

THE
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WHY WE CARE (AND DON'T CARE) ABOUT THE NEW RULES OF GOLF

By David Owen 1:44 P.M.



Photograph by Martin Parr / Magnum

If the rules of football worked the way that the rules of golf work, the Saints, not the Rams, would be playing in the Super Bowl. With one minute and forty-five seconds to go in the N.F.C. championship game, Nickell Robey-Coleman, a cornerback for the Rams, would have penalized himself for pass interference and a helmet-to-helmet hit—flagrant violations that the officials on the field inexplicably failed to call—and the Saints would have run down the clock before kicking an unanswerable field goal.

Golf tournaments have officials, too, but their role is mainly advisory; the golfers are responsible for policing themselves, and, to a remarkable extent, they really do. The most famous example occurred during the U.S. Open in 1925, when Bobby Jones called a penalty on himself for an infraction that only he had observed: his ball, he said, had moved slightly when he addressed it in the rough. His honesty possibly cost him the title, but he dismissed those who applauded him: “You might as well praise a man for not robbing a bank as praise him for playing by the rules.” By contrast, a running back who didn’t try to steal an extra foot by sliding the ball downfield after being tackled would be considered almost negligent. Robey-Coleman, to his credit, said, after the game, that he should have been called for pass interference. But, in football, what a player does matters only if it matters to a referee.

Not that golfers don’t cheat. There’s an old joke about a weekend player who is so accustomed to fudging his score that when he one day makes a hole-in-one he marks it on his scorecard as a zero. Nevertheless, even at the recreational level—and certainly on the tour—when golfers break rules it’s usually not because they’re trying to get away with something but because they don’t know what they’re doing. The rules of golf are hard even for rules officials to keep straight. Every few years, the United States Golf Association and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews address confusions, anachronisms, and other issues by revising the rulebook, which they’ve published jointly since 1952. Sometimes the changes make things better, and sometimes they make things worse. The 2019 revision, which was unusually extensive, does both.

Golf’s first written rules were set down, in 1744, by the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith, whose home course, in Edinburgh, Scotland, had five holes. There were thirteen succinct “articles,” of which the tenth was “If a Ball be stopp’d by any person, Horse, Dog, or any thing else, The Ball so stop’d must be play’d where it lyes.” That last clause contains what can be thought of as the game’s foundational commandment. Many of golf’s other rules—in a book that now runs to two hundred and forty pages—are, in effect, exceptions to it.

Several of the 2019 changes were made in the hope of speeding up what has become a painfully slow game. Players used to be allowed five minutes to search for a lost ball; they now get three. The old rulebook said little about pace of play; the new one recommends (though it doesn’t require) taking no more than forty seconds to hit each

shot, and it encourages “ready golf” in stroke play rather than requiring, as the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith did, that the player “whose Ball lies farthest from the Hole” play first. There used to be a penalty for hitting an unattended flagstick with a putted ball; that penalty is now gone.

Putting with the flagstick in the hole really will speed up play if all golfers do it—but if only some do, as is certain to be the case, it will actually make things slower, by creating a whole new layer of pointless putting-green housekeeping: flag in for me, flag out for you, flag back in for my partner, flag out again for yours. Nevertheless, I welcome this rule change, because I think that putting with the flagstick in the hole makes me a slightly better putter, both by forcing me to focus on a skinnier, more visible target, and by giving me a backstop for overly energetic strokes. The tour player who has taken the greatest advantage, so far, is Bryson DeChambeau, who has said that putting with the flagstick in the hole is “statistically proven to be a benefit in 99 per cent of situations.” He won last weekend, in Dubai.

Quite a few of the revisions eliminate dumb penalties that have existed for a long time, such as the one for accidentally hitting a ball twice with a single stroke and the one for accidentally moving your own ball while searching for it. Other revisions add penalties for practices that used to be legal. Many players on the L.P.G.A Tour, especially, have become accustomed to aiming shots by having their caddies stand directly behind them, on the line of play, and telling them when they’re pointed in the right direction. The caddies used to be required to step away before the players swung; they’re now required to step away before the players take their stance. The change was made, the U.S.G.A. explained, because helping a player aim “undermines the player’s need to use his or her own alignment skills and judgment.” It also looked kind of babyish.

Several of the most important revisions are more confusing than the rules that they replace. What used to be called water hazards are now called yellow-marked penalty areas, and what used to be called lateral water hazards are now called red-marked penalty areas, and, for the first time, stakes of either color can be used to create penalty areas in places that not only don’t contain water currently but have never contained it in the past. Furthermore, penalty areas of all types can be red-marked, and governed by the rules for such, if local authorities so choose. (What?) These changes smell strongly

of committee work. They don't resolve long-standing disagreements; they merely hint at those disagreements and preserve them.

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The U.S.G.A. and the R. & A. used to publish a supplemental volume, called “Decisions on the Rules of Golf,” which came out every two years and was hundreds of pages longer than the rulebook. Its purpose was to “clarify matters which may not be entirely clear” from the rules themselves, based on issues that the governing bodies had had to settle for baffled players and rules officials. What used to be called “decisions” have now been renamed “interpretations.” Some of them have been incorporated into the rulebook itself, while others have been collected in a new publication, “The Official Guidebook to the Rules of Golf,” which contains other explanatory material as well.

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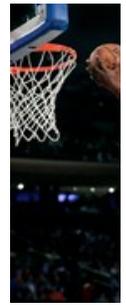
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I own several old editions of the “Decisions,” and they have long been my favorite bathroom reading. They have made me appreciate the tremendous challenge involved in trying to behave as Bobby Jones expected all golfers to behave, in addition to providing an agreeable exercise in Schadenfreude: “A player misses a shot completely and, in swinging his club back, he accidentally knocks his ball backwards. Was the backward swing a stroke? If the ball comes to rest out of bounds, how does the player proceed?” Also: “A tumbleweed blowing across the course strikes a ball at rest and knocks it into the hole. What is the procedure?” Furthermore: “Is a worm, when half on top of the surface of the ground and half below, a loose impediment which may be removed? Or is it fixed and solidly embedded and therefore not a loose impediment?”

All these problems are given definitive solutions, but the real pleasure in studying them lies not in learning the answers but in imagining the situations in which they arose: “After a player putts, the flagstick attendant removes the flagstick and a knob attached to the top of the flagstick falls off. The knob strikes the player’s moving ball and deflects it. What is the ruling?” You can easily picture the scene: the imbecile tending the flag; the brilliant fifty-foot putt that would have dropped if the detached knob hadn’t struck it; the ensuing screams. Next question!



Video

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