

ABOUT THE STROKE IN THE GAME OF GOLF

[Quotes from literature appear in original format, grammar and style]

Before beginning, a quote from H. Gardner-Hill is in order.

Man being a machine, with certain unmachinelike qualities, is capable at times of intent to stroke but without manifest effect upon the ball. Moreover, some of the strokes of the less worthy strikers might be considered not to qualify for the category of ‘strokes’ at all. Clearly the defining of a stroke, therefore, is a formidable problem.

This paper presents extracts from golf related works during the period 1744-2012, focusing on the Definition of a stroke and Rules concerning the method of making a stroke. Although there have been differences in the Rules published by the R&A and USGA over the years, none of the references herein regarding a stroke have that distinction.

In what follows, evolution of the Rules regarding a stroke is divided into two parts: [i] the Definition of the stroke and [ii] the method of making a stroke. However, in 1891 and for a few years thereafter, a single specific Rule addressed both of these issues before the Rules once again separated the two subjects in 1900.

Evolution of the Definition of the Stroke

In the new Rules of Golf for 2023, there are 74 Definitions that underpin the fundamentals of the game. Over time, these Definitions have evolved to set forth the framework of the modern game within its historical traditions.

The first Definition of a stroke appeared in Article 11 from the oldest surviving written set of Rules, inscribed in 1744 and thirteen in number, given by the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith [now known as the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers]. In 1754, in the first set of Rules produced by the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews [R&A], their Article 11 is identical to that of the Golfers of Leith. Here is what those two early Rules defined as a stroke:

If you draw your Club in order to Strike & proceed so far in the Stroke, as to be bringing down your Club; If then, your Club shall break, in, any way, it is to be Accounted a Stroke.

Over the next centuries, small changes are evident. It is clear that the early concern was in the fact that a club might break and how this might affect whether a stroke had occurred or not. It may be concluded that there was a commonly accepted meaning of the word “stroke” such that a formal Definition was not needed.

1812

If, in striking, the club breaks, it is nevertheless accounted a stroke if the player either strike the ground or pass the ball.

1842

If, in striking, the club breaks, it is nevertheless to be accounted a stroke, if the part of the club remaining in the player's hand either strike the ground or pass the ball.

1891

This year marks the end of the past concern with the issue of a club breaking as it relates to a stroke having been made. From this point on, the method of making a stroke became of primary interest and a Rule was introduced in 1891 as Rule 4, which in the second sentence also included the essence of the modern Definition of a stroke including the word “intent” [see the section below for a continued discussion of the method of making a stroke]. Rule 4 was adopted by the USGA in 1895 and reads as follows:

The ball must be fairly struck at, not pushed, scraped, or spooned, under penalty of the loss of the hole. Any movement of the club which is intended to strike the ball is a stroke.

1900

Here is the first appearance of a separate Rule or Definition with a near modern version of the Definition of a stroke, which is now separated from the Rule governing the method of making a stroke. It is unclear if the exception below referring to Rule 4 meant that if a ball were not fairly struck at [that is, by pushing, scraping, or spooning] such a movement of the club would not be counted as a stroke.

A ‘stroke’ shall be any movement of the ball caused by the player, except as provided for in Rule 4, or any downward movement of the club made with the intention of striking the ball.

1903

This year the Rules omit the reference to Rule 4 that was present in 1900, which seems to be an attempt to clarify the question about whether a stroke is made if the ball is not fairly struck. Additionally, a new reference was inserted to Rule 3 [“If a ball fall or be knocked off the tee in addressing it, no penalty shall be incurred, and it may be replaced, and if struck when moving no penalty shall be incurred.”] that seems to clarify that a stroke has occurred in the referenced circumstances. This year was the first time a section labeled as “Definitions” was separately included in the Rules of Golf. Heretofore, Definitions were simply individual paragraphs of the Rules, generally in the first part of the Rules.

A ‘stroke’ shall be any movement of the ball caused by the player, except as provided for in Rule 3, or any downward movement of the club made with the intention of striking the ball.

1909

In 1909, the Definition seems to continue to imply that even if a ball is unfairly struck, but struck with a club, it is to be counted as a stroke.

A ‘stroke’ is the forward movement of the club with the intention of striking the ball, or any contact between the head of the club and the ball resulting in movement of the ball, except in the case of a ball accidentally knocked off a tee (Rule 2(1)).

1934

In 1934, the Definition of a stroke was simplified with removal of the reference to Rule 2, which was included in the part of the Rules governing the teeing area and a ball falling off a tee. This Definition now closely conforms to the form of the modern Definition. However, more changes are yet to come.

A ‘stroke’ is the forward movement of the club made with the intention of striking the ball.

1952

A small but significant change was made for 1952 with the word “moving” substituted for the word “striking” the ball. It is of note that the current Rule includes both words for a complete understanding of the purpose of the stroke. There are no available contemporary references to discussions about this change as to why it was necessary for defining a proper making of the stroke.

A "stroke" is the forward movement of the club made with the intention of moving the ball.

1956

In 1956, both of the words “moving” and “striking” the ball are included with the addition of the word “fairly,” which was later deleted in 2004 because of the implication that a ball not fairly struck would not be counted as a stroke. This latter addition is a return to the implication present in the Rules of 1900.

A "stroke" is the forward movement of the club made with the intention of fairly striking at and moving the ball.

1988

The evolution continues with the addition of the words “checking his downswing voluntarily.”

A 'stroke' is the forward movement of the club made with the intention of fairly striking at and moving the ball, but if a player checks his downswing voluntarily before the clubhead reaches the ball he is deemed not to have made a stroke.

2004

Deletion of the word “fairly” eliminates the ambiguity of whether or not a stroke has been made if the ball is not struck fairly. This latest change results in conformity to the 2016 version of the Definition of a stroke.

A 'stroke' is the forward movement of the club made with the intention of striking at and moving the ball, but if a player checks his downswing voluntarily before the clubhead reaches the ball he has not made a stroke.

The evolution of the Definition of a stroke was in a fashion comparable to that of the development of many other Definitions. Intention of striking the ball has been a key component since 1891.

2019

The Definition removes the word “intention” but the construct and grammar of the entire Definition clarifies that intention is paramount for there to be a stroke. The Definition also adds the phrase that if the player decides during the downswing not to strike the ball but is unable to stop the forward movement of the club, there will be no stroke if the ball is deliberately missed.

The forward movement of the club made to strike the ball.

But a *stroke* has not been made if the player:

- Decides during the downswing not to strike the ball and avoids doing so by deliberately stopping the clubhead before it reaches the ball or, if unable to stop, by deliberately missing the ball.
- Accidentally strikes the ball when making a practice swing or while preparing to make a *stroke*.

Introduction of Rules Regarding the Method of Making a Stroke

The 1744 Code made no mention of the required method by which a stroke must be made. In succeeding years, there were no Rules introduced governing the method of making a stroke until 1891, followed by significant Rules changes in 1909 and 1968.

1891

The first appearance of a Rule regulating the method of making a stroke appeared in the R&A Rules of 1891 as Rule 4, adopted by the USGA in 1895, as follows:

The ball must be fairly struck at, not pushed, scraped, or spooned, under penalty of the loss of the hole. Any movement of the club which is intended to strike the ball is a stroke.

There is no comparable passage governing a method of making a stroke in any of the Codes published during the period 1744-1891.

Furthermore, a search of the contemporary literature in the period from 1888-1891, such as The Golfing Annual edited by David Duncan and published annually, reveals considerable discussion of the need for revision of certain Rules but nothing suggesting introducing a Rule governing the method of making a stroke [see "The Burning Questions in Golf" in Volume III, 1889-90, The Golfing Annual]. Thus, no firm conclusions can be drawn as to the reasons for the appearance of Rule 4 in the 1891 Code.

However, negotiating a stymie was a difficult task encountered fairly often and it is most likely that some players resorted to variations of the traditional stroke in order to remove some of the difficulty of making a successful stroke when stymied, which could be characterized as pushing, scraping or spooning. The introduction of Rule 4 might have been in reaction to those utilizing these variations of the traditional stroke in order to make the game easier. Indeed, the 1909 R&A Decision book contains a Decision, perhaps written much earlier and possibly before the 1891 Rules change that reads as follows:

Decision 25, Portishead Golf Club.

Is it permissible to negotiate a stymie by laying the club on the ground and lofting the ball by pulling the back of the club along the ground?

Answer. – No. It is not a fair stroke, but a scrape.

1909

In 1909, the Rules introduced a significant modification to Rule 4 appearing as Rule 5 that added the words “with the head of the club” that would eliminate the billiard shot using the grip end of the club as follows:

The ball must be fairly struck at with the head of the club, not pushed, scraped, nor spooned. The penalty for a breach of this rule shall be the loss of the hole.

This modification most likely resulted from a Decision of the R&A Rules Committee mentioned in The Golfing Annual, Volume XVIII-1904-05, page 12:

Q. – The competitor who returned the best score in a Medal round adopted an unusual method of putting. The competitor knelt down and used the handle end of the club shaft to strike the ball in the same manner that a billiard ball is struck with a cue. Is this legal?

A. – This method of putting is absolutely illegal.

Since 1909, the Rule governing the method of making a stroke has not been changed and currently appears in the Draft Proposed New Rules of Golf for 2019 (Rule 10.1a), as follows:

In making a *stroke*, the player must fairly strike at the ball with the head of the club and must not push, scrape or scoop the ball.

Also, appearing in 1909 were two Decisions by the R&A dealing with croquet putters:

Decision 229, Nga Motu Golf Club, New Zealand.

With regard to “Make and Form of Golf Clubs” is it permissible to use a small croquet mallet to putt with?

Answer. – No. A croquet mallet is not a golf club and is inadmissible.

Decision 230, Pickeridge Golf Club. [in part]

In a stroke competition a competitor used a putter made in the form of a croquet mallet. Is he disqualified?

Answer. – The Rules of Golf Committee is of the opinion that the time has come for the Royal and Ancient Golf Club to decide at a General Meeting whether the various mallet-headed implements at present in use are to be permitted or not. The Rules of Golf Committee is, however, of opinion that it is not allowable to employ the vertical croquet stroke as a method of putting. The Committee considers that it is much to be deplored that players, instead of trying to master the use of golf clubs, should endeavour to overcome the difficulties of the game by using implements which have never been associated with it.

The R&A subsequently ruled that not only were croquet mallets not permitted but took the opportunity to bar the use of a standard putter with a single-faced mallet-shaped head [known as the Schenectady Putter]. The USGA disagreed with the latter interpretation and the dispute continued until agreement on the unified Code of 1952 that permitted the Schenectady Putter.

1968

The predecessor to the present Joint Rules of Golf Committee was the aptly named two Negotiating Committees consisting of a USGA Committee and an R&A Committee. These Committees met in the Spring of 1967 to settle on language to appear in the 1968 revised Rules of Golf. Here is a quote from an article written by Joseph C. Dey, appearing in The Golf Journal, June 1967, addressing the issue of croquet style putting:

. . . one of the major discussions of the meeting [is] the question of what to do about odd putting methods which have developed with center-shafted putters and which often resemble croquet more nearly than the traditional golf stroke: methods which some critics say isn't golf. The adherents of such styles include two former Captains of the R&A, the present President of the USGA, Wm. Ward Foshay, who attended the Sandwich meetings: and a few prominent players, including Sam Snead.

The results of these deliberations were the adoption of three separate changes to the Rules of Golf that effectively prohibited croquet style putting. These Rules remain in effect today and are:

- **Rule 16-1e. Standing Astride or on Line of Putt.** The player must not make a stroke on the putting green from a stance astride, or with either foot touching, the line of putt or an extension of that line behind the ball.
- Club shafts including those for putters must be substantially straight and plain in form and generally circular in cross-section.
- A shaft at right angles to the head is prohibited.

The reactions in articles published at the time were generally supportive of these changes.

2008

In 2008, an exception to the prohibition on standing astride or on the line of putt was introduced that said there was no penalty if it was done inadvertently or to avoid standing on another player's line of putt.

2016

In 2016, the Rules of Golf were significantly changed to prohibiting anchoring in making a stroke. Rule 14-1b simply says that “in making a ***stroke***, the player must not anchor the club, either “directly” or by use of an “anchor point,” which is defined as existing when the player intentionally holds a forearm in contact with any part of his body to establish a gripping hand as a stable point around which the other hand may swing the club.”

2019

The essence of the 1968 and 2016 Rules was retained. Rule 10.1b says:

10.1b. Anchoring the Club

In making a *stroke*, the player must not anchor the club, either:

- Directly, by deliberately holding the club or a gripping hand against any part of the body (**except** that the player may hold the club or a gripping hand against a hand or forearm), or
- Indirectly, through use of an “anchor point,” by holding a forearm against any part of the body to use a gripping hand as a stable point around which the other hand may swing the club.

In addition, the prohibition on making a stroke with a croquet style was extended to include strokes made from anywhere on the course rather than just on the putting green. Rule 10.1c says:

10.1c. Making Stroke While Standing Across or on Line of Play

The player must not make a *stroke* from a *stance* with a foot deliberately placed on each side or, or with either foot deliberately touching, the *line of play* or an extension of the line behind the ball.

Summary and Conclusions

In examining the original Rules of Golf from 1744, one might ask – why is there no reference to the most fundamental principle of golf, the ball must be played as it lies? The answer must be that such a traditional and essential ingredient of playing the game was widely understood by all playing the game.

A different question but with a similar answer might apply also to the absence of a Definition of the stroke in the early Rules other than to address the issue of a club breaking during the stroke. However, this similar answer - a stroke is a traditional and essential ingredient of playing the game and is widely understood by all playing the game - may be a reasonable approach for the small group of Scotts playing the game in the middle of the 18th century but hardly suffices for the many and diverse populations who are now playing the modern game.

Golf has met challenges to the historical and customary ways of playing the game with both [i] opinions that procedures were untraditional and [ii] changes to the Rules.

A quote from A History of Golf in Britain, 1952, contribution by H. Gardner-Hill, is illuminating regarding both of these approaches:

There seems to be no reason to suppose that Rule II, 1744, ‘Your tee must be upon the ground’ meant anything more than the traditional practice of today. In early days, there is good evidence to show that players adopted the practice of ‘teeing’ which has been customary ever since. The earliest known paper on ‘How to Play Golf’ by the Edinburgh medical student, 1687, quoted by Dr. Meikle in the *Scotsman* (2.3.38) and also Matheson’s poem ‘The Goff’, 1743, show that the ordinary practice was the same then as it has been since. Perhaps the rule was included in the 1744 *ad hoc* code as a provision against untraditional practice. There may have been prototypes of Sir Harold Gillies and his equipment in the early eighteenth century, against which *ad hoc* legislation had to be made. As a phenomenon of the 1930’s, this distinguished player will be remembered for his high tee – a beer bottle, with a superstructure of rubber tubing on which a tee was finally established. This was a contraption off which he succeeded in striking the ball immense distances and pulling the legs of the members of the Ruling Body. It was an arrangement presumably designed to mitigate the diminishing elasticities of middle age and, judging by results, it amply succeeded in its objective. Legislation was not necessary as the originator bowed to the opinion that the procedure was untraditional and, in due course, the components parts of the arrangement were restored to their natural uses.

From this passage relating circumstances surrounding use of non-traditional teeing of the ball, it can be seen that public opinion held sway over attempts to play the game in non-traditional ways. Specific changes to the Rules of Golf were not necessary. However, in the past, both the Definitions and the Rules have been modified to address unclear or ambiguous passages as well as to strengthen the historical and traditional values of the game and the way it is played. The issues with the stroke that were addressed with the 1891 addition of Rule 4 - The ball must be fairly struck at, not pushed, scraped, or spooned – have disappeared and for the better of the game. The revisions to the Rules in 2016 and subsequently continued in 2019 prohibiting anchoring the club to the body, principally for use in putting, should be viewed in the same context – for the better of the game.