

About Penalties in the Game of Golf

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In sports games, there are Rules that serve to define each game, consequently differentiating between games. In football and basketball, the game clock stops if a player with the ball steps out of bounds but there is no penalty. In golf, there is no game clock to be stopped but there is a penalty when a ball comes to rest out of bounds. The philosophical underpinnings of golf penalties in stroke play are the subject of this article.

Golf differs from most sports games since in golf the player is often the one to both observe a breach of the Rules and to assess the penalty for that breach. This responsibility is particularly important in stroke play, as every player has the right to expect other players to properly apply the Rules. The Rules of Golf express this responsibility in Rule 1.3b(1), "Players are responsible for applying the Rules to themselves."

It has been observed by some, that golf is unique among sports games in that the players *should* want to play the game properly; that is, they do not seek to benefit from improper play. On-course officials tend to be present only at higher level golf competitions and their primary role is to assist players with applying the Rules properly rather than "calling" penalties as in other sport's games. The official's sole job is to offer opinions when asked and to use these opinions to prevent needless penalties if possible.

In baseball, a runner is only out at first base if the umpire calls the player out and in the same fashion a foul is not committed in basketball unless the referee calls a foul. In golf, the Rules state that when a player's ball is in play and the player moves it or causes it to move except as permitted by a Rule the player gets a penalty. If this happens during a stroke-play competition, then in returning the scorecard, the player must include this penalty because the player is responsible for the correctness of the score recorded for each hole on the scorecard. In order for the player to meet his or her obligations under the Rules, the player must be aware both of the facts of the situation (that the ball in play was moved) and the Rule (that there is a penalty for such movement). In every stroke-play competition, it is these two issues that are fundamental to a fair competition and the Rules provide for proper judgment of the player who plays improperly.

There is one further point to be made about the differences between golf and other sports with respect to penalties. In other sports, sometimes a breach of a Rule is part of the strategy of the game, such as an intentional foul in basketball to prevent an easy layup or to stop the game clock. This may be a perfectly acceptable part of the game of basketball. In golf, a breach of the Rules should never be part of the strategy of the game and the penalties are graded accordingly to discourage a player from taking an action that is not allowed by the Rules.

Richard Tufts, in the 1960 book *The Principles Behind the Rules of Golf* suggests dividing penalties into four categories, those that may result from [1] ordinary play (striking a ball out of bounds), [2] an accidental act of the player (moving a ball in play), [3] a purposeful act of the

player (improving the lie of the ball), and [4] failure to correctly follow a required procedure (dropping the ball incorrectly). The term penalty should not be thought of as indicating punishment but rather as an adjustment to a player's score, which means that the penalty must not be less than the advantage gained from the Rules violation.

There is no sliding or fractional scale for penalties. The Rules in match play call for only three gradations in penalty: [1] one stroke, [2] loss of hole, and [3] disqualification. Correspondingly, the Rules in stroke play also call for only three gradations in penalty: [1] one stroke, [2] two strokes and [3] disqualification.

There are numerous penalties of one stroke common to both match and stroke play, including, marking a ball, or dropping a ball; for taking relief from a penalty area or deciding that a ball is unplayable. The advantage gained by the player in not following a prescribed procedure may be only slight but nonetheless the player has played other than in accordance with the Rules and there must be an adjustment to the score relative to the player who played properly. In taking relief from a penalty area or deciding that the ball is unplayable, the penalty of one stroke is somewhat analogous or equivalent to the stroke that the player might have made at the ball as it lies to remove it from that situation.

The match-play penalty of loss of hole and the corresponding penalty in stroke play of two strokes, referred to as the general penalty, is commonly applied when there might be more than a one-stroke advantage or there might be an indefinite but non-serious advantage gained from a violation, such as improving the line of play or asking for advice from someone other than a partner or a caddie. It's worth observing that nearly all penalties of loss of hole or two strokes can be easily avoided by proper knowledge of the Rules.

Over the years, the Rules of Golf have been revised to accommodate the conditions of the times and in the process some penalties have been altered. For instance, in the first published USGA Rules of Golf in 1897, a lost ball called for a penalty of one stroke in addition to loss of distance, since the player was required to play again from the spot of the previous stroke. In 1947, this penalty was changed in the Rules to loss of distance only and then in 1952 subsequently revised to the original penalty of one stroke and distance where it remains today.