

When May a Player Change Options?

Occasionally, a player might lift a ball in play, intending to take relief under a Rule, and have second thoughts about what to do. If the player does change options and takes relief differently than the original intentions, there is the possibility of getting a penalty. The following several situations clarify some of the variables involved for a player in a stroke-play competition.

If a player's ball lies on a cart path in the general area, the player is normally allowed free relief (Rule 16.1b). If the player doesn't think through the situation before lifting the ball, it might happen that the nearest point of complete relief is in a bush or that the ball when dropped could come to rest in an unplayable spot. If the player does drop the ball and it is unplayable in its new location, then the player could decide to take unplayable ball relief there with a penalty of one stroke (Rule 19.2). The reference point for taking relief would be the new spot of the ball. On the other hand, after initially lifting the ball and before dropping it, the player may replace the ball on the cart path and play it from there but this action would result in a penalty of one stroke (Rule 9.4). So it pays to consider these possibilities before lifting the ball.

In a different situation, if the player takes relief from the cart path, drops the ball properly and it comes to rest in an unplayable spot, then the player might want to replace the ball to its original spot on the cart path. However, that is not allowed. If the player proceeds that way and the ball is played from the cart path then the player gets a penalty of two strokes (Rule 14.7), a hefty price in this instance for changing options after dropping the ball.

Suppose that the player takes relief from the cart path and drops the ball in the required relief area but it rolls and comes to rest outside the relief area. If the ball is played, the player gets a penalty of two strokes (Rule 14.3c and Rule 14.7). Prior to playing the ball, if the player discovers that the ball is in a wrong place, the player may lift the ball without penalty and correct the mistake (Rule 14.5a). The player may not lift the ball and replace it on the cart path without penalty. There are two major points to remember here: [1] a ball incorrectly dropped in a wrong place but not played may be lifted without penalty and the player must then proceed correctly, and [2] once a player has put a ball into play under an applicable Rule, in this case the obstruction Rule, the player must continue under that Rule until a ball is correctly put into play.

Another situation worth considering is that where a player decides that the ball is unplayable and lifts it only to discover that the ball was lying in an area of unusual damage that has been marked as ground under repair. May the player change Rules, avoid the penalty of one stroke as called for by the unplayable ball Rule and take free relief using the ground under repair Rule? Yes - in this situation the player is not committed to taking relief under the unplayable ball Rule, provided a ball has not been put into play under that Rule. In the special situation where the player drops the ball after taking unplayable ball relief and it comes to rest in the ground under repair, the player could then take free relief from the ground under repair but will still get the penalty of one stroke as called for by the unplayable ball Rule.