

The Rules of Golf and Your Golf Course Maintenance Staff

by David Finney, CGCS

Are you ever concerned that the daily maintenance activities of your staff and crew might alter the outcome of a friendly match, or perhaps even effect the outcome of a tournament? What happens if one of your crew rakes a bunker that has a ball lying in it? What's the ruling if your fairway mower runs over and embeds a ball in play, or cuts up a ball in play? How do you respond to the golfer, and how do the golfers decide the outcome of a hole or the match, if one of your crew has inadvertently interfered? Armed with the correct information on the Rules of golf and how they are applied to everyday situations involving your maintenance crews and their equipment is something you need to know.

I've been a Golf Course Superintendent since 1986 and a student of the Rules of Golf since 1992 when I began studying the rules in preparation for the

GCSAA certification exam. Since that time I have attended several PGA/USGA four-day Rules and Tournament Administration Workshops, and have had the opportunity to work as a Rules Official at the championships of the West Virginia Golf Association. Although I'm not on a par with rules authorities such as Clyde Luther, or Tom Meeks of the USGA, I have gathered some pertinent information on the rules of golf and how they effect us as Golf Course Superintendents, our staffs, and our daily maintenance operations.

One very interesting piece of information I've come across in the Decisions on the Rules of Golf book is Decision 1-4/1. This decision basically says that distractions are a common occurrence which players must accept. My interpretation of this decision provides the Superintendent with sort of a carte blanche for our

maintenance operations. What it means to me is that the noise from a maintenance vehicle passing by a group of golfers, then engine noise from a mower, even the noises associated with construction are no excuse for a bad shot. Of course this decision doesn't give us the right to throw the courtesy normally shown to golfers out the window, but it does say that the noise we make while working on the golf course cannot be used as an excuse for poor play, missed shots, or lost matches.

For the most part, our maintenance crews and equipment are considered to be outside agencies. An outside agency is anything that is not part of the match, or in stroke play not part of the competitor's side. Whenever our crew members or equipment interfere with play of the ball, rule 18-1 (Ball at rest moved by outside

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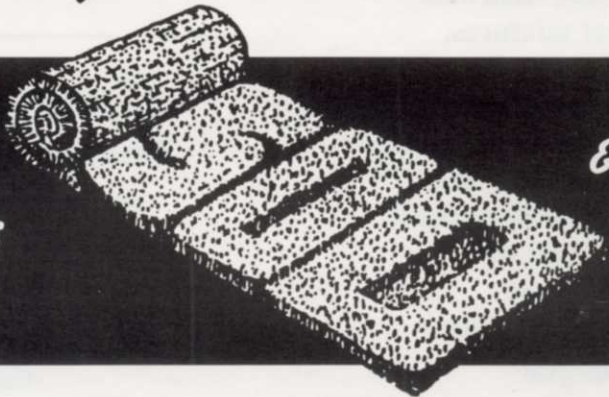


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agency) and rule 19-1 (Ball in motion deflected or stopped by outside agency) will come into play.

Rule 18-1 simply says if a ball that is in play, and at rest is moved by a mower, a utility vehicle, or even a crew member (any outside agency), the ball is to be replaced before the player plays another stroke, and there is no penalty to the player. Rule 19-1 gets a little trickier for the golfer and actually introduces an element of luck into the game. Rule 19-1 says basically that there is no penalty if a ball in motion is accidentally deflected or stopped by any outside agency, and the ball shall be played as it lies. This is referred to as rub of the green. The term rub of the green can mean either good luck or bad luck for the player. For instance, if a ball in motion hits the mower while your operator is mowing fairways (in bounds) and is deflected out-of-bounds, then the ball is out-of-

bounds. The player must proceed under rule 27-1, take the stroke and distance penalty associated with the ball going out-of-bounds, and play the next shot from where the original ball was last played. In a similar scenario, while mowing fairways your operator pulls over, and is sitting out-of-bounds waiting for the players to go through. If a shot played from in bounds goes out-of-bounds, hits the mower and is deflected back in bounds, the ball is in bounds and playable.

There are two exceptions to rule 19-1, both dealing with a ball in motion landing in or on an outside agency. Rule 19-1a says that if a ball in motion after a stroke other than on the putting green comes to rest in or on a piece of maintenance equipment, then through-the-green the ball shall be dropped, or on the putting green the ball shall be placed as near as possible to the spot where the ball landed on the piece of equipment. Rule 19-1b goes on to say that if a ball in motion after a stroke on a putting green is deflected or stopped by, or comes to

rest in or on a piece of maintenance equipment, the stroke shall be cancelled, the ball replaced and the stroke replayed. In either case, if the ball lands in or on a piece of maintenance equipment and the equipment drives away with the ball, another ball may be substituted, with no penalty.

Turning now to the application of these rules, imagine that you're taking a mid-afternoon tour of your course, paying close attention to turf conditions, but not paying much attention to where you're driving, when you accidentally drive over a ball in play. Now what do you do? If the lie of a ball in play has been altered by a piece of maintenance equipment, the player is permitted to lift, clean and place the ball in the nearest most similar lie (within one club length), without penalty (rule 20-3b). Carrying this one step further, if the lie of a ball in play has been altered and the original spot is not determinable, the ball shall be dropped if its original lie was either through-the-green or in a hazard, or on a

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putting green the ball shall be placed (rule 20-3c) as near as possible to the place where it lay. And if a ball in play is deemed to have been damaged by a mower or any other piece of maintenance equipment, another ball may be substituted (rule 5-3).

Rule 25 is the rule dealing with abnormal ground conditions, casual water, ground under repair, and there are a number of interesting decisions based on this rule relating to golf course maintenance. Decision 25/14 defines a hole made by a greenkeeper as ground temporarily dug up in connection with course maintenance. Decision 25/15 states that an aeration hole is not a hole made by a greenkeeper, therefore relief is not granted. However, a local rule (33-8/32) is suggested which may be adopted by your club when you aerify, that does allow a player to take relief from aeration holes. Naturally, where there are aeration holes there

are aeration plugs. The ruling pertaining to aeration plugs can be found in decision 23/12. It states that although loose soil is not a loose impediment through-the-green, aeration plugs are considered to be compacted soil, so they are considered to be loose impediments, which may be moved away from the ball before making a shot. Just be careful not to move the ball when you move the plugs, or you'll be assessed a one-stroke penalty under rule 18-2c (Ball moved after touching loose impediment).

How should ruts made by tractors be treated under the rules? Decision 25/16 explains that a rut made by a tractor is not a hole made by a greenkeeper. Deep ruts should be declared as ground under repair by the Committee, however shallow indentations made by greenkeeping equipment is not ground under repair. A ball in a shallow indentation would have to be played as it lies.

Is there any relief from a tree stump under the rules? Decision 25/8 says that unless the stump is marked as ground under repair, or is in the process of being

removed there is no relief. A tree stump is nothing more than a short tree according to the USGA. What would be the status of a tree that had been blown over by a storm and was lying on the golf course? Decision 25/9 states that this tree is not necessarily ground under repair if the tree is still attached to the stump. Decision 23/7 goes further to specify that this same fallen tree (still attached to the stump) is not a loose impediment until a member of the greenkeeping staff cuts the tree away from the stump. The fallen tree then becomes a loose impediment, and only then may branches from the tree be broken off by the player, if they interfere with his swing (decision 23-1/4). In any case where a tree has fallen on the golf course, the Committee would be justified in declaring the area covered by the tree to be ground under repair (decision 25/9).

Decision 25/11 explains the many ramifications of grass clippings. Grass clippings are only ground under repair if they have been piled for removal. A

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clippings piled for removal interfere with his stance or swing. Grass clippings are by definition loose impediments, whether or not they are piled for removal, and may be removed by the player. But again, don't move the ball when removing loose grass clippings, or you'll pick up a penalty stroke under rule 18-2c. It's also worth noting that grass clippings that adhere to the ball are not loose impediments, and removal of adhering grass clippings would constitute cleaning the ball (decision 21/2), costing you a one-stroke penalty.

Have the members at your club ever had to invoke the "leaf rule" in the fall? Actually there is no such thing, however the, Decisions book suggest that the Committee may adopt a local rule to deal with the seasonal problem of leaves. Decision 33-8/31 suggests adoption of a local rule declaring accumulations of

leaves through-the-green to be ground under repair, allowing rule 25-1 to be applied.

And finally, what is the ruling if a member of your staff rakes a bunker when the player's ball lies in it, and the raking improves the lie of the ball or the line of play? Decision 13-2/4 states that if the staff member raked the bunker on the instructions, or with the sanction of the player, the player would incur a two stroke or loss of hole penalty. Otherwise, there would be no penalty. If in raking a bunker your staff member accidentally rakes over the ball partially burying it, rule 20-3b applies and the original lie of the ball shall be recreated as nearly as possible.

The rules of golf and their application to our side of the business can be involved, even a bit complicated, but they are always interesting. If a question ever arises at your club regarding your operation and the rules of the game, the best and closest source of information on

the rules is you state golf association. In our area of the country, the Virginia State Golf Association, the West Virginia Golf Association, and the Mid-Atlantic Golf Association have knowledgeable, competent rules people on their staff. You can also refer your rules questions directly to the USGA, but keep in mind that the USGA will render a decision only to clubs that conduct their competitions in accordance with the Rules of Golf.

The author is employed as Golf Course Superintendent at Virginia National Golf Club in Bluemont, VA. He also serves on the Rules Committee of the West Virginia Golf Association, and has worked as a Rules Official at the Championships of the WVGA since 1995.

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