoulder height, with your arm extended, before dropping.

When a ball must be dropped, it has to be in a defined relief area.

Currently: You are sometimes allowed to drop on or as near as possible to a spot or a line. The proposed change would give you 20 inches on either side of a line, and 20 or 80 inches around a spot depending on the type of drop.

A dropped ball must come to rest in the relief area where it was dropped or it must be dropped again.

Currently: The ball must be dropped again if it rolls to any of the nine specified areas in Rule 20-2c. An example: If it rolled more than two club lengths from where the ball first struck the ground. The relief area will either be 80 inches from the reference point (for drops next to a penalty area or for an unplayable lie) or 20 inches (all other drops). The

recommendation is to mark the shaft of a club to assist in measuring.

Currently: Drop areas are measured in club lengths (and you can choose any club to measure).

Your ball is lost if not found within three minutes of searching.

Currently: Your ball is lost if not found within five minutes of searching.

You can substitute a ball when taking relief.

Currently: With a few exceptions, you have to continue with your original ball when taking free relief, though you can substitute a ball when taking a penalty relief.

You can take free relief for an embedded ball anywhere in the general area (formerly “through the green”) of the course except sand (unless a Local Rule is enacted to make free relief available only for embedded balls in areas cut to fairway height or less).

Currently: Free relief is given only for balls embedded in closely mowed areas (fairway height or less) unless a Local Rule is enacted.

When estimating or measuring a spot, point, line, area or distance under a rule, you will not be second-guessed later using evidence such as video review. This applies so long as you use reasonable judgment and do all you reasonably can to make an accurate measurement.

Currently: Your judgment is given no particularly weight or deference and the committee decides any issue about the accuracy of estimation based on a review of all facts.

EQUIPMENT

You can use distance-measuring devices such as laser rangefinders and GPS watches during a round unless a Local Rule is adopted prohibiting their use.

Currently: A Local Rule has to be adopted allowing their use.

You can use a club damaged during a round.

Currently: You can only use a damaged club during a round if the impairment happened during the normal course of play. If it was damaged in anger or for another reason, it can't be used for the remainder of the round.

You can't replace a damaged club during a round unless you were not responsible for its condition.

Currently: You can replace a club if its damage occurred during the normal course of play.

If you have a good reason for lifting a ball, such as to identify it, check for damage or determine if it lies in a condition where relief is permitted (such as checking to see if it's embedded), you don't have to announce your intention to another player or the marker. You also don't have to give that person an opportunity to observe the process.

Currently: Before lifting, you must announce your intention to another player or the marker and allow them to observe the process.

In the extremely rare event that this occurs, a ball cannot be substituted during play of a hole simply because it's misshapen.

Currently: You can replace a misshapen ball.

CADDIES

Your caddy can't stand on a line behind you from the time you take your stance until the stroke is made.

Currently: A caddy can't stand on a line behind you while you're making a stroke, but can line you up while you address the ball.

Your caddy can lift and replace your ball on the putting green without specific authorization from you.

Currently: It's a one-stroke penalty for your caddy to lift your ball without permission.

PACE OF PLAY

A new form of stroke play is recognized where your maximum score for a hole is capped (such as double par or triple bogey). That max score is set by the committee.

Currently: You must hole out in stroke play unless playing Stableford, Par or Bogey formats.

Players in stroke play are encouraged to play “ready golf” when it can be done in a safe and responsible way and opponents in a match play can agree to go out of turn in order to save time.

Currently: There is no penalty for playing out of turn, but in match play an opponent can make you replay a shot if you do so. The recommended allotment of time to make a stroke is no more than 40 seconds, and the Rules recognize that you should normally play more quickly than that.

Currently: No recommendation is given.

ETIQUETTE

Committees can adopt their own codes of player conduct and set penalties for breach of standards in that code.

Currently: Committees can disqualify you for serious breaches of etiquette, but cannot impose lesser penalties.

OTHER RULES OF NOTE

You have to declare you’re playing a provisional ball before making a stroke with it. But you can begin a search, and still have the option of playing a provisional so long as you do so within three minutes.

Currently: The moment you go forward to search for your original ball, you can no longer play a provisional.

You’re allowed to listen to or watch sporting events, news broadcasts or music as “entertainment” during a round if it doesn’t give you an advantage when playing. It would be a penalty, for example, if you were listening because it improves your rhythm or relaxes you, but not if you wanted to share a new song you love with other members of your group.

Currently: With some exceptions, you cannot listen to music or watch/listen to sporting events and news during a round.

You now have the mandate to make your feelings known. You must submit your ideas no later than August 31st of this year. If you’re one of the thousands that complain about not being able to take relief from your ball in a divot, here’s your chance to get that rule changed, among a myriad of others. Here’s the e-mail links:

<http://www.usga.org/rules-hub/rules-modernization/feedback-landing-page.html>

Hit em straight and I’ll see you at the Muni.