

Whose Rules Are These?

By: Nathan Crace Date: May 25, 2005

I receive e-mail all the time ranging from those who agree "110%" with what I write to those who "can't believe [I] would write that" to everything in between. I also get a lot of suggestions regarding topics for future columns. Mostly, they deal with the same topics or topics I've already written about—sometimes more than once. But from time to time I get an idea that interests me from someone who makes a unique or interesting point. A few weeks ago, Ned B. from Slidell, Louisiana asked if I thought that the Tour golfers receive an unfair advantage over you and I in that they have hundreds (if not thousands) of fans who can help to spot a lost ball. Ned wondered why regular players (like you and me) couldn't just locate a point as close as possible to where we thought the ball was lost and crop another ball under penalty of a stroke instead of suffering stroke and distance penalties.

At first glimpse, it would be easy to say that you can't treat a lost ball like a ball in a water hazard because there is no line delineating a lost ball "area" such as you have around a water hazard. But upon further inspection, Ned's question raises a much more important point: could (or should) the USGA establish one set of rules for the pros and another set for everyone else. This has been part of the base argument against the "competition" ball with a limited ball flight for the pros. It also begins a slippery slope that could quite possibly have no clear end in sight if we get started down that path. For example, do we have one set of rules for amateurs, one for competitive amateurs, one for male professionals and yet another for female professionals? Sound ridiculous? Consider the following:

In the 1999 Phoenix Open, Tiger Woods' ball came to rest behind a large 1,000+ pound boulder typical throughout desert golf courses. After getting a ruling from a Tour rules official, the boulder was deemed to be a "loose impediment" which Woods could move (or have moved) within the Rules of Golf. Naturally, there was no way Woods nor his caddie could move the "loose impediment" on their own. So a dozen or so willing spectators chipped in some elbow grease and rolled the stone out of the way so Tiger could play his shot.

The obvious response is that if you or I had the same situation in our regular game, no one in our foursome could (or would) help to move such an impediment. But beyond that, how could they rule that a 1,000+ pound boulder be a loose impediment? Do you honestly think that such a large stone was not even slightly set in the soil to some extent by its own weight? In tournament play, I've stopped myself from moving a stone smaller than a golf ball because I felt resistance when initially trying to move it and knew immediately in my mind that it was not "loose." And what if Tiger's incident had been a Futures Tour event on a Thursday for a player playing in the first morning group who was also near the bottom of the money list with no throngs following her? Think there would have been enough men in the gallery to jump in and move the "loose impediment?" Yeah, right.

So back to Ned's original question about the lost ball rule. To be honest, most "everyday" players don't play golf by the rules anyway. They improve their lie, pick up putts that are "in the leather," hole putts with the flagstick in the cup, and the list goes on and on. How many times do you go to the first tee in your regular game with two balls in your pocket? There are no mulligans in the Rules of Golf. So if you're going to do these things, then why not just pick a spot close to where you think the ball was when it was lost and assess a stroke and not distance?

The Rules are the rules and they are adapted and changed very carefully from time to time. But I still stand by my opinion that one set of rules should govern all play—amateur, professional, male, female, and otherwise. If your group wants to tweak the rules a bit to speed up play or make it more fun, go ahead. Who cares? If you are going to give each other two and three foot putts, why not avoid going back to the tee when you discover the ball you thought was in the left rough cannot be found? Of course, you need to make sure everyone understands which rules will be bent when you are standing on the first tee before the scenario arises.

Do the pros get an advantage over the rest of us regarding the lost ball rule by virtue of having a crowd around all the time? Sure. But they also have to hole out every putt and hit every shot just like in competitive golf on any level from junior golf to the Tour. In the end, the game should be fun for all who play and not feel burdensome. The last thing we need is a bunch of golfers leaving the game because it's too slow to play or no fun because all of the rules are too strict.

There is, however, a reason I like to play the ball down and putt out everything. Have you ever noticed the guy in your group with the 10 handicap who can't break 90 when he plays in the club championship? Maybe it's not just the pressure after all. You see, all of those two-and-one-half footers suddenly become more difficult to hole out when they actually count and you have grown accustomed to simply picking them up—especially once you miss the first two. Playing by the rules makes you a better player, but not everyone wants to be a "better player." Thank goodness, a large contingent is just happy to be on the course and out of the office. That's what it's really about anyway, right?

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 2005.