



Illegal Hole Placements?

By Jeff Hall

Editor's Note: This article appeared in the Vol. XLVI, No. 8 of *GOLF JOURNAL*, the official publication of the USGA. It appears here with permission. I've always told my employees that day in and day out, setting the cups properly for play just might be the most important job we do. Author Jeff Hall, who is the Manager of the Rules of Golf for the USGA, presents a good look at this important task.

"Several times this year, the youngster working at our golf course has cut holes a scant 14 to 20 inches from the fringe, or on the edge of a tier on a green. Is there such a thing as an 'illegal' hole placement?"

USGA Member Bob LaPrade, of Cicero, New York, recently wrote us a letter asking this question; the answer may surprise you. First, a question. How can the Rules-making body not have a Rule to address something as important as the location of the hole on the putting green? After all, the Rules book contains 34 Rules with various subsections. Why does it not address something that every golfer confronts during play of every hole?

Well, let's suppose for a moment that there was a Rule that required the hole to be placed no nearer than 15 feet from any edge of a putting green. During the stroke-play championship at XYZ Country Club, a competitor in the final group notices that the hole on the 17th green is 13 feet from the edge, in violation of our mythical Rule. What could we do? Do we penalize the Committee two strokes? Typically, if you have a Rule, a penalty is usually associated with its breach.

Although there is not a Rule that governs the location of the hole on the putting green, the USGA provides guidelines with respect to selection of hole locations. The USGA believes there are many factors that affect the selection of hole locations, but none is more important than common sense. The desired goal in determining hole locations is fair results. A Committee

should test the skills of the players in a competition; tricky hole locations do little to test a player's abilities.

Here's a summary of the USGA's guidelines on the selection of hole locations for daily or competitive play:

1. Consider the design of the hole as the architect intended it to be played. Be aware of the probable weather conditions for the day, i.e., wind direction, weather forecast (remember, finding higher ground for a round to be played in the rain may make the difference between finishing a round or suspending play), and the holding quality of a green. Having a handle on these items requires doing a bit of homework in advance, but the information can prove invaluable.

2. There should be enough putting green surface between the hole and the front and sides of the green to accommodate the type of shot required at a given hole. Thus, on a hole that requires a long-iron shot, the hole should be located deeper into the green and farther from its sides than a hole that is to be played with a pitching wedge. As a rule of thumb, it is generally accepted that the hole be located at least five paces from the edge of the green. The contour of the ground and the severity of hazards around the green should also factor into the proximity of the hole to the green's edge. Remember, a player who hits a reasonably good shot but misses the putting surface should have a fair opportunity for recovery.

3. An area of two to three feet in radius around the hole should be as nearly level as possible and of uniform grade. Placing holes in tricky locations, i.e., on a sharp slope where a ball can gather speed, is undesirable. A player should be able to stop the ball at the hole regardless of the direction from which he plays.

4. Be careful to avoid areas of poor turf and damaged areas on the green, such as an old hole plug that has not been completely healed.

5. Holes should be cut as nearly vertical as possible, not plumb with the

contour of the green.

6. A balanced selection of hole locations (left, right, front, and back) for the entire course helps to insure fair results without placing a premium on "working" the ball in only one direction. Additionally, a balanced selection of hole locations provides for a golf course that plays a consistent length on a daily basis. For most golfers, this means a more accurate handicap since the course will play more closely to its predetermined course and Slope ratings regardless of when they choose to play.

7. The greenkeeper responsible for the actual cutting of the holes must be aware that the Rules of Golf call for a hole with a diameter of exactly 4 1/4 inches. When a hole-liner is used, its outer diameter cannot exceed 4 1/4 inches, and it must be sunk at least one inch below the putting green surface.

Hole locations should be balanced for the duration of the competition. Remember, in a stroke-play competition, the first hole of the first round is just as important as the final hole of the final round. The USGA does not subscribe to the theory that the course should be progressively more difficult each day of the competition. Other considerations when determining hole locations for a competition include practice rounds and the traffic patterns of the players as they exit the putting green.

Determining hole locations is not an exact science; it requires doing some homework and relying on common sense. Don't lose sight of the objective—fair results that should be determined by a player's skill. What is the reward for a job well done? Well, you probably won't be showered with accolades from each of the players saying how well the course was set up. But make even one mistake over the course of a 72-hole stroke-play competition, and you will hear complaining from all but two of the 156 players in the field. The eventual champion—and the guy who pitched in from 50 yards out. 🏌️