

The Winds of Change

The finest legal minds not charging \$700 an hour recently reached agreements on tweaks to the Rules of Golf. While I know *Golfdom* readers have already committed the vagaries of Decision 4-4a/6 to memory, it may be worth considering one of the big changes and what it means to the world of maintenance.

At first glimpse, the change to Rule 18-2b does not sound like it'll be a life changer for the turfgrass world. To refresh your memories, again, because I know you've been enraptured nightly by reading the 3-inch thick Decisions book before bed: in the past, the Rules deemed a player had caused a ball to move after they addressed it by placing their putter behind the ball, whether they had moved the ball or not. Wind and tightly mown greens were usually the culprit, but that didn't matter to the frosty Rules of Golf which invoked a penalty if anyone saw it, or as was the case with many golfers, they called it on themselves.

Well, the bluecoats got together and did something after several high profile episodes where HD television-aided viewers phoned in violations when balls moved and players had done nothing wrong other than place their putter behind the pellet on a windy day. The dirty little secret we all knew: this is as much a product of the green speed chase as it is a windy day. On a fast, firm green cut to 1/8" it's not easy to get your ball to hold still.

The 2012 version of the Rules fixes the problem with an exception

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BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



that says players haven't addressed the ball by taking their stance if it's clear wind moved the ball. Now they just play the ball where it lies after the wind has done its thing.

What do I love about this change? Well instead of asking the players to replace the ball, the bluecoats said, just move a bit and play the ball from where it came to rest. Following years of rules and decisions that have allowed the golfer to fiddle, fudge, touch, re-touch, scrap, slap and in general, fuss too much with their ball and the green, the bluecoats have gone retro by returning to the most fundamental tenet of all: play it as it lies.

Now, this rule change is not going to change the world, but it's one small step backwards for the green. And for a world where the putting surface has taken on entirely too much focus, the maintenance world will take anything it can get.

No, golfers won't be asking greens to get a little bit longer in the blade or bumpier in an homage to late 1800s golf. Nor will Tour pros be any less fussy about... everything. But for the first time since the stymie was

outlawed, the rulemakers have actually made the putting surface just a little less sacrosanct and precious in the eyes of the oh-so precious Rules. More importantly, they've said to the world that we don't need to take this whole nonsense of touching and placing your ball on the green quite so seriously.

Long before our time, greens were much less important. When the stymie — that's when players left their balls down on the greens and had to play around them strategically — golf entailed much less touching of the ball when it was on the area known as the green. Golf was probably a lot more interesting then and certainly less expensive and faster. Mostly because of the Rules and advancement in agronomy, we know the green has taken on too much importance. And for a change, it seems the rulemakers have taken notice.

Now, about those guys bracing putters against their bellies...

Reach Shack, Golfdom's contributing editor, at geoffshack@me.com. Check out his blog — now a part of the Golf Digest family — at www.geoffshackelford.com.