



Clarifications of the 2019 Rules of Golf

Updated April 7, 2021

Clarifications will normally be updated on a quarterly basis each January, April, July, and October and the next quarterly update will be in July 2021. The next revision to Rules of Golf will be January 2023.

New Clarifications

Rules

Rule 3.3b(4):

1. Interpretation 3.3b(4)/1 – National Association May Establish Meaning of “Handicap” Player Must Show on Scorecard
 2. Interpretation 3.3b(4)/2 – Player May be Exempt From Penalty When Committee Provides a Scorecard With an Incorrect Handicap
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RULES

Rule 1:

Rule 1.3c(4):

1. Playing From a Wrong Place Is Related to Causing the Ball to Move:

If a player moves his or her ball in play in breach of Rule 9.4 and plays it from its new location rather than replacing it, the player gets only the general penalty under Rule 14.7 for playing from a wrong place. The act of moving the ball in breach of Rule 9.4 is related to playing from a wrong place in breach of Rule 14.7. (Added 12/2018)

Rule 3:

Rule 3.3b(4):

1. Interpretation 3.3b(4)/1 – National Association May Establish Meaning of “Handicap” Player Must Show on Scorecard:

Until further notice, a National Association (Authorized Association as defined in the Rules of Handicapping) may adopt a policy that establishes the handicap that players must show on their scorecard in a net-score stroke play competition. This handicap does not have to be the handicap described in Interpretation 3.3b(4)/1, which is the Course Handicap (as defined in the Rules of Handicapping). The options for the National Association are the Handicap Index, the Course Handicap or the Playing Handicap. If no policy is adopted by the National Association, the Course Handicap is the handicap the player must show on the scorecard, in accordance with Interpretation 3.3b(4)/1. (Added 4/2021)



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2. Interpretation 3.3b(4)/2 – Player May be Exempt From Penalty When Committee Provides a Scorecard With an Incorrect Handicap:

Until further notice, a National Association (Authorized Association as defined in the Rules of Handicapping) may adopt a policy that alters the provisions in Interpretation 3.3b(4)/2. With such a policy in place, it means that if a Committee provides a player with a scorecard containing the incorrect handicap and the error is not corrected before the player returns the scorecard, this will be treated as an administrative mistake by the Committee. This means that the player is not penalized if the incorrect handicap on the returned scorecard is the handicap provided by the Committee. There is no time limit for correcting the mistake. (Added 4/2021)

Rule 4:

Rule 4.1b(3)

See the Committee Procedures section at end of this document for MLR G-9 Replacement of Broken or Significantly Damaged Clubs

Rule 4.1c:

1. Club Taken Out of Play Must Not Be Used During That Round:

If an extra club was taken out of play before a round and carried during the round, or a club was taken out of play during the round, it must not be used for the remainder of that round. This includes a situation where a player is allowed to replace a club, and is an additional restriction in Rule 4.1b(4). (Added 12/2018)

Rule 4.3a:

1. Interpretation 4.3a/1 – Limitations on Using Green-Reading Materials

Purpose of Interpretation:

Rule 4.3 limits the use of equipment and devices that might help a player in his or her play, based on the principle that golf is a challenging game in which success should depend on the judgment, skills and abilities of the player. This interpretation of Rule 4.3 limits the size and scale of detailed putting green maps and any similar electronic or digital materials that a player may use during a round to help with reading his or her line of play on the putting green so that a player's ability to read a green remains an essential part of the skill of putting.



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[The limitations apply:

- to any stroke a player makes from the putting green, and
- to a stroke made with a putter from anywhere when the player's intention is for the ball to come to rest on the putting green.

This bracketed information comes from a frequently asked question on green-reading materials. To access all FAQs, go to www.usga.org/GRM. (last updated June 2019)]

Putting Green Maps

The player is allowed to use a putting green map or other putting green information, except that:

- Any image of a putting green must be limited to a scale of 3/8 inch to 5 yards (1:480) or smaller (the "scale limit");
- Any book or other paper containing a map or image of a putting green must not be larger than 4 ¼ inches x 7 inches (the "size limit"), although a "hole location sheet" that displays 9 or more holes on a single sheet of paper may be larger, provided that any image of a single putting green meets the scale limit;
- No magnification of putting green information is allowed other than a player's normal wearing of prescription glasses or lenses;
- Hand drawn or written information about a putting green is only allowed if contained in a book or paper meeting the size limit and written by the player and/or his or her caddie.

Electronic or Digital Putting Green Maps

In electronic or digital form, any image of a putting green must meet the above scale and size limits. Even when an electronic or digital putting green map meets the above limits, the player is still in breach of Rule 4.3 if the player uses any device in a manner not consistent with the purpose of these limits, such as by:

- Increasing the size of the green's representation beyond the scale or size limits;
- Producing a recommended line of play based on the location (or estimated location) of the player's ball (see Rule 4.3a(1)). (Interpretation Introduced in November 2018 and added to clarifications on 7/2019)

2. When Use of Alignment Device Results in Breach

If a player places an "alignment device" (see Definition in Equipment Rules to see when a ball-marker meets this Definition) to show the line of play and then orients his or her ball based on the direction of that alignment device, the player is in breach of Rule 4.3a.



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For example, a player's ball comes to rest on the putting green and the player marks the spot of his or her ball with an "alignment device." When doing so, the alignment device is placed to show the line of play. If the player then lifts and replaces his or her ball (which includes rotating it) so that a marking on the ball is lined up with the alignment device, the player is in breach of Rule 4.3a. (Added 1/2020)

Rule 5:

Rule 5.2:

1. First Breach Happens When First Stroke Made:

The penalty for the first breach of Rule 5.2 applies when a player commits a single act (such as making a stroke). The disqualification penalty for the second breach applies when that player commits any subsequent act that is not allowed (such as rolling a ball or making another stroke). These are not treated as related acts under Rule 1.3c(4). (Added 12/2018)

Rule 10:

Rule 10.2b(4):

1. Meaning of "Begins Taking a Stance for the Stroke":

Rule 10.2b(4) does not allow a player to have his or her caddie deliberately stand on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball for any reason when the player begins taking a stance for the stroke. Reference to "the stroke" means the stroke that is actually made.

The player begins to take the stance for the stroke that is actually made when he or she has at least one foot in position for that stance.

If a player backs away from the stance, he or she has not taken a stance for the stroke that is actually made, and the second bullet point in Rule 10.2b(4) does not apply.

Therefore, if a player takes a stance when the caddie is deliberately standing on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball, there is no penalty under Rule 10.2b(4) if the player backs away from the stance and does not begin to take a stance for the stroke that is actually made until after the caddie has moved out of that location. This applies anywhere on the course.

Backing away means that the player's feet or body are no longer in a position where helpful guidance on aiming at the intended target line could be given. (Added 2/2019)



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2. Examples of Caddie Not Deliberately Standing Behind Ball When Player Begins Taking Stance for Stroke

Rule 10.2b(4) does not allow a player to have his or her caddie deliberately stand on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball for any reason when the player begins taking a stance for the stroke.

The use of the term “deliberately” requires the caddie to be aware that (1) the player is beginning to take a stance for the stroke to be played, and (2) he or she is standing on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball.

If the caddie is unaware of either of these two things, the caddie’s action is not deliberate and Rule 10.2b(4) does not apply.

Examples of when a caddie’s action is not considered to be deliberate include when:

- The caddie is raking a bunker or taking some similar action to care for the course and is not aware that he or she is doing so on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball.
- The player makes a stroke and the ball comes to rest near the hole and the player walks up and taps the ball into the hole while the caddie is unaware he or she is standing on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball.
- The caddie is standing on an extension of the line of play behind the ball but, when the player moves in to begin taking a stance, the caddie is facing away from the player or looking in a different direction and is unaware the player has begun to take his or her stance.
- The caddie is engaged in a task (such as obtaining a yardage) and is unaware that the player has begun to take the stance.

But, in the examples given above, when the caddie becomes aware that the player has already begun to take a stance for the stroke to be played and he or she is standing on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball, the caddie needs to make every effort to move out of the way.

Common acts that caddies take unrelated to the player setting up to the ball, such as checking to see if a player’s club will hit a tree, whether the player has interference from a cart path or holding an umbrella over a player’s head before the stroke, are not treated as deliberate actions under Rule 10.2b(4). After helping the player with such an act, there is no penalty so long as the caddie moves away before the stroke is made.

If either the player or caddie is attempting to circumvent the primary purpose of Rule 10.2b(4), which is to ensure that aiming at the intended target is a challenge that the player must overcome alone, the caddie’s actions are treated as being deliberate. (Added 2/2019)



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3. Alignment Help Before Player Has Begun Taking Stance for Stroke:

Interpretation 10.2b(4)/1 explains that the primary purpose of Rule 10.2b(4) is to ensure that aiming at the intended target is a challenge that the player must overcome alone.

In a situation where a player has not yet begun to take his or her stance for the stroke but:

- the player's feet or body are close to a position where useful guidance on aiming could be given and
- the caddie is deliberately standing on or close to an extension of the line of play behind the ball,

the player is treated as having begun to take a stance for the stroke (even though his or her feet are not in that position) only if the caddie gives the player help with alignment.

If alignment help is given but the player backs away before making the stroke and the caddie moves out from behind the line of play, there is no breach of the Rule. This applies anywhere on the course.

Alignment help includes when the caddie gives help by standing behind the player and moving away without saying anything but, by doing so, is giving a signal to the player that he or she is correctly aimed at the intended target. (Added 2/2019)

Rule 10.3b(2):

1. Caddie May Lift Ball When Player Will Take Relief:

So long as it is reasonable to conclude that the player is taking relief under a Rule, his or her caddie is treated as being given authorization to lift the ball and may do so without penalty. (Added 12/2018)

Rule 11:

Rule 11.1b:

1. How To Apply Exception 2 to Rule 11.1b:

Exception 2 to Rule 11.1b is to be applied using the "known or virtually certain" standard. Therefore, if there is knowledge or conclusive evidence that the ball played from the putting green accidentally hit a person, animal or movable obstruction on the putting green, the stroke does not count. (Added 12/2018)

2. Living Insects Are Animals:

Exception 2 to Rule 11.1b applies to living insects since they are animals. (Added 12/2018)



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Rule 13:

Rule 13.1c(2):

1. Status of Damage From Hail:

Damage on the putting green caused by hail may be repaired. (Added 12/2018)

Rule 14:

Rule 14.3b(2):

1. Tee Is Player's Equipment:

A tee that is being used by the player, or is being carried by the player or his or her caddie, is the player's equipment (such as a tee marking the reference point). (Added 12/2018)

Rule 14.3d:

1. Penalty for Deliberately Deflecting or Stopping Dropped Ball Always Applies:

If a player drops a ball in the right way and deliberately deflects that ball before it comes to rest in breach of Rule 14.3d, the player must drop a ball again. When doing so, the player is not considered to be correcting a mistake under Rule 14.5b(3) and gets the general penalty under Rule 14.3d. (Added 12/2018)

Rule 14.5c:

1. Player Not Penalized When Improvement Has No Effect on Relief Area Ball Played From:

If a player improves the relief area but drops the ball in a wrong way, the player would get no penalty under Rule 8.1a if he or she dropped in the right way in a different relief area so long as the improvement did not also improve the relief area that the player played from. (Added 12/2018)



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Rule 15:

Rule 15.3:

1. Backstopping:

“Backstopping” is the common term used to describe the following situation in stroke play:

A player, without agreement with any other player, leaves his or her ball in place on the putting green close to the hole in a position where another player, who is about to play from off the putting green, could benefit if his or her ball struck the ball at rest.

As there has been no agreement to leave the ball in place to help any player, there is no breach of the Rules – see Rule 15.3a.

However, The R&A and USGA take the view that “backstopping” fails to take into account all of the other players in the competition and has the potential to give the player with the “backstop” an advantage over those other players.

Consequently, The R&A and USGA offer players the following guidance and explanation of best practice:

- In stroke play, the competition involves all players and, because each player in the competition cannot be present to protect his or her own interests, protecting the field is an important responsibility that all players in the competition share.
- Therefore, in stroke play, if there is a reasonable possibility that a player’s ball close to the hole could help another player who is about to play from off the green, both players should ensure that the player whose ball is close to the hole marks and lifts that ball before the other player plays.
- If all players follow this best practice, it ensures the protection of the interests of everyone in the competition. (Added 1/2020)

Rule 16:

Rule 16.1a(3):

1. Meaning of “Clearly Unreasonable to Play Ball” When Deciding If Relief Is Allowed:

The purpose of Rule 16.1a(3) is to prevent a player from obtaining free relief when it is clearly unreasonable for him or her to make a stroke because of interference by something from which free relief is not available. But it does not apply, for example, if a player’s ball is embedded in the general area and he or she is standing on an immovable obstruction. In this case, the player may take relief from either condition unless relief is unreasonable because of something other than either condition. (Added 12/2018)



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Rule 16.1c(2):

1. Reference Point and Relief Area for Back-On-the-Line Relief Must Be Outside Bunker:

When taking back-on-the-line relief from an abnormal course condition under Rule 16.1c(2), both the reference point and relief area must be outside the bunker in which the original ball came to rest. (Added 1/2021)

Rule 16.3b:

1. Player Not Always Allowed to Take Embedded Ball Relief:

If a player's ball is embedded in the general area but neither the reference point nor any part of the course within one club-length of the reference point is in the general area, the player is not allowed to take free relief under Rule 16.3b.

For example, free relief is not allowed if:

- a ball is embedded at the very base of the lip, wall or face above a bunker,
- the spot right behind the ball is in the bunker and
- within one club-length of and not nearer the hole from that reference point, there is no part of the relief area that is in the general area. (Added 12/2018)

Rule 17:

Rule 17.1d(2):

1. Reference Point for Back-On-the-Line Relief Must Be Outside Penalty Area:

When taking back-on-the-line relief from a penalty area, the reference point (and the relief area) must be outside that penalty area. (Added 04/2019)

2. See the Committee Procedures section at end of this document for MLR E-12 Ball Played from Outside Relief Area When Taking Back-On-the-Line Relief



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Rule 24:

Rule 24.4b:

1. Advice Giver Must Not Deliberately Stand Behind Player:

If an advice giver deliberately stands behind a player from when he or she starts to take a stance, if the player asks or authorizes the advice giver to do this, he or she gets the general penalty under Rule 10.2b(4) – see Rule 1.3c(1), first bullet point.

If the player did not ask or authorize the advice giver to stand in that location but knows that this is not allowed and does not take reasonable steps to object or stop it from happening, the player gets the general penalty under Rule 10.2b(4) – see Rule 1.3c(1), second bullet point.
(Added 12/2018)

DEFINITIONS

Club-Length:

1. Meaning of “Club-Length” When Playing with Partner:

In partner forms of play, either partner’s longest club, except a putter, may be used for defining the teeing area or determining the size of a relief area. (Added 12/2018)

Flagstick:

1. Flagstick Specifications:

The specification of flagstick in the Equipment Rules was amended on 1 January 2020, principally to include the following:

“Attachments may be permitted more than 3 inches (76.2 mm) below the putting green surface but must be constrained to this area.”

For full details of the flagstick specification, see the [Equipment Rules](#). (Added 1/2020)

Relief Area:

1. Determining Whether Ball in Relief Area:

When determining whether a ball has come to rest within a relief area (i.e. either one or two club-lengths from the reference point depending on the Rule being applied), the ball is in the relief area if any part of the ball is within the one or two club-length measurement. However, a ball is not in a relief area if any part of the ball is nearer the hole than the reference point or when any part of the ball has interference from the condition from which free relief is taken.
(Added 12/2018)



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COMMITTEE PROCEDURES

Model Local Rule B-2:

1. Point on Opposite Edge Must Not Cross Another Area of the Course:

With the Model Local Rule in use, if the straight line from the edge where the ball last crossed into the penalty area to the other edge that is an equal distance from the hole crosses outside the penalty area, the player is not allowed to use that opposite point. (Added 12/2018)

Model Local Rule D-7:

1. Local Rule D-7 Limiting When Stroke Made From Putting Green Must Be Replayed Under Exception 2 to Rule 11.1b

Model Local Rule D-7

“Exception 2 to Rule 11.1b applies, except that when a ball played from the *putting green* accidentally hits:

- the player,
- the club used by the player to make the *stroke* or
- an *animal* defined as a *loose impediment* (that is, worms, insects and similar *animals* that can be removed easily)

the *stroke* counts and the ball must be played as it lies.

Penalty for Playing Ball from a *Wrong Place* in Breach of Local Rule: *General Penalty Under Rule 14.7a.*” (Added 1/2021)

Model Local Rule E-12:

1. Local Rule E-12 Ball Played From Outside Relief Area When Taking Back-On-the-Line Relief

Model Local Rule E-12 Ball Played From Outside Relief Area When Taking Back-On-the-Line Relief

Purpose. A Committee may choose to introduce a Local Rule to provide for no penalty in specific circumstances when a ball is played from outside the relief area after taking back-on-the-line relief.

Under this Local Rule, a player will not be penalized for playing from a wrong place so long as the ball is dropped in the relief area and comes to rest within one club-length of where it first touched the ground.



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For example, a ball rolls slightly forward of the reference point after having been dropped in the right way and in the relief area, but is still within one club-length of where it first touched the ground when dropped. In such cases, the player can either proceed under Rule 14.3c(2) or the player can play the ball from where it came to rest.

This Local Rule is for use only in relation to the Back-On-the-Line relief procedure.

MLR E-12

“When taking Back-On-the-Line relief, there is no additional penalty if a player plays a ball that was *dropped* in the *relief area* required by the relevant Rule (Rule 16.1c(2), 17.1d(2), 19.2b or 19.3b) but came to rest outside the *relief area*, so long as the ball, when played, is within one *club-length* of where it first touched the ground when *dropped*.”

This exemption from penalty applies even if the ball is played from nearer the hole than the *reference point* (but not if played from nearer the *hole* than the spot of the original ball or the estimated point where the ball last crossed the edge of the *penalty area*).

This Local Rule does not change the procedure for taking Back-On-the-Line relief under a relevant Rule. This means that the *reference point* and *relief area* are not changed by this Local Rule and that Rule 14.3c(2) can be applied by a player who drops a ball in the right way and it comes to rest outside the *relief area*, whether this occurs on the first or second drop.”
(Added 4/2019)

Model Local Rule F-5:

1. Immovable Obstruction Is Not Required to Be in General Area:

In relation to the location of the immovable obstruction, the term “within two club-lengths of the putting green” includes an immovable obstruction that is on the putting green. (Added 12/2018)

Model Local Rule G-9:

1. Local Rule G-9 for Replacement of Club that is Broken or Significantly Damaged

Model Local Rule G-9

“Rule 4.1b(3) is modified in this way:

If a player’s club is “broken or significantly damaged” during the round by the player or caddie, except in cases of abuse, the player may replace the club with any club under Rule 4.1b(4).

When replacing a club, the player must immediately take the broken or significantly damaged club out of play, using the procedure in Rule 4.1c(1).



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For the purposes of this Local Rule:

- A club is “broken or significantly damaged” when:
 - the shaft breaks into pieces, splinters or is bent (but not when the shaft is only dented)
 - the club face impact area is visibly deformed (but not when the club face is only scratched)
 - the clubhead is visibly and significantly deformed
 - the clubhead is detached or loose from the shaft, or
 - the grip is loose.

Exception: A club face or clubhead is not “broken or significantly damaged” solely because it is cracked.

Penalty for Breach of Local Rule – See Rule 4.1b.” (Added 4/2019)

MODIFIED RULES FOR PLAYERS WITH DISABILITIES

Modified Rule 2:

1. Expanded Definition of “Replace”

Physical limitations may make it difficult or impossible for players who are amputees to replace a ball by hand as required by the definition of replace.

To address this, the Definition of “replace” for players who are amputees is expanded to allow the player to replace the ball either by hand or by using another piece of equipment (such as rolling the ball with a club). (Added 1/2021)

Modified Rule 3:

1. Expanded Definition of “Replace”

Physical limitations may make it difficult or impossible for players who use an assistive mobility device to replace a ball by hand as required by the definition of replace.

To address this, and in addition to being allowed to have another person replace the ball, the Definition of “replace” for players who use an assistive mobility device is expanded to allow the player to replace the ball either by hand or by using another piece of equipment (such as rolling the ball with a club). (Added 1/2021)



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2. New Modified Rule 3.12 - Modification of Penalty Under Rule 19.3b (Unplayable Relief in Bunker) for Player Using Wheeled Mobility Device

Physical limitations increase the instances where it is difficult or impossible for players who use a wheeled mobility device to play the ball as it lies in a bunker. To address this, Modified Rule 3.12 is added to the Modified Rules.

“3.12 Modification of Penalty Under Rule 19.3b (Unplayable Relief in Bunker) for Player Using Wheeled Mobility Device

Rule 19.3b is modified in this way:

When a player with a wheeled mobility device takes relief for an unplayable ball in a *bunker*, the player may take back-on-the-line relief outside that *bunker* for one penalty stroke.

Penalty for Playing Ball from a *Wrong Place* in Breach of Local Rule: *General Penalty Under Rule 14.7a.*” (Added 1/2021)

3. Modified Relief Local Rule for Players Using Wheeled Mobility Devices

Purpose. The function of some wheeled mobility devices creates a situation where the player’s stance (based on where the device is first positioned) cannot be promptly and consistently taken in relation to where the ball comes to rest.

This Local Rule can be adopted by the Committee to assist a player who uses a wheeled mobility device so that he or she does not have to reposition the device multiple times to achieve the desired set-up position.

This Local Rule may be applied anywhere on the course, including the putting green, the general area, penalty areas and bunkers.

It is not the purpose of this Local Rule to impact on the decision that a player using a wheeled mobility device needs to take in relation to safety (such as positioning the device on steeply sloped ground). In such situations, other relief Rules (such as unplayable relief under Rule 19 or penalty area relief under Rule 17) may be applied.



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Model Local Rule

“Before making a *stroke*, a player using a wheeled mobility device may take free relief by placing the original ball or another ball in and playing it from this *relief area*:

- Reference Point: Spot of the original ball.
- Size of Relief Area Measured from Reference Point: 6 inches from the *reference point*, which may be nearer the hole, **but** with these limits:
- Limits on Location of Relief Area:
 - » Must be in the same *area of the course* and
 - » Must not be in an area of grass cut to fairway height or less unless the original ball came to rest in a part of the *general area* cut to fairway height or less (this means, for example, that a ball in the rough may not be placed in the fairway).

When taking relief under this Local Rule, the player is allowed to place a ball more than once (such as when the first attempt to place a ball is slightly too far back in his or her *stance*).

Exception – No Relief When Clearly Unreasonable to Play Ball. Relief is not available under this Local Rule when playing the ball as it lies would be clearly unreasonable (such as when the ball has come to rest in a bush and it is in such a position where the player would be unable to make a *stroke*).

Penalty for Playing Ball from a *Wrong Place* in Breach of Local Rule: *General Penalty Under Rule 14.7a.*” (Added 1/2021)