

Differences in Rules for Match Play and Stroke Play

[original article published in 2007, *NCGA Golf*]

There are differences in Rules for match play and stroke play, as these are very different forms of play.

Most obvious of the differences are the penalty statements in the Rules where the general penalty is loss of hole in match play or two strokes in stroke play. Less obvious are the specific Rules that apply to only one form of play. A simple scanning of Rule 3.2 for match play will find that there is no requirement for players to hole out as concession of a stroke, a hole or even a match is allowed. And consequently, there is no requirement for a scorecard to be returned in match play. A major difference is Rule 20.1c(3) that allows a player in stroke play to play two balls when uncertain what to do about the right procedure while playing a hole. This is not allowed in match play where the player must decide what to do and play on; although the player in match play may request a ruling from a referee or Committee member if one is available.

When searching through 24 separate Rules, it would take some time to uncover all the differences between the two forms of play. It wasn't always this way. For a very long time, the Rules were written solely for match play, with stroke play an afterthought addressed in a special section.

In 1947, the USGA reorganized the Rules to integrate both forms of play into a coherent single set of Rules, much in the same form that we find them today. While this format is certainly preferred, it somewhat obscures the fundamental principle of match play, that is, influencing the outcome of the match is generally restricted to those playing in it.

Included in this principle of match play is that a player may choose to ignore the fact that a Rule has been breached by an opponent (Rule 3.2d(4)); but if the player and opponent deliberately agree to ignore a Rule or a penalty, both players are disqualified under Rule 1.3b(1).

Thus, we have contrasting outcomes such that, in match play, a breach of a Rule that calls for a penalty does not always result in a penalty, whereas, in stroke play, a similar breach must always result in a penalty. Additionally, in match play, the reverse may sometimes be true. In the absence of a referee accompanying the match, players may agree how to decide a Rules issue (Rule 20.1b(1)). That agreement is conclusive even if it turns out to have been wrong under the Rules, so long as the players did not deliberately agree to ignore the Rules in breach of Rule 1.3b(1).

To further illustrate the disparity of results in match play and stroke play for identical breaches, consider the case where a player is late to the tee beyond the three-minute grace period and there are no exceptional circumstances that have prevented that player from starting on time. In match play without a referee, if the players are unaware of the Rules, a request for a ruling is never made and the match is played to a

conclusion, the result would stand even if this breach of Rule 5.3a is reported to the Committee after the match is final but before the close of competition. This surprising outcome is proper because, in the absence of a timely request for a ruling, a ruling will not be given. The result of the match in question will stand even if the Rules were applied in the wrong way (Rule 20.1b(2)). In a similar situation in stroke play, the player would be disqualified.

There are other examples. For instance, consider a situation where a player plays a wrong ball not moving in water in a penalty area or temporary water. In match play, Rule 6.3c(1) tells us that the penalty is loss of hole to the opponent. However, in a match without a referee, a ruling request must be made in time by the opponent for the penalty to be applied. In the absence of a timely ruling request, the match continues without penalty. The opponent may make a later, timely claim if the fact that the player played the wrong ball was previously unknown to the opponent. In stroke play, Rule 6.3c(1) requires that the player will get the general penalty without exception and that the mistake must be corrected by playing the proper ball before the player makes a stroke from the next teeing area. If the player does not correct the mistake in time, the player is disqualified.

If the Committee becomes aware of a player's breach of Rule 6.3c(1) after conclusion of play but before the competition is closed, the results again differ for match play and stroke play. In the match play case, if a timely ruling request was not made, the Committee must rule that the result of the match stands as played. This would be true either as a result of the players not knowing the Rules or when the opponent decided to overlook the breach of the player. However, in the stroke play case, the player must be disqualified.

Nevertheless, in both match play and stroke play, there must be no deliberate agreement between players to ignore any Rule or waive any penalty in breach of Rule 1.3b(1). In such cases, the Committee must disqualify the players even after the competition is closed.

The differences between match play and stroke play are significant and the above principles and situations should be kept in mind, whether playing the game or acting as an official.