



If golf balls are flying,

golf course workers should be

wearing hard hats, according to OSHA.

But the debate continues on whether

or not helmets should be required.

# Head Case

**T**hey go up and come down, so you don't have to be a physicist to classify golf balls as flying and falling objects.

If you agree with that — and you work on a golf course while duffers are at play — then you should be wearing a hard hat. If you're not donning a helmet on the course, you could be cited for breaking the rules.

According to an Occupational Safety & Health Administration regulation, "the employer shall ensure that each affected employee wears a protective helmet when working in areas where there is potential for injury to the head from falling objects."

If falling golf balls don't pose potential for injury, neither do 100-mph Randy Johnson fastballs that run in and under the chin. But it doesn't take a census count to show that a

lot of superintendents and golf course maintenance workers don't wear hard hats.

"Most workers aren't wearing them," confirms Sarah Bundschuh, an Atlanta-based safety consultant to the golf course maintenance industry.

At Salinas Golf and CC in Salinas, Calif., some workers wear hard hats and some don't.

"It's not a mandatory thing here," admits Robert Hedberg, general manager of the course. "But it's encouraged."

Workers may not be wearing hard hats because they know OSHA is not enforcing the regulation. "If OSHA came out and inspected your course and your workers were not wearing hard hats, you probably wouldn't be cited," Bundschuh reveals.

But if a serious injury occurred because a worker was hit in the head with a golf ball — and that worker wasn't wearing a hard hat — then OSHA would probably cite the course, she adds.

DAN BEEDY

BY LARRY AYLWARD, MANAGING EDITOR



The hard hat issue is unclear among OSHA regulators, Bundschuh insists. Some state regulators require golf course workers to wear hard hats and others don't.

Gayle Fratto, a safety consultant for the Georgia Research Institute (which works with OSHA on a contractual basis), says OSHA doesn't crack down on the golf course industry because it's not considered a high-hazard industry. Still, he advises maintenance workers to wear hard hats.

Hedberg says the hard hat issue is often black and white.

"At some courses, you wear helmets or you don't work there," he says. "There are no ifs, ands or buts."

It's that way at courses operated by Dallas-based ClubCorp. "Our (policy) has it that you wear a hard hat if you're on the maintenance crew," confirms Monte Carmack, ClubCorp's vice president of golf operations.

Rick Niemier, a superintendent for 14 years who currently works at Saddleback Ridge GC in Solon, Iowa, has been hit twice by golf balls — in the back and on the ankle — but he still doesn't wear a hard hat.

Niemier, who previously worked as superintendent at Fairfield Golf and CC in Fairfield, Iowa, didn't require crew members there to wear hard hats either. "My policy has always been to provide them to my employees, but I've never required them to wear them," he says.

### Common sense

For some workers, wearing a hard hat comes down to common sense. If a course is closed and there's no chance of golfers hacking balls destined for workers' heads, crew members may forsake their hard hats while they spray the greens, and they wouldn't be breaking OSHA's rule.

But if two busloads of beer-drinking golfers are scheduled to play a course — and not one of these Bluto Blutarski types is in a hurry to finish in four hours — then crew members would be wise to wear hard hats and abide by OSHA's rule.

While Bundschuh believes hard hats offer little protection from golf balls because they only cover a small portion of the body, she ad-

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## A Bellyful ... of Laughs

Gettin' plunked in the paunch with a golf ball is no laughing matter, but superintendent Ron Kirkman offers a story that's a real rib tickler.

Kirkman was mowing and striping the first fairway at the Needham GC near Boston early one evening about three years ago when he saw a white flash coming at him faster than a Pedro Martinez speedball. Kirkman had just scaled a small hill on his mower and was about 230 yards from the tee when he saw a golfer in his follow-through. "Where'd he come from?" Kirkman muttered to himself, a heartbeat before pinpointing the golfer's ball bound for his belly.

The golfer, a member at Needham known as a big hitter, watched Kirkman ride up over the hill after he hit his ball and muttered to himself the same thing as Kirkman. The golfer knew he hit his ball toward Kirkman, but he lost sight of it in the evening sun. But Kirkman saw it floating like a butterfly and soon felt it stinging like a bee.

"I didn't even move," Kirkman says. "I knew it was going to hit me, so I just tightened my stomach."

Remarkably, Kirkman caught the ball in his breadbasket and kept on mowing and moving along. Then he started scheming, as all practical jokers do.

Kirkman made his turn and headed away from the golfers and back down the hill. Out of sight from the golfer, he threw the ball in the fairway.

When he made another turn and headed back toward the tee, the golfer motioned him to come over. The golfer explained that he didn't see Kirkman until a second after he hit his ball and was afraid it might have hit the superintendent, who was wearing his best poker face.

"I told him I saw the ball in flight the whole way," Kirkman says. "I told him that it was a great hit and went way over my head."

The golfer believed Kirkman and was ecstatic to learn he hit the ball about 330 yards — a career-long drive.

Kirkman's gut was black and blue for a few weeks. "It hurt like a bugger," he says, especially when he laughed about his prank.

To this day, the golfer, whom Kirkman knows well, doesn't know the real story.

"I can't let on," Kirkman says. "He'd be heartbroken."

But Kirkman does bring up the, ahem, "monstrous" drive.

"Sometimes I ask him if he ever hit another drive that far," Kirkman quips. "He can hit the ball pretty far, but he can't hit 330 yards. He can't hit it farther than Tiger Woods."

— Larry Aylward



MIKE KLEMM



## Head Case

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mits that some protection is better than none.

"If you're in a situation where there are a lot of golfers and you're in the middle of

### Maybe They Should Wear Mouth Guards

Hard hats are supposed to protect you, right? They do, most of the time.

The story goes that a turf maintenance worker at Westchester CC was riding a fairway mower when he heard a golfer yell, "Fore." Thankfully, the worker was wearing a hard hat.

The worker, following his instincts, ducked his head to avoid the errant golf ball. But when he ducked, his hard hat fell from his head, bounced off the mower's steering wheel and smacked him in the face. The golf ball missed him, but the head-on collision with the hard hat left the worker with a chipped tooth.



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them, then a hard hat is added protection," she notes.

If maintenance workers are involved in more heavy-duty work, like sawing tree branches, then hard hats are essential, safety experts agree.

Fratto, who has visited several construction sites, says workers there complain about wearing hard hats because they cause perspiration and can be uncomfortable in the heat. But Fratto says well-constructed hard hats feature good airflow and aren't as hot and irritating as workers claim.

Niemier begs to differ.

"They're hot and uncomfortable," he says of hard hats. "Every time you bend over to do something, they fall off."

Bundschuh says some course workers wear pith helmets, particularly to combat sunburn. But a pith helmet is not a hard hat in OSHA's eyes because it's not approved by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health Approval, she notes.

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Bundschuh believes that wearing a hard hat is less important than wearing safety glasses and hearing protection. Even though he believes hard hats are necessary, ClubCorp's Carmack agrees.

"You have more accidents with workers running chain saws, weed eaters and lawn mowers than you will with someone getting dinged on the head with a golf ball," Carmack says.

**If OSHA ever decides to strictly enforce its hard hat regulation, would golfers have to wear them? That'll be the day.**

### Legal issues

Assume that a golf course worker who's not wearing a hard hat is struck in the head by an errant golf ball and injured. Whether or not OSHA cites the course for safety negligence, the injured employee is eli-



gible for workman's compensation.

"Fault has nothing to do with it," says Gary Crist, a lawyer representing the National Golf Foundation. "Whether or not the employee was complying with safety guidelines is irrelevant. The employee is still entitled to whatever workman's compensation provides."

The issue could also affect golfers. If OSHA ever decides to strictly enforce its hard hat regulation, would golfers have to wear them?

Fratto says no because there's a difference between the two groups. Players are more attuned to what's going around them, as in who's hitting behind them. A player is also more inclined to hear another golfer yell "fore," rather than a maintenance worker who's riding a noisy fairway mower.

Insurance companies may also have a say in the hard hat issue. For instance, a course might have a lower insurance premium if it requires workers to wear hard hats.

As Bundschuh says, the hard hat issue always provides fodder for discussion in golf course safety seminars. But discussions don't lead to any exact interpretation.

"It doesn't seem to get any clearer," Bundschuh says. ■

## LOOKING FOR A NEW HAT?

### What to look for in head protection

- Resists penetration by objects.
- Absorbs the shock of a blow.
- Is water resistant and slow burning.
- Comes with instructions explaining proper adjustment and replacement of the suspension and headband

### Hard hats are divided into three industrial classes:

- **Class A** – These are helmets for general service. They provide good impact protection but limited voltage protection. They are used mainly in mining, building construction, shipbuilding, lumbering and manufacturing.
- **Class B** – These are helmets for employees doing electrical work. They protect against falling objects and high-voltage shocks and burns.
- **Class C** – Designed for comfort, these lightweight helmets offer limited protection. They protect workers from bumping against fixed objects, but do not protect against falling objects or electric shock.

Source: OSHA