

Philosophical Advice to a Rules Expert When He or She Starts the Process of Learning the New Rules of Golf

It won't take you long at all to learn and understand the basics of the new Rules. It will mostly be a matter of just eliminating one old thought (this is a penalty; you get five minutes to search; you have to announce before lifting; caddie needs authorization to lift your ball on the PG) and substituting a new one (this is not a penalty; you get 3 minutes to search; you don't have to announce before lifting; caddie can lift on PG without authorization), learning a revised vocabulary (but with most concepts staying the same), figuring out a few different procedures (the new relief areas actually incorporate most of the basics of old Rule 20-2c, it's just a different way to approach it).

The revised vocabulary will require some practice with lots of repetition, some examples are (new vs old); gets a penalty vs incurs a penalty; allowed relief vs entitled to relief; teeing area vs teeing ground; penalty area vs water hazard; temporary water vs casual water; general penalty vs loss of hole in match play or two-stroke penalty in stroke play; tied hole or tied match in match play vs halved hole or all-square match in match play; request a ruling in match play vs make a claim in match play; certify the scorecard in stroke play vs sign the scorecard in stroke play; round vs stipulated round; unreasonable delay of play vs undue delay of play; stopping play vs discontinuing play; wrong green vs wrong putting green; ball helping play vs ball assisting play).

Additionally, there are numerous spelling changes where words have been revised into British English, some examples are (new vs old); practise vs practice; centred vs centered; honour vs honor; cancelled vs canceled).

It will take longer for you to notice and re-learn a fair number of very minor/technical things that only Rules' people will particularly notice. Some examples of the revised approach to issues today covered under old Rule 1-2, such as a player putting a towel on a cactus to protect him or her, is now a Rule 8.1a (old Rule 13-2) breach without regard to intent as it is considered improving the player's stance (and hard to do that accidentally anyway); setting a golf bag down near a ball to protect it from the wind is OK so long as the player removes it before the stroke (Rule 10.2b(5)); in foursome or four-ball play either player may take some actions, such as dropping a ball, that were previously restricted to one of the partners.

A lot of that revised approach to issues will be clear in the Rules themselves so it won't need to be ferreted out in supporting Decisions (more on that below), but there are some conceptual differences that won't be immediately obvious.

As an expert, you would understand as much as anyone, the real challenge (and interesting part) will be sorting through the interpretive doctrines for some of the Rule changes while serving as a referee. For instance, two particular doctrines that will need developing re how they are applied are: (i) we now are placing greater reliance on deciding if something was deliberate vs accidental (so, for example, how does that work

in various situations with a player deflecting his or her own ball in motion with an attended flagstick or removed flagstick or by leaving a towel near the hole or by parking a cart in a certain location or by the player failing to get out of the way when a ball is coming at him or her; or with lifting a loose impediment or a ball at rest or movable obstruction while a ball is in motion) and (ii) we are placing greater reliance on deciding what is “reasonable” vs. what isn’t (for example, deciding what is “reasonable judgment” in estimating/measuring under new Rule 1.3b(2); or deciding what actions are reasonable vs excessive as part of a player fairly searching for his or her ball).

For many Rules people, these interpretive doctrines will be among the harder topics, as it’s easier to learn and apply black and white Rules as compared to ones that are gray. But of course, what has really happened over time is that putatively black and white Rules ended up being made gray through Decisions based on equity and “interpretations” that created exceptions and such. And there are some other doctrines that will end up with more interpretive focus, such as Knowledge or Virtual Certainty (given that it will now apply to a ball moved situation); when does a player “begin taking a stance” and therefore trigger the expanded prohibition against a caddie standing behind the player; with an affirmative endorsement of “ready golf” in stroke play, how to deal with situations where one player keeps playing out of turn and the other player doesn’t like it. These sorts of things will be discussed further as the governing bodies refine the language of a specific Rule over time but they are things that inevitably will evolve as we are confronted with dicey fact patterns.

In effect, we’ll all learn these together, and those like you who are gurus of the current Rules will in fact likely help lead the way in identifying these vexing issues that will need to be dealt with. All the time you’ve put in on the Rules over the decades will be anything but irrelevant; indeed, your input will likely be even more valuable than ever.

Besides the philosophical thoughts about general principles above, you will have difficulty in figuring out what happened to the thoughts and guidance from a particular Decision that we were all familiar with for a long period of time. Here are six general categories in which you might discover these missing thoughts and guidance:

(1) Where principles from the Decision have been changed, modified or revised and incorporated into a Rule, such as:

- Decision 1-2/0.7, Meaning of “Sole Purpose of Caring for the Course,” where the clause “sole purpose of caring for the course” has evolved into a different form in Rules 8.2b and 8.3b Exceptions that allows players to restore the course to its unaltered state; that is, when an action is taken to care for the course, the player gets no penalty even if the action was partially taken to alter other physical conditions for the better.
- Decision 1-2/2, Shielding Line of Putt from Wind, where Rule 10.2b(5) now allows positioning of the golf bag provided no stroke is made with the golf bag in place.

- Decision 16-2/2 Ball Overhanging Hole Knocked Away by Opponent Before Player Determines Status, where guidance from the Decision is changed and now included in Rule 13.3b.

(2) Where principles from the Decision have been directly incorporated unchanged into a Rule, such as:

- Decision 23-1/8 Removal of Loose Impediments Likely to Cause Ball to Move; Loose Impediments Removed Before Ball Replaced, where that specific guidance from the Decision is now present in Rule 15.1a Exception 1;
- Decision 27/11, Provisional Ball Not Distinguishable from Original Ball, where specific guidance from the Decision is now present in Rule 18.3c(2) last two bullet points.

(3) Where the Decision specifically covered a situation that is clearly covered by a 2019 Rule such as:

- Decision 26-1/3.7, Ball Dropped Under Water Hazard Rule Without it Being Known or Virtually Certain Ball in Hazard; Original Ball Then Found, where a straightforward application of Rule 14.5a to the situation directly gives the unchanged guidance found in the Decision.

(4) Where provisions of the Decision have been included in a Clarification such as:

- Decision 1-2/3, Breaking Bush in Area into Which Ball May Roll After Drop, where a situation similar to the one in the Decision is included as an example in Clarification 8.2b/1.

(5) Where many situations from Decisions involving a referee's decision have been included in the Official Guide to the Rules of Golf, Committee Procedures, Section 6C Providing Rules Assistance to Players, such as:

- Decision 34-3/3.7, Player Incorrectly Advised to Continue with Provisional Ball, where the situation from the Decision is included without change on page 434 of the Official Guide to the Rules of Golf with the same title there as in the former Decision.

(6) Nearly all of the Decisions 33-8/1 through 33-8/45 involving Local Rules, with some exceptions, are now to be found in the Official Guide to the Rules of Golf, Committee Procedures, Section 8 Model Local Rules.

Our challenge is to find out which of these six classes applies to our situation. Over time and with study, the 2023 Rules, Clarifications and Committee Procedures will become as familiar to us as the former Rules and Decisions.

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Another source of our education will be periodic additional Clarifications of the 2023 Rules that will appear on the USGA website. Links to these will be posted on the front page of GENERALAREA.ORG.

In the years past, we all learned the Rules with endless study and repetition. Be prepared once again for this endless study and repetition.