

The Rules of Golf – Simplified

by Douglas A. Hoffmann, MGA Tournament Director
PGA Master Professional

Rule 1 – The Game

1. You start from within the teeing ground and hit the ball until it ends up in the hole. Count all your swings made with the intention to hit the ball.
2. Don't intentionally interfere with a moving ball or the conditions in its path.
3. You play by the Rules; don't cheat.
4. If you cannot figure out the answer to situation by using the Rules, decide in Equity.

Rule 2 – Match Play

1. It's "Me/Us" versus "You/Y'all" with scoring by holes ("player" versus "opponent")
2. Tied Hole = "Halved hole"
3. Winner is person who has won the most holes. The match ends when a person is more holes ahead ("up") than there are holes left to be played.
4. A player can give ("concede") a stroke, hole or the match at any time during the match.
5. If you question your opponent's actions, you can ask for a ruling as long as it happens at the time the question comes up; otherwise, it's too late in most cases.
6. Penalty for most rules violations = Loss of Hole (if it's not a one shot penalty)

Rule 3 – Stroke Play

1. Winner is the person with the lowest total score.
2. Hole out every hole. If you don't, enjoy a hot fudge sundae at DQ on the way out of town!
3. In Stroke Play only, if you don't know what to do, you can play another ball.
 - a. How to play a second ball
 - i. Before you play a second ball, tell the person keeping your score or another player in your group ("fellow competitor") what you are planning to do, why and which ball you want to count for your score.
 - ii. You must do (i) before you hit a shot with either ball.
 - iii. Tell the people running the event ("the Committee") that you played two balls before your return your score card. Otherwise, it's a hot fudge sundae stop.
 - b. What is your score for the hole? Here's how the Committee will decide:
 - i. If your procedure (see above) is correct, and the ball you want to count was played properly, then this ball will count. If it wasn't played properly, the other ball will count presuming it was played properly.
 - ii. If you don't say which ball you want to count, then your original ball will count if played properly. If not, then the other ball if played properly.
 - iii. If you don't play either ball properly, then the original ball counts ... as long as you haven't really messed up and would be eligible for a hot fudge sundae. In which case, the second ball will count – unless you are eligible for that sundae with it, too. In which case, put your clubs away and find the nearest DQ.

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4. If you don't follow a Rule that affects another player's rights, you are enjoying your hot fudge sundae at DQ on the way out of town.
5. Penalty for most rules violations = Two (2) strokes (if it's not a one shot penalty)

Rule 4 – Clubs

1. *Form & Make*: Clubs must have a shaft and club head and otherwise conform to rules and regulations found in Appendix II prior to starting play with it.
2. *Playing characteristics*
 - a. You cannot change a club (loft, lie, etc.) during a round.
 - b. You cannot add anything to a club to change how it influences a ball.
3. *Damage*
 - a. If the club breaks during the round for normal play, you can
 - i. Continue to use it,
 - ii. Have it repaired or
 - iii. Replace it if it is unusable.
 - b. If the club breaks because of non-normal reasons (negligence, anger, etc.), you cannot use it any more during the current round and may not fix it until after the round.
4. *14 Clubs*
 - a. You can select up to 14 clubs to use for your round. If you start with less than 14, you can add clubs during the round but cannot exceed 14. You cannot swap out clubs during a round.
 - b. You cannot share clubs with another player on the course unless he/she is your partner; in which case, combined you cannot have more than 14 clubs.
 - c. If you start with more than 14, you will be penalized and must take out as many clubs as necessary to get to 14. In Match Play, you have to adjust the match so you are fewer "up" or more "down". You make the adjustment for each hole you had more than 14 clubs, up to a maximum of two (2) holes. In Stroke Play, you add two shots to your score for each hole you had more than 14 clubs up to the same maximum of two (2) holes.

Rule 5 – The Ball

1. The ball you play must conform to the rules and regulations in Appendix III.
2. You cannot put anything on the ball to influence its flight.
3. If the ball becomes damaged so that it cannot fly like normal, you may replace it during a hole. You can always switch balls between holes. You may check your ball to see if it is damaged and may be replaced. To check your ball, you must:
 - Tell your opponent, the person keeping your score or someone else in your group what you are doing *before* you do it.
 - You must mark the position of the ball *before* you pick it up.

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- You must give your opponent, the person keeping your score or someone else in your group the chance to look at your ball.
- You cannot clean your ball when you pick it up to identify it.
- If it's damaged as a result of your play, you can substitute a new ball. If not, you must put it back down and keep playing it for the rest of that hole.

Rule 6 – The Player

1. **You** must know the Rules. Ignorance is not an excuse. Otherwise, you play at your own risk.
2. *For competitions played using a handicap,*
 - a. In Match Play, the player with the lower handicap should give the player with the higher handicap the difference in the two handicaps. If you lie about your handicap (intentionally or not), you are enjoying that hot fudge sundae at DQ. (See #1) The strokes should be applied to the corresponding holes according to the hole assignments on the score card.
 - b. In Stroke Play, the score for each player will be the actual (gross) score less the player's handicap. Whoever has the lowest "net" score is the winner.
3. *Starting Play*
 - a. You are expected to know your starting time and start at that time. If you miss your time but are able to start within five (5) minutes of that time, you can play with a penalty. In Match Play, you lose the first hole. In Stroke Play, you get a two (2) shot penalty. If you're more than five minutes late, enjoy your stop at DQ.
 - b. You must stay in your group unless factors don't permit it.
4. You can have someone assist you ("caddie") during your round but only one at a time.
5. You must know what ball you play. Put some marks on it, autograph it, do something to it.
6. *Scoring*
 - a. If you are keeping score for someone else, you need to write the score on their score card after each hole. Also, you should keep your own score so you can compare it with your official score card.
 - b. After you finish your round, sign the score card you have been keeping and give it to that player. Once you get your score card, make sure your score keeper has signed it and check it to make sure your scores are correct. If so, sign it and give it to the Committee. Once you leave the scoring area, your card is official.
 - c. Once your card is official, you cannot change it.
 - d. You are not responsible for the total. You are responsible for the scores for each hole. If one is higher than you made, you have to take the higher score. If one is lower than you made, then you are enjoying that hot fudge sundae at DQ ... **unless it's because you failed to include a penalty you did not know you had incurred. In which case, the Committee adds that penalty PLUS two more to your score. (Bold = 2016 change)**
7. You are not expected to run around the course, but you are expected to play within a reasonable time (30 seconds per shot) and keep up with the group in front of you. If you don't, you may be penalized. Don't worry about the group behind you!

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8. *Keep playing*

- a. You must continue playing unless the Committee tells you to stop, you feel in danger because of lightning, you get sick or if you need a ruling from the Committee (but remember, you might be able to play a second ball).
- b. If the Committee suspends play, you may finish the hole you are currently playing but cannot start a new one. However, if it is because of a dangerous situation (lightning), you must stop immediately.
- c. You may mark and pick up your ball during a suspension.
- d. When you are ready to re-start, you must start when the Committee instructs you to start. If you picked up your ball, you may put any ball back in the original spot. If you left your original ball there, you may pick it up and clean it or replace it before starting. If your original ball is not there, simply place another ball in the original spot.

Rule 7 – Practice

1. *Before or Between Rounds*

- a. You can practice on the course the day of a match.
- b. You cannot practice on the course the day of a stroke play tournament or before a playoff on the course, and you cannot play or practice on the course between rounds. The Committee may reverse either of these two rules (a or b).

2. *During Round*

You cannot hit a practice shot when playing a hole or between holes, except you can practice chip or putt on the last green you played (except if prohibited), on a practice green or the tee box of the next hole as long as you don't hold up play.

Rule 8 – Advice; Indicating Line of Play

1. *Advice*

- a. You cannot tell someone (except your partner) how to play a shot, and
- b. You cannot ask someone (except your caddie, partner or his caddie [or team captain if permitted]) how to play your shot.

2. *Indicating Line of Play*

a. Not on the Green

You can have someone show you the line of play, but the person or anything used to show you that line must be moved before you hit your shot.

b. On the Green

If your ball is on the green, you can have your caddie, partner or his caddie show you the line but they cannot touch the green to show you.

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Rule 9 – Information as to Strokes Taken

1. Your score must include any penalties you incurred.
2. *Match Play*
 - a. Information as to Strokes Taken: Your opponent has a right to know what you lay at any time during a hole or your score after a hole.
 - b. Wrong Information: You must give your opponent your correct score when asked. If you don't, you lose the hole. You are expected to know the Rules, so your score must include any penalties you incurred, even if you don't know you incurred them. You have given wrong information if you:
 - i. Don't tell your opponent that you incurred a penalty if he doesn't observe what you do, or
 - ii. Mistakenly tell your opponent what you lay when asked and don't correct your mistake before your opponent makes the next stroke, or
 - iii. Don't give your correct score for a hole and it causes your opponent to misunderstand the result of the hole. You can correct your mistake before either of you play from the next tee.
3. Stroke Play: You need to tell the person keeping your score when you incur a penalty.

Rule 10 – Order of Play

1. *Match Play*
 - a. Starting a Hole: The Committee should determine who plays first in a match. If not, the players should decide. Whoever wins a hole goes first on the next hole. If you tie, whoever played first on the last hole plays first on the next hole.
 - b. During a Hole: The player that is farther away plays first. If you have to play another ball from that spot, you must play before your opponent. If you must drop but have a choice where to drop, whoever is away is determined by where your first ball ended up.
 - c. Playing Out of Turn: If you play when it was your opponent's turn to play, your opponent can recall your shot. He must do so right away, but there is no penalty to you.
2. *Stroke Play*
 - a. Starting a Hole: The Committee should determine the order of play to start. If not, the players should decide. The order for the rest of the holes is based on the scores from the previous hole. If two or more players have the same score, they keep the same order.
 - b. During a Hole: The player who is farthest away plays.
 - c. Playing Out of Turn: There is no penalty if you play out of turn as long as you are not trying to help another player.
3. *Provisional Ball or Another Ball from Tee Box*
 - a. If you have to play a Provisional Ball or another ball from the tee box, you should do so after everyone else has played their first shots.

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Rule 11 – Teeing Ground (a.k.a. Tee Box)

1. *Teeing*: When you start a hole, you must start from the Tee Box. You may use a tee or place the ball on the ground. You may create a little mound and place your ball on it. The tee must conform to the Rules. You may stand outside the tee box. (The ball must be between the outside edges of two tee markers, cannot be in front of them and no further than two club-lengths behind them.)
2. *Tee Markers*: When you start a hole, the tee markers are fixed and you cannot move them.
3. *Ball Falling Off Tee*: If you bump your ball off the tee before making your swing, you can put it back on the tee and are not penalized. If it happens during a swing, the swing counts and you must play the ball where it is.
4. *Playing Outside the Tee Box*
 - a. *Match Play*: If you start from outside the tee box (as in #1), your opponent can recall your shot. He must do so right away, but there is no penalty to you.
 - b. *Stroke Play*: If you start from outside the tee box (as in #1), you must cancel that shot and play another ball from within the tee box. You get a two shot penalty. If you fail to correct your mistake, you get to stop at the DQ after leaving the course.
5. *Playing from Wrong Tee Box*: See #4

Rule 12 – Searching For and Identifying Ball

1. You are not entitled to see the ball when you make your shot. You can bend or touch long grass, bushes and other vegetation in order to find the ball, but you cannot do this if it ends up improving the lie of the ball, your stance, area of swing or line of play. If you cause the ball to move, you are penalized. Here are some special cases when you are not:
 - a. *Searching for or Identifying Ball Covered by Sand*: If you think your ball is covered by sand on the course, you can move the sand in order to find and/or identify your ball, including in a bunker. If you find your ball but you have moved it or altered the lie, you must replace the ball and re-create the lie. You must re-cover the ball but may leave a small part visible.
 - b. *Searching for or Identifying Ball Covered by Loose Impediments in a Hazard*: If you think your ball is in a hazard (bunker or water hazard) and covered by leaves, sticks or other natural objects, you can remove them without penalty to find the ball. If you find your ball, you must put the natural objects back before you play it. If you move your ball, you are penalized one stroke (unless you moved the ball when replacing the natural objects) and must replace the ball.
 - c. *Searching for Ball in Water in a Water Hazard*: if you think your ball is in the water in a water hazard, you may search for it by probing in the water with a club or something else. If you move the ball, you are not penalized but must replace the ball unless you take a penalty and drop outside the hazard. But, if the ball is not in the water and you move it, you are penalized one stroke.

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- d. Searching for Ball Within Obstruction or Abnormal Ground Condition: If you move your ball while searching for it in one of these conditions, there is no penalty and you must either (1) replace the ball or (2) take relief as authorized under Rule 24-2 or 25.
2. *Lifting Ball for Identification*

You must know what ball you play. Put some marks on it, autograph it, do something to it. If you find a ball but don't know if it's yours, you can pick it up to identify it, but there are three things you must do to keep from getting a penalty.

 - You must tell someone in your group what you are doing and why.
 - You must mark the ball before you pick it up.
 - You must give someone in your group the opportunity to watch what you do.

If you don't do one, two or all three of these, you get a one stroke penalty. Of course, you must replace the ball once you identify it as yours.

Rule 13 – Ball Played as It Lies

1. One of the underlying concepts in the Rules is that you play the ball as you find it.
2. *Improving Lie, Area of Intended Stance or Swing, or Line of Play*
 - a. You cannot improve:
 - i. The position or lie of your ball,
 - ii. The area of your intended stance or swing,
 - iii. The line you intend for your ball to go, or
 - iv. The area where you have to drop your ball.
 - b. You cannot do any of these actions to the extent that might improve the above areas:
 - i. Pressing a club on the ground,
 - ii. Moving, bending or breaking anything fixed or growing (including immovable obstructions and objects that define OB),
 - iii. Create or eliminate irregularities on the ground,
 - iv. Remove or press down sand, loose soil, replaced divots or other cut turf, or
 - v. Brush off dew, frost or water
 - c. However, you will not be penalized in these cases:
 - i. You can ground you club lightly at address,
 - ii. You can fairly take a stance,
 - iii. If this happens during your backswing or forward swing when making a shot,
 - iv. You can brush off dew, frost, water, and create or eliminate irregularities on the ground on the tee box only, or
 - v. You can move sand and loose soil on the green only.
3. *Building Stance*: You cannot do anything to build a stance.
4. *Ball in Hazard; Prohibited Actions*: If your ball is in a bunker or water hazard, you cannot:
 - a. Test the hazard or one like it,
 - b. Touch the ground in the hazard or water in a water hazard with your hand or club, or
 - c. Touch any loose impediment (natural object) that is in the same hazard.

Here are some exceptions to these rules:

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1. As long as you don't test the condition or improve the lie of your ball, you can:
 - a. Touch the ground and move natural objects to keep you from falling, to remove an obstruction or to measure, mark, lift, retrieve, place or replace the ball, or
 - b. Place your clubs (and entire bag) in the hazard.
2. You can rake a bunker if you are doing so in normal etiquette and not trying to test the sand as long as you don't improve the lie of your ball, your stance, the area of your swing or the line of play.
3. If you play from one hazard into another one, you can do whatever you want in the hazard you played from.

Rule 14 – Striking the Ball

1. *General*
 - a. You must try to hit the ball with the head of the club and cannot push, scrape or spoon the ball.
 - b. **You must NOT anchor the club (hold it against your body), either directly (think “belly putter” or hand against the chest) or by use of an anchor point (forearm against the body). (2016)**
2. *Assistance*
 - a. Physical Assistance and Protection from Elements: You must not get any help when hitting your ball.
 - b. Positioning of Caddie or Partner Behind Ball: You must not have your caddie, partner or partner's caddie standing behind you when you make your swing.
3. *Artificial Devices, Unusual Equipment and Unusual Use of Equipment*: You cannot use anything artificial or unusual during your round if it does one of these things. **NOTE: The first violation is only a two-stroke penalty in stroke play (down from a hot fudge sundae stop at DQ) effective 2016. A second allows you that stop for a hot fudge sundae.**
 - a. Might assist you in making your shot or playing your round,
 - b. Might measure distance or conditions that help you play, or **(NOTE: DMDs [Distance Measuring Devices] may now have functionality that allows for the measurement of non-acceptable information, such as slope, as long as it is not “in use” [turned off or made non-functional] during the round.)**
 - c. Might assist you in gripping your club, except:
 - i. You can wear plain gloves,
 - ii. You can use resin, powder or other drying or moisturizing agents, and
 - iii. You can wrap a towel or the like around your club when gripping.
4. *Striking the Ball More than Once*: If you hit the ball more than one time during a shot, you count your shot and add one penalty shot (for a total of 2).
5. You are not allowed to play a moving ball except if it (1) falls off the tee during the shot, (2) you hit it more than once during your shot, (3) you play a ball moving in water and (4) it moves during your shot but before you hit it.

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6. *Ball Moving in Water:* You are not penalized for hitting a ball moving in water in a water hazard as long as you don't wait for it to move to a better position. But how many of you have done this?

Rule 15 – Substituted Ball; Wrong Ball

1. You are expected to play the same ball from the tee box into the hole. Sometimes the Rules allow you to substitute a ball.
2. *Substituted Ball:* You may substitute a ball under some Rules. If you substitute another ball for the one you hit from the tee box and the Rules don't allow you to do it, you will keep playing with the new ball but will get a penalty. In Match Play, you lose the hole. In Stroke Play, you get a two shot penalty.
3. *Wrong Ball:* A wrong ball is any ball you hit other than the ball you are currently playing or a provisional or second ball you may have hit under the Rules.
 - a. Match Play: If you hit a wrong ball in match play, you lose the hole.
 - b. Stroke Play: If you hit a wrong ball in stroke play, you get a two shot penalty AND must correct your mistake by finding and playing the correct ball for the rest of the hole. If you fail to correct your mistake, you are enjoying that sundae at DQ. Any strokes you make with the wrong ball do not count in your score.

Rule 16 – Putting Green (a.k.a. Green)

1. *General*
 - a. *Touching Line of Putt:* You are not allowed to touch the line you hope your ball will travel to the hole, except you may touch the line when:
 - i. Removing loose impediments as long as you don't improve the line by pressing things down,
 - ii. Placing the club in front of the ball during your address routine,
 - iii. Measuring,
 - iv. Marking, lifting or replacing your ball,
 - v. Pressing down your ball marker,
 - vi. Repairing ball marks or old holes on the green, and
 - vii. Removing movable obstructions.
 - b. *Lifting and Cleaning Ball:* If your ball is on the green, you can mark, lift and then clean it. You must replace it, but you cannot lift the ball if another ball in motion might hit it.
 - c. *Repair of Hole Plugs, Ball Marks and Other Damage:* You can repair ball marks and old hole plugs on the green, but your ball does not have to be on the green to do it. You cannot fix other damage (spike marks) if it might help you or another player in your group. Fix it when you are done with the hole. If you move your ball when fixing the damage, you are not penalized but you must replace the ball.
 - d. You cannot test the surface of the green by rolling a ball or roughening or scraping it.

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- e. You cannot intentionally straddle or stand on your line of putt or an extension of that line behind the ball unless you do so to avoid standing in another player's line in order to tap in.
- f. *Making Stroke While Another Ball in Motion:* You cannot hit your ball if another ball is already in motion as a result of another person playing a shot from the green. There is no penalty if it was your turn to play.

If you violate any of these rules, you lose the hole in match play and get a two shot penalty in stroke play.

2. *Ball Overhanging Hole:* If any part of your ball overhangs the hole, you may take a reasonable amount of time to get to the hole plus an additional ten (10) seconds. If the ball falls in during this time, you have holed out with the last shot. If not, then you must tap in. If the ball falls in after the ten seconds but before you tap it in, you don't have to tap it in but you must add another stroke to your score.

Rule 17 – Flagstick (a.k.a. Pin)

1. *Flagstick Attended, Removed or Held Up:* You can have the flagstick attended, removed or held up for any stroke, but it must be done prior to the stroke. The flagstick must not be moved while the ball is in motion if the ball might strike it.
2. *Unauthorized Attendance:* If someone attends, removes or holds up the flagstick without your approval during your shot or after you hit your shot, that person is penalized.
3. *Ball Striking Flagstick or Attendant:* Your ball must not strike:
 - a. The flagstick when it is attended, removed or held up,
 - b. The person (or anything carried by him) attending or holding the flagstick, or
 - c. The flagstick which is in the hole when you make your shot from the green.
4. *Ball Resting Against Flagstick:* If your ball comes to rest against the flagstick but is not completely in the hole, you or someone you authorize can straighten the flagstick. If the ball falls into the hole, you are ruled to have made your last shot. If not, you must place the ball on the edge of the hole.

Rule 18 – Ball at Rest Moved

1. *By Outside Agency:* If your ball in play is at rest and moved by an outside agency (something not part of your side in stroke play or part of your match in match play), you replace the ball with no penalty to you.
2. *By Player, Partner, Caddie or Equipment:* If you, your caddie, your partner or his caddie, or any of your collective equipment causes your ball in play to move or touches it on purpose, you are penalized one shot and must replace the ball, unless it happened during your shot and you continue your swing. There are exceptions: (1) searching for your ball covered by sand, in replacing loose impediments in a bunker or water hazard moved during search, in searching for a ball in water in a water hazard or in an area of ground under repair or an obstruction, (2) in repairing a ball mark or old hole, (3) in measuring, (4) in lifting your ball under the Rules, (5) in

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placing or replacing your ball, (6) in removing loose impediments on the green, and (7) in removing a movable obstruction. **(NOTE: 18-2b – Ball Moved After Address was eliminated from the Rules effective 2016.)**

3. *By Opponent, Caddie or Equipment in Match Play*
 - a. *During Search:* If your ball is moved during a search for it by your opponent, his caddie or equipment, there is no penalty to anyone and your ball must be replaced.
 - b. *Other than During Search:* If your ball is moved or touched by your opponent, his caddie or equipment and they were not helping you to search for it, your opponent gets a one shot penalty, and your ball must be replaced.
4. *By Fellow-Competitor, Caddie or Equipment in Stroke Play:* If one of the players or caddies in your group moves or touches your ball, there is no penalty, and the ball must be replaced.
5. *By Another Ball:* If your ball is moved by another ball in motion after a shot, your ball must be replaced.
6. *Ball Moved in Measuring:* If your ball or ball marker is moved when measuring under a Rule, there is no penalty to anyone, and your ball must be replaced.

NOTE: If you do not replace your ball when required to do so, you lose the hole in match play or get a two stroke penalty in stroke play.

Rule 19 – Ball In Motion Deflected or Stopped

1. *By Outside Agency:* If your ball in motion after your shot is accidentally deflected or stopped by an outside agency (something not part of your side in stroke play or part of your match in match play), there is no penalty to anyone and you play your ball from where it comes to rest, except:
 - a. If your ball was not on the green when you made your shot, and it comes to rest in or on the *moving or animate* outside agency, then you drop your ball where it first came to rest in or on the agency.
 - b. If your ball was on the green when you made your shot (putt) and it is deflected or stopped by, or comes to rest in or on, any *moving or animate* outside agency (except a worm, insect or something similar), you must cancel your shot and replay it.

NOTE: If your ball is intentionally deflected or stopped by an outside agency,

- a. and your ball was not on the green when you hit it, you must estimate where it would have ended up and drop a ball at that point. If it would have been OB, you must play accordingly. If it would have been on the green, you will place (not drop) the ball, or
 - b. and your ball was on the green when you hit it, you must cancel and replay the shot.
2. *By Player, Partner, Caddie or Equipment:* If you, your caddie, your partner or his caddie, or any of your collective equipment deflects or stops your ball in play, you are penalized one shot and must play the ball as it lies, unless it comes to rest in or on the equipment, in which case you drop the ball.
 3. *By Opponent, Caddie or Equipment in Match Play:* If your ball is accidentally deflected or stopped by your opponent, there is no penalty. You get to decide if you want to play the ball from where

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it stopped or if you want to cancel and replay the shot, but you must do so before anyone hits another shot.

4. *By Fellow-Competitor, Caddie or Equipment in Stroke Play:* See 19-1.
5. *By Another Ball:*
 - a. *At Rest:* If your ball is deflected or stopped by another ball at rest, you must play your ball as it lies. You are not penalized unless it is stroke play and both balls were on the green at the time of your shot.
 - b. *In Motion:* If your ball is deflected or stopped by another ball in motion after a stroke, you must play your ball as it lies, unless your ball was on the green when you hit it, in which case you must cancel and replay your shot. You are not penalized.

Rule 20 – Lifting, Dropping and Placing; Playing from Wrong Place

1. *Lifting and Marking*

- If the Rules allow you to pick up your ball, you, your partner or anyone you authorize may pick it up.
- If the Rules require you to replace the ball back on the spot from which it is picked up, then you must mark the ball before picking it up. If you don't mark it, you get a one shot penalty. You must put it back on the same spot when you put it down.
- If you accidentally move the ball or ball marker when picking it up, there is no penalty as long as it is due to the actual process of marking or lifting. If not, you get a one shot penalty.
- You should use a coin, ball marker or other similar object to mark the ball. In addition, you should place it behind the ball. If it interferes with another person, you should move it to the side. Remember to move it back.

2. *Dropping and Re-Dropping*

- a. *By Whom and How:* When you have to drop a ball, you must drop it yourself by standing erect, holding your arm straight and at shoulder height. You cannot spin the ball or do anything else to influence the ball when dropping it. If you drop it in any manner other than this, you get a one shot penalty (unless you fix your mistake as allowed in Rule 20-6). If the ball hits a person or any equipment before it comes to rest, you must drop it again.
- b. *Where to Drop:* If the Rules require you to drop in a specific spot, you must drop it within 3-4" of that spot and it cannot be closer to the hole. If you don't know the specific spot, do your best to estimate it. The ball must land within the area specified by the Rules (such as a hazard, tee box or the rest of the course [through the green]).
- c. *When to Re-Drop:* There are times when the Rules don't allow you to play a ball that's been dropped and requires you to drop it another time (re-drop). These are:
 - i. If it rolls and stays in a hazard (water hazard or bunker),
 - ii. If it rolls and stays out of a hazard (water hazard or bunker)
 - iii. If it rolls and stays on a green,
 - iv. If it rolls and stays OB,

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- v. If it rolls and stays in the same situation that permitted relief in the first place, such as *Immovable Obstructions* (Rule 24-2), *Abnormal Ground Conditions* (Rule 25-1), *Embedded Ball* (Rule 25-2) and *Wrong Putting Green* (Rule 25-3),
- vi. If it rolls and stays more than two club-lengths from where the ball first hits the course; or
- vii. If it rolls and stays closer to the hole than:
 1. The ball's original or estimated spot (unless permitted by the Rules),
 2. The *nearest point of relief* or maximum available relief, or
 3. The point where the ball last crossed the margin of a water hazard.

If the ball does any of the above things (i – vii) in two drops, then you place the ball where it hit the course on the second drop.

3. *Placing and Replacing*

a. *By Whom and Where:*

- If you have to place your ball, you or your partner may do it.
- If you are replacing your ball (that is, putting it back where it was), then you, your partner or the person who moved it in the first place may replace it. If someone other than these people put it back, you are penalized one shot.
- If you accidentally move the ball or ball marker when placing or replacing it, there is no penalty as long as it is due to the actual process of placing or replacing. If not, you get a one shot penalty.
- If you put your ball somewhere other than where it is supposed to be, you lose the hole in match play or get a two shot penalty in stroke play.

b. *Lie of Ball to be Placed or Replaced Altered:* If you have to put your ball on a spot that has been altered, you must:

- i. (Except in a hazard) place your ball in the closest spot within one club-length that is the most similar to the original lie, not closer to the hole and not in a hazard,
- ii. (In a Water Hazard) place your ball like (i) above but keep it in the hazard, or
- iii. (In a Bunker) place your ball like (i) above in the bunker but you must re-create the lie (if it was buried, you must re-bury it).

c. *Spot Not Determinable:* If you cannot determine where you are to place your ball, you must:

- i. (Through the green) drop your ball as near as possible to where it was but not in a hazard or on a green,
- ii. (In a Hazard) drop your ball like (i) above but within the hazard, or
- iii. (On a Green) place your ball as near as possible where it lay (may not be on the green).

d. *Ball Fails to Come to Rest on Spot:* If, after a couple of tries, you cannot get your ball to come to rest on the spot where you are supposed to place it, you must:

- i. (Except in a Hazard) place your ball at the closest spot where it will come to rest but not closer to the hole or in a hazard, or

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- ii. (In a Hazard) place your ball like (i) above but within the hazard.
4. *When Ball Dropped or Placed is In Play:* Once you drop or place your ball, including a substituted ball (even if you're not allowed to substitute another ball), it is in play.
5. *Making Next Stroke from Where Previous Stroke Made:* If you elect or are required to play your next shot from the same spot where you played your previous shot, you must:
 - a. (On the Tee Box) play your shot from anywhere in the tee box and you may tee it up,
 - b. (Through the Green) drop your ball within 3-4" of the spot,
 - c. (In a Hazard) drop your ball within 3-4" of the spot but you must drop it in the hazard, or
 - d. (On a Green) place your ball on the spot.If you don't play from the spot as required here, you lose the hole in match play or get a two shot penalty in stroke play.
6. *Lifting Ball Incorrectly Substituted, Dropped or Placed:* If you don't follow any of these rules when dropping or placing your ball, you may correct your mistake without penalty as long as you do it before making your next shot.
7. *Playing from Wrong Place*
 - a. *General:* You are considered to have played from a wrong place if you:
 - i. Play your ball from a spot on the course where the Rules don't permit you to play, or
 - ii. If you play from a place when the Rules required you to re-drop or replace your ball.
 - b. *Match Play:* If you play from the wrong place in Match Play, you lose the hole.
 - c. *Stroke Play:*
 - If you play from a wrong place in Stroke Play, you get a two shot penalty and your score with that ball counts, except:
 - If you play from a wrong place in Stroke Play and you have gained a significant advantage (serious breach) by doing so, you will be required to correct your mistake by playing another ball from the correct spot. Your score with the second ball counts plus you get a two shot penalty.
 - If you are not sure if you gained a significant advantage, you can play a second ball from the correct spot. You will play both balls into the hole, and you must tell the Committee what you have done. The Committee will decide if you have gained a significant advantage.
 - If you did not have a significant advantage, the score with your first ball will count plus the two shot penalty. None of the shots with the second ball will count in your score.
 - If you did have a significant advantage, the score with your second ball will count plus the two shot penalty. None of the shots with the first ball will count.
 - If you do not play a second ball and the Committee determines you gained a significant advantage, you will enjoy your hot fudge sundae at DQ on the way out of town.

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Rule 21 – Cleaning Ball

If your ball is on the green, you may mark, lift and clean it. If your ball is somewhere else on the course, you may clean it if you are entitled to lift it, except:

- a. To determine if it is damaged and unfit for play (see Rule 5),
- b. To identify it (you may clean as much of it as necessary to see some identification mark; see Rule 12),
- c. If it is assisting or interfering with the play of another person (see Rule 22).

If you clean your ball when you are not permitted to, you get a one shot penalty.

Rule 22 – Ball Assisting or Interfering with Play

1. *Ball Assisting Play:* Except when a ball is in motion, if you think any ball might help another player, you can:
 - a. Lift the ball if it is yours, or
 - b. Ask to have the ball lifted if it is not yours.

The ball cannot be cleaned unless it is on the green. The person whose ball is to be lifted may play first. If the Committee thinks players are agreeing to leave a ball in position in order to help one of the players, it may send both players to a DQ for sundae.

2. *Ball Interfering with Play:* Except when a ball is in motion, if you think another ball might interfere with your play, you may have it lifted. The person whose ball is to be lifted may play first.

Rule 23 – Loose Impediments

“Loose Impediments” are natural objects, such as sticks, leaves, rocks, acorns and pine cones. They also include things like a branch or tree that has fallen and is not attached to the tree or base and gravel that is used to create a cart path.

1. *Relief:* You can move any loose impediment as long as the ball and loose impediment are not in the same hazard (bunker or water hazard). If you move a loose impediment and it causes your ball to move, you get a one shot penalty unless the ball is on the green. If you cause your ball to move, you must replace it. You cannot move a loose impediment that is in the way of a moving ball.

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Rule 24 – Obstructions

“Obstructions” are man-made, non-natural, objects, such as water bottles, towels, paper cups, bunker rakes, cart paths, sprinkler control boxes and flagsticks. In addition, items, while made with natural objects, that didn’t exist in nature in their current form (a gravel cart path) are obstructions.

Obstructions come in two forms: Movable and Immovable. It is movable if you can do it rather easily and don’t damage the course. Otherwise, it is immovable. What is movable for you may be immovable for another person.

1. *Movable Obstruction*

- a. If a movable obstruction interferes with your stance, lie of ball or your swing, you may move it for free. If you cause the ball to move while moving the obstruction, you are not penalized but must replace the ball. If your ball happens to lie on the obstruction, then you pick up your ball, move the obstruction and drop the ball so that it hits the ground underneath where the ball was on the obstruction. This is true for anyplace on the course, including in hazards.

2. *Immovable Obstruction*

- a. If an immovable obstruction interferes with your stance, lie of ball or your swing, you may move your ball for free.
- b. You have to find the closest spot that avoids the obstruction for all three reasons – stance, lie of ball and your swing – without going closer to the hole. Then you drop the ball within a club-length of that spot. But, the ball cannot go closer to the hole than that spot.
 - i. If your ball isn’t on the green or in a hazard, just follow this procedure.
 - ii. If your ball is in a bunker, follow this procedure but you must drop your ball in the bunker – or you can drop behind the bunker with a one shot penalty.
 - iii. If your ball is on the green, you will place the ball (not drop) at the nearest spot. You do not get the one club-length, and the spot may be off the green.
 - iv. If your ball is in a water hazard, you do not get free relief from the immovable obstruction. If you want relief, you must follow Rule 26.

3. *You cannot find your ball*

- a. If you cannot find your ball in a movable obstruction, then you might get free relief and be able to drop another ball – if you have “virtual certainty.” “**Virtual certainty**” means the ball can be no other place other than in the movable obstruction based on the specific situation even though you don’t know that for a fact. An example of this is a trash can filled with trash and bees swarming around it.
- b. Like “a” above, if you cannot find your ball in an immovable obstruction, then you might get free relief and be able to drop another ball – if you have “virtual certainty.” (See description above)
 - i. If your ball isn’t on the green or in a hazard, simply drop a ball within one club-length of where the original ball entered the immovable obstruction.

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- ii. If your ball entered the obstruction (i.e. a drain hole) in a bunker, then drop a ball in the bunker within one club-length of that spot – or you can drop behind the bunker with a one shot penalty.
- iii. If your ball entered the obstruction in a water hazard, then you do not get free relief. You must proceed under Rule 26.

Rule 25 – Abnormal Ground Conditions

An “Abnormal Ground Condition” are conditions on the golf course that aren’t as they are supposed to be, such as unnecessarily worn or bare areas in the fairway, abnormally deep depressions in the fairway or rough, washed out bunkers and other damage (intentional and otherwise) on the course. Common situations also include casual water, a tree in the process of being removed, a re-sodded or re-seeded area and other areas under construction.

This Rule, its applications and procedures are almost identical to those found in Rule 24-2 – Immovable Obstructions.

1. *General*

- a. If an abnormal ground condition interferes with your stance, lie of ball or your swing, you may move your ball for free.
- b. You have to find the nearest spot that avoids the abnormal ground condition for all three reasons – stance, lie of ball and your swing – without going closer to the hole. You then drop the ball within a club-length of that spot. But, the ball cannot go closer to the hole than that spot.
 - i. If your ball isn’t on the green or in a hazard, just follow this procedure.
 - ii. If your ball is in a bunker, follow this procedure but you must drop your ball in the bunker. If you cannot find a position where you avoid all three reasons, you go to the spot where you have “maximum relief.” Or, you can drop behind the bunker with a one shot penalty.
 - iii. If your ball is on the green, you will place the ball (not drop) at the nearest spot. You do not get the one club-length, and the spot may be off the green.
 - iv. If your ball is in a water hazard, you do not get free relief from the abnormal ground condition. If you want relief, you must follow Rule 26.
- c. If you cannot find your ball in an abnormal ground condition, then you might get free relief and be able to drop another ball – if you have “virtual certainty.” (See description in Rule 24-3a.)
 - i. If your ball isn’t on the green or in a hazard, simply drop a ball within one club-length of where the original ball entered the abnormal ground condition.
 - ii. If your ball entered the abnormal ground condition (i.e. casual water) in a bunker, then drop a ball in the bunker within one club-length of that spot – or you can drop behind the bunker with a one shot penalty.

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- iii. If your ball entered the abnormal ground condition in a water hazard, then you do not get free relief. You must proceed under Rule 26.
2. If your ball embeds (“plugs”) in the ground after your shot, you might get free relief, but that depends on where the ball is plugged. If it’s in an area of grass that is cut to “fairway height” or less, such as the fringe, then you can pick your ball out of the hole and clean it before dropping it as close as possible to the hole it created when it plugged – but don’t drop it closer to the hole. If it plugs in the rough, check with the Committee as it may have a Local Rule that allows you free relief. If it plugs in sand, either in or outside of a bunker, or the ground in a water hazard, you do not get free relief. To be “plugged,” the ball must break the surface of the ground, not just nestled deep in the grass.
3. If your ball should end up on the wrong green (even a putting or practice green), you are not allowed to play it. However, you do get free relief. Find the nearest spot off the green, not nearer your intended hole, and drop it within one club-length of that spot. It’s okay if you are still standing on the green when you play your shot.

Rule 26 – Water Hazards (including Lateral Water Hazards)

If you hit your ball toward a water hazard, you cannot assume it ended up in the hazard. Of course, if you, other people in your group or other people who saw you hit the shot actually saw the ball go into the water and not come out, then you have *knowledge* and can proceed under this Rule. However, without this knowledge, you need “virtual certainty” to follow this Rule. “*Virtual certainty*” means the ball can be no other place other than in the water hazard based on the specific situation even though you don’t know that for a fact. If you don’t have “virtual certainty,” you must treat the ball as lost under Rule 27.

1. If you know or are virtually certain your ball is in the water hazard (yellow), then you have some options. Of course, you may attempt to play the ball without penalty. If that is not an option, you have other options that all include a one shot penalty.
 - a. You can play another ball from where you hit the previous ball (“stroke and distance”)
 - b. You can play another ball on the “flag line” – or the line from the hole through the point where the ball last crossed the water hazard margin – going back as far as you wish.If your ball ended up in a lateral water hazard (red), you have these same two options plus one or two more.
 - a. You can drop a ball within two club-lengths of the point where the ball last crossed the margin of the water, or
 - b. if you can find a spot on the other side of the water that is the same distance from the hole, you can drop a ball within two club-lengths of that spot.
2. *Playing a ball from a water hazard*
 - a. If you hit a ball from a water hazard and it (1) doesn’t get out of the first hazard, or (2) ends up in another water hazard, you have a variety of options.

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- i. You can drop and play another ball at the spot in the first water hazard (stroke & distance) with a one shot penalty.
 1. If after dropping the ball you decide you cannot play it, you may use any of the options available to you for the first shot you played into the water hazard, including stroke and distance. You will buy two penalty strokes at the penalty store in this case (one per drop).
- ii. If you know it's not a good idea to drop the ball back into the water, you can drop another ball using any of the options available to you for the first shot you hit into the water hazard, including stroke and distance. You will have only one penalty stroke added to your score (one drop).
- b. If you hit a ball from a water hazard and lose it outside of a water hazard, hit it out of bounds, or hit it into an unplayable lie, you have three options.
 - i. You can drop another ball back into the water hazard and play it with only a one stroke penalty (for the lost ball, OB or unplayable ball).
 - ii. If you drop the ball in the water and decide you cannot play it, then you may use any of the options available to you for the first shot you played into the water hazard, including stroke and distance. You will incur two one shot penalties – one for the lost ball, OB or unplayable and one for getting out of the water.
 - iii. If you don't drop the ball in the water, you may use any of the options available to you for the first shot you played into the water hazard, including stroke and distance. You will incur two one shot penalties – one for the lost ball, OB or unplayable and one for getting out of the water.

Rule 27 – Ball Lost or Out of Bounds; Provisional Ball

1. *Stroke and distance* is when you go back to the place where you hit your previous shot to play your next shot. The first shot counts and you get a one shot penalty. Thus, you would be hitting your third shot.
 - a. At any time, you may choose to play under stroke and distance.
 - b. If you hit your ball out of bounds, you must play another ball under stroke and distance. You may tee it up if the shot was from the tee box. If not, you must drop the ball at the spot of your last shot.
 - c. If you cannot find your ball after searching for it for five minutes, it is lost. You must proceed just as in (b) above.
2. If you hit your ball and you think it might be lost or out of bounds, you can hit another ball “provisionally” before going forward (beyond 50 yards) to search for the original to save the time and keep from having to go back.
 - a. You must tell your opponent or someone in your group what you are doing before doing it.

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- b. If you hit a provisional ball, and your original ball is out of bounds or lost (not in a water hazard), your provisional ball becomes your “ball in play” under the penalty of stroke and distance. (You lay 3.)
- c. If you hit a provisional ball but you find that your original ball is not out of bounds or lost outside of a water hazard, you must abandon the provisional ball and proceed under the applicable Rule – even if one of the options under that Rule is stroke and distance.

Rule 28 – Ball Unplayable

You are permitted to declare your ball unplayable anywhere on the course – except when it is in a water hazard. You are the only person who can make that judgment. If you decide your ball is unplayable, you have three options, all of which include a one shot penalty. NOTE: If your ball is in a bunker, you must drop in the bunker under Options b or c below.

- a. You may play another ball under stroke and distance.
- b. You may drop and play another ball, keeping the point where the original ball is at rest between you and the hole with no limit as to how far back you may go.
- c. You may drop and play another ball within two club-lengths of the spot where the original ball is at rest in its unplayable position.

The Rules of Golf – Simplified is a document created by Douglas A. Hoffmann, who is the Tournament Director for the Minnesota Golf Association and a PGA Master Professional living in Apple Valley, MN. It is a simplified, paraphrased version of the **Rules of Golf** as written and published jointly by the United States Golf Association and the R&A Rules Limited. (Created March, 2015; Updated January, 2016)