

Rules of Engagement

By: Nathan Crace Date: May 18, 2003

Got rules where you work? Most people do. There are the obligatory rules of social acceptance that we all abide by such as no spitting in someone's coffee and wearing pants to the office and then there are the rules and procedures that are a little more, well shall we say, gray. Such as what you can and cannot do and say around your piers. These usually have some variation from industry to industry and even from business to business. Then there are the rules that are specific to your profession. Attorneys, CPAs, and police officers, for example, must abide by strict guidelines that artists and musicians don't exactly worry about committing to memory—let alone attending workshops to maintain continuing education credits.

Then there are professional golfers. Not golf professionals. Professional golfers. Golf professionals are the men and women who keep the golf shop side of operations at your local club running on a day-to-day basis. Most of them know the Rules of Golf pretty well, having served as tournament director for the club championship, your annual four-ball, etc. Most have attended some type of rules seminar as part of their continuing education. But the professional golfers—the ones whose livelihood is conducted on television each week—seem to have missed the boat a bit on this one. To their credit, in each tournament there is a team of rules officials to clear up any questions on the course, so they don't have a real need to know every rule in the book. And anyone who plays any competitive golf understands the procedure to taking a drop from a water hazard or an unplayable lie...or do they?

Just about each week, the cameras catch a professional golfer calling a rules official over to tell him or her how to take relief from a cart path or utilize the antenna on their two-way radio as a pointing device to designate the perimeter of the zone for a drop from a hazard. Granted, the players are more than likely covering their, er, assets, since a mistake could cost them strokes and thousands of dollars. However, you begin to wonder how much they really know or don't know about the rules that make the game what it is. Remember Craig Stadler building his stance by placing a towel on the ground under a tree so he wouldn't get his pants wet when he had to play a shot from his knees in the 1987 San Diego Open? It was actually brought up after the fact by a television viewer more astute than most and the Tour later agreed and disqualified Stadler for signing an incorrect scorecard. Protecting his \$50 trousers cost Stadler \$37,000!

A few years ago, Davis Love III was standing over a putt on the 17th hole of the final round of the Players Championship at the TPC at Sawgrass when his practice stroke brushed the ball and moved it. Now here's where it gets crazy: Love (one of the top players in the world) asked playing partner Justin Leonard (another one of the top players in the world) what to do. Leonard suggested he play it as a stroke and continue on. Wrong answer. He should have taken a penalty stroke and then replaced his ball before taking the next stroke. As a result, he ended up signing an incorrect scorecard and costing himself about \$90,000 and almost a spot on the Ryder Cup! I guess that's a good enough reason why so many rules officials are covering the grounds at each event. Although Love didn't like it, he knew it was his own fault and he accepted it. There was no kicking dirt on the shoes of the rules officials like some Major League Baseball umpire. No throwing off of the sport coat and screaming at the basketball referee. He made the mistake. He accepted it. Rules are rules.

I've been there and it's not fun. When I was working as an assistant golf professional some 10 years ago, I was helping run the Thrifty Car Rental Mississippi Open in its first year of returning to the Mississippi golf scene and a strong field comprised of amateurs and professionals alike made for a lot of real good golf. However, I still vividly recall having to tell a well-known professional golfer (not golf professional) with years of mini tour experience and years playing foreign tours that he had disqualified himself. DQ. Dairy Queen. (His name will be withheld in this story out of respect to him as a player). Here I was at age 21, sitting in the scoring tent, going over his scorecard over and over again. I couldn't believe it. He had signed for a lower score than he had made on a hole. I had to catch him on his way out of the scoring tent and let him know. He didn't like it. Looking at it from his perspective, I can understand why: here's a kid telling him he was finished. Done. I hated it more for him than for me and he hated me for telling him. I didn't blame him. He argued with me that he hadn't left the scoring tent and should be allowed to change the scorecard. After a few minutes of trying to explain the problem to him again, long-time golf professional (not professional golfer) Johnny Andrews came to my aid, reviewed the situation, and simply asked him, "Are you wrong or is the Rule book wrong?" The player said nothing, turned, and walked to his car.

That's just it. Is the book wrong? The Rules of Golf are what disqualify people, not rules officials. They only review, administrate and deliver the sometimes bad news. So why can't Tour players attend a rules workshop from time to time? I know they have to spend a lot of time living up to their end of the bargain on endorsement deals, working on their games, and still somehow squeezing in family time. But if I worked somewhere that was governed by one of the most widely used rulebooks in the world, I would want to know what those rules were and understand how to apply them. Plus it would speed up play and save on the wear and tear of the Tour's walkie-talkie antennas/pointers.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from the archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2003.