

Ball Moved on Putting Green 2016 US Open at Oakmont CC

With all the extraordinary media coverage about the Dustin Johnson ball moved situation in the final round of the 2016 US Open, there was an unnoticed and unmentioned similar situation in the final round with Romain Wattel that had a twist about whether the ball had actually moved. Play in the final round was in groups of two players accompanied by a walking referee. Matthew Fitzpatrick, the 2013 US Amateur champion, was the other player in the group.

This difficult situation developed at the 10th hole where the hole was cut at the far back-center of the putting green. The slope near the hole was severe [maybe 3%] from the player's right to left, looking from the fairway to the putting green. Because the hole was at the back of the putting green, the referee stationed himself against the TV tower about 50-feet from the rear of the green for better viewing but not too close to the players. This provided a great site for observation of player actions and also for listening of conversations not common at a US Open where referees are usually at much greater distances from the putting green and the players.

Fitzpatrick's ball, a second shot played from the fairway, came to rest about 20-feet above the hole to the player's right. The first putt appeared to die at the hole but then gained speed before coming to rest about 15-feet below the hole. Fitzpatrick made the comeback, uphill putt.

Wattel's first putt from about 12-feet below the hole on the same line as that of Fitzpatrick's second putt came to rest about 2-feet above the hole at a spot where the referee had a direct view perpendicular to Wattel's next line of play. Fitzpatrick and the two caddies were standing on the fringe about 20-feet from the hole to the right of the referee's view.

After Wattel lifted and replaced the ball in preparation for the second putt, Wattel grounded the club behind the ball and began a routine of shifting grip and feet, while looking to the hole then to the ball, back and forth. About 5-seconds after grounding the club, Wattel looked up at Fitzpatrick, lifted the club and stepped away from the ball. Apparently Wattel had noticed something, which the referee later discovered was the changed alignment of the putting line on the ball compared to that when the ball was replaced.

Wattel stated to Fitzpatrick that the ball had moved but he didn't see it move. Fitzpatrick and the two caddies each stated that they also didn't see the ball move. Additionally, the referee had not seen it move after the player grounded the club despite the fact that the referee was watching attentively for a possible movement. Fitzpatrick stated to Wattel that they needed an official. At that point, the referee proceeded to the putting green.

Since the referee had not seen Wattel's ball move, the initial thought was that the ball had merely oscillated or wobbled, thinking that the players might not know the Rules of Golf Definition of "Move."

When the referee arrived at the putting green, the players were asked if they needed assistance. Wattel said that the ball had moved. The referee in response asked Wattel to describe what happened. Wattel stated that a short time after the club was grounded, the line on the ball was no longer aligned at the center of hole where it had been when the ball was replaced. It was now slightly to the right, which was not the intended direction for the stroke. When the referee looked at the alignment of the ball, it was as Wattel had stated so the referee concluded that, despite the fact that no one present [two players, two caddies and a referee] saw the ball move, it had in fact moved after the player grounded the club. Later viewing of a TV replay confirmed that the ball had in fact moved a very slight distance, perhaps not seen by the naked eye.

Since the referee had not seen the ball move, the immediate problem was that there was not an exact fix on the time differential between the player's grounding of the club and the subsequent ball movement.

However, because there was a delay time of about 5-seconds between the time of grounding of the club and the player's notice of the changed alignment of the line on the ball, the referee rationalized that the movement of the ball must have occurred about 5-seconds after grounding of the club. There was no other basis for determining this delay time.

Because of (i) the delay time of 5-seconds between grounding of the player's club near the ball and its movement, (ii) the severe slope of the green near the hole, which was about 3%, (iii) the extreme quickness of the dry green, and (iv) the reported wind velocity of 5-10 MPH, the referee concluded that the player had not caused the ball to move but rather one of these other factors was the cause. This conclusion was conveyed to the player who was told to play the ball as it lay without penalty.

In the referee's experience, this was a very unusual situation, in that no one present saw the ball move yet there was evidence that such had occurred. Fortunately, the player called this to the referee's attention, a strike for integrity of the game.

No one having seen the ball move added to the difficulty of determining the elapsed time between grounding of the club and the movement of the ball, which is always one of the crucial factors, if not the most crucial factor, in concluding whether the player had caused the ball to move.

Postscript. In the September 2016 issue of Golf Digest, Jamie Diaz has written a comprehensive review of the Dustin Johnson situation entitled "What Really Happened – Dustin Johnson and the U.S. Open Fiasco," which is in sharp contrast to the inept media coverage that took place immediately following the final round of the 2016 US Open. However, the reference to the Wattel ruling recalls that it occurred on the second green whereas it actually happened on the tenth green. Otherwise the account appears to be factually correct.