

## COMMITTEE RESOLUTION OF OFFICIAL'S ERROR



Consider the following situation as related in the USGA publication, GOLF RULES ILLUSTRATED, 2016-2019:

“At a U.S. Open sectional qualifier at Woodmont Country Club, MD in 2000, an official erred with the result that a player who proceeded correctly was told that he had proceeded incorrectly. The result of the official’s error was that the player left the putting green under the impression that he had scored six on the 17<sup>th</sup> hole of the North course [shown above viewed from the tee]. Upon playing from the tee of the 18<sup>th</sup> hole, the error was discovered and the player’s score was correctly adjusted to 4.

In play of the 17<sup>th</sup> hole, the player was playing the course for the first time and had struck his tee shot in the direction of some trees to the left side of the fairway. Because he reasonably thought that his ball might be lost outside a water hazard, he announced and properly played a provisional ball (Rule 27-2) that came to rest in the center of the fairway. Upon reaching the place where he hoped to find his original ball, he was fortunate to find it in a playable position but just inside a lateral water hazard that was not visible from the tee and unknown to him at the time of playing the provisional ball.

An official incorrectly told the player that he was not entitled to play a provisional ball when his ball was struck in the direction of a water hazard

and that he must consider his second ball from the tee as his ball in play with a one stroke penalty, thus he would lie three with that ball. The player continued with the ball in the fairway, taking three additional strokes to complete the hole for an apparent score of 6.

After reviewing the situation, the Committee reached the following decision. Since the player had proceeded correctly with the second ball from the tee, it was a provisional ball and the Rules required that he abandon that ball when the original ball was found (Rule 27-2c) and continue play with the original ball. At that point, further play of the provisional ball would be play of a wrong ball. However, since this was at the direction of the official, the player would not be penalized for doing so. Moreover, since he was required to abandon the provisional ball, there would be no penalty under Rule 27-1 that was associated with the second ball as a provisional ball. The Committee determined that his score for the hole was 4, which includes the stroke from the tee with the original ball plus the three strokes made with the wrong ball after the incorrect ruling and with no penalty strokes. This is an unusual case where the player must count the strokes with a wrong ball as otherwise he would have no score for the hole.

If the player had doubt about the official's original decision, he could have asked for a second opinion, but he did not do so."

Mistakes by officials during a competition, while not common, are potentially devastating to a player and challenging to a Committee to resolve fairly to all concerned. The above situation was resolved with Decision 34-3/3.7 [first published in 2008], which sets a precedent for incidents based on similar facts. There are a number of other situations in the Decisions on the Rules of Golf 2016-2017 from which conclusions can be reached about principles for Committees to follow in resolving situations involving official's error. This paper will present results of examination of relevant Decisions as categorized according to:

- Administrative Error – improper performance of an administrative function such as incorrect addition of the scores on a card or misapplication of the recorded handicap.
- Course Marking Error – improper marking of the competition course such as failure to mark a water hazard as such.
- Incorrect Ruling – providing incorrect information on the Rules of Golf or giving a mistaken ruling.

## ADMINISTRATIVE ERROR

There are ten Decisions falling within the category of administrative error:

- 6-1/1 Wrong Form of Play Used in Match-Play Event
- 6-2b/3 Competitor Wins Competition with Handicap Which Was Incorrect Due to Committee Error; Error Discovered Several Days Later
- 6-2b/3.5 Wrong Handicap Recorded on Score Card by Committee; Error Discovered Before Competition Closed
- 6-6b/4 Score Cards Not Returned Promptly Due to Committee Failure to Advise Competitors Where to Return Cards
- 6-6d/4 Competitor's Scores Recorded on Score Card with Fellow-Competitor's Name and Vice Versa
- 33-1/12 Wrong Handicap Used Due to Committee Misinformation
- 33-5/2 Wrong Handicap Applied by Committee Results in Player Not Receiving Prize
- 33-5/3 Misapplication of Handicap Affects Match-Play Draw
- 33-6/4 Players Decide Method of Settling Tie When Committee Fails to Do So
- 34-1b/6 Winner's Score Not Posted Due to Committee Error

Two of these Decisions, which are typical of the procedures of the Committee, are representative of the principles for the Committee to follow in resolving administrative errors:

### **6-1/1 Wrong Form of Play Used in Match-Play Event**

**Q.** In a foursome match-play competition, four players begin their match on a four-ball match-play basis. The error is discovered after play of the 9th hole. What is the ruling?

**A.** It would be improper to decide any match by a form of play other than the proscribed form.

If the wrong form of play is used as a result of a Committee error, the match should be replayed . . . .

### **6-2b/3 Competitor Wins Competition with Handicap Which was Incorrect Due to Committee Error; Error Discovered Several Days Later**

**Q.** The Committee incorrectly calculated a competitor's handicap and posted it on the notice board as 17 when it should have been 16. The competitor won an 18-hole stroke-play event as a result of the error. May the Committee correct the error several days later and retract the prize?

**A.** Yes. There is no time limit on correcting such an error. Rule 34-1b is not applicable since it deals with penalties, not with Committee errors. The competitor should not be disqualified but his net score should be increased by one stroke.

The following principles are established in the Decisions for resolution of an administrative error:

- Equity is used to provide the fairest result possible given the circumstances of the situation.
- There is no time limit for the Committee to make the correction.

### **COURSE MARKING ERROR**

There are four Decisions falling within the category of course marking error:

- 11-5/2 Use of Wrong Teeing Ground Attributable to Committee Failure to Indicate Hole Numbers on Teeing Grounds
- 26/2 Ball Within Natural Margin of Water Hazard but Outside Stakes Defining Margin
- 33-2b/1 Holes Relocated and/or Tee-Markers Moved During Stroke-Play Round
- 33-2b/1.5 Committee Wishes to Move Hole During Stroke-Play Round Due to Severity of Location

Three of these Decisions, which are typical of the procedures of the Committee, are representative of the principles for the Committee to follow in resolving course marking errors:

#### **11-5/2 Use of Wrong Teeing Ground Attributable to Committee Failure to Indicate Hole Numbers on Teeing Grounds**

**Q.** In a stroke-play competition, the Committee failed to place a sign at each teeing ground indicating the hole number. As a result, a group which had just finished the 4th hole played from the teeing ground of the 12th hole, rather than the 5th hole. Should the members of the group be penalized under Rule 11-4b in the circumstances?

**A.** Yes.

The Committee was remiss in not placing a sign at each teeing ground. However, each player is responsible for knowing the stipulated round, this being one of the conditions of the competition.

**26/2 Ball Within Natural Margin of Water Hazard but Outside Stakes  
Defining Margin**

**Q.** Stakes defining the margin of a water hazard were improperly installed. As a result, an area which clearly was part of the water hazard was outside the stakes and, thus, technically was outside the hazard. A player's ball came to rest in water in this area. The player claimed that, in view of the alignment of the stakes, his ball was in casual water through the green. Was this claim valid?

**A.** No. The Committee erred in not properly defining the margin of the hazard as required by Rule 33-2a, but a player is not entitled to take advantage of such an error. Since it was clear that the place where the player's ball lay was within the natural boundaries of the water hazard, the claim should not be upheld.

**33-2b/1 Holes Relocated and/or Tee-Markers Moved During Stroke-Play  
Round**

**Q.** During a round in a stroke-play competition, one or more holes were relocated and/or tee-markers moved. What is the proper procedure?

**A.** If this was authorized by the Committee, the round should be declared null and void. In stroke play, the Committee is prohibited from relocating a hole and from moving tee-markers except as provided in the Exception and Note to Rule 33-2b or in circumstances such as those in Decision 25-1b/4 or 33-2b/1.5.

If this was done without the authority or sanction of the Committee, generally the round should be declared null and void. However, if the course has not been altered significantly and no competitor has been given an undue advantage or disadvantage, the Committee would be justified in letting the round stand.

The following principles are established in the Decisions for resolution of a course marking error:

- A player is responsible for knowing the Rules, which includes the conditions of the competition.
- A player is not entitled to take advantage of a course marking error that is clearly mistaken.

- Despite the clear language of Rule 33-2b, the Committee has broad powers to alter the location of holes and tee-markers during a round to accommodate difficult circumstances and to provide for fair competition (see Decisions 33-2b/1 and 33-2b/1.5).

## INCORRECT RULING

There are fourteen Decisions falling within the category of an incorrect ruling:

- 33-7/5 Play of Wrong Ball Not Rectified on Advice of a referee
- 34-1b/3 Play of Wrong Ball in Stroke Play Not Rectified; Error Discovered After Competition Closed
- 34-1b/5 Disqualification Penalty Wrongly Applied to Winner of Event; Error Discovered After Two Other Competitors Play Off for First Place
- 34-2/5 Referee Reverses Ruling Made at Last Hole of Match After Players Leave Putting Green
- 34-2/6 Referee Reverses Ruling After Player Subsequently Plays Ball
- 34-2/7 Correction of Incorrect Ruling by Referee in Match Play
- 34-3/1 Correction of Incorrect Ruling in Stroke Play
- 34-3/1.3 Competitor Incorrectly Advised to Cancel Stroke
- 34-3/1.5 Committee Error and Scoring in Stroke Play
- 34-3/2 Committee Does Not Penalize Player in Breach of Pace of Play Condition Believing Player Had Already Lost Hole
- 34-3/3 Player in Match Makes Stroke from Wrong Place Due to Incorrect Ruling; Procedure for Player When Error is Discovered
- 34-3/3.3 Player in Stroke Play Makes Stroke from Wrong Place Due to Incorrect Ruling; Procedure for Competitor When Error is Discovered
- 34-3/3.7 Player Incorrectly Advised to Continue with Provisional Ball
- 34-3/3.9 Committee Makes Incorrect Ruling Under Rule 3-3; Whether Ruling May Be Corrected

Not surprisingly, a review of these Decisions reveals that different procedures are followed for situations involving match play and stroke play. Therefore, these situations will be examined separately.

## MATCH PLAY

For match play, three of the immediately above Decisions, which are typical of the procedures of the Committee, are representative of the principles for the Committee to follow in resolving an incorrect ruling:

### **34-2/6 Referee Reverses Ruling After Player Subsequently Plays Ball**

**Q.** In a match, an incident occurs on the putting green of the 17th hole and the referee rules incorrectly that A loses the hole. A and B walk off the putting green without disputing the ruling. After the players play from the next tee, the referee learns of his error, reverses the ruling and rules that B lost the 17th hole. Did the referee act properly in reversing the ruling?

**A.** No. If after a referee has given a ruling, either player makes a stroke on the hole or, in circumstances where no more strokes are made on the hole, either player makes a stroke from the next teeing ground, the referee may not reverse his ruling.

If the referee becomes aware of his error prior to a player making a stroke or, in circumstances where no more strokes are made on the hole, either player making a stroke from the next teeing ground, in equity (Rule 1-4), the referee must correct the error. Although Rule 34-2 states that the referee's decision is final, it is final only in the sense that the player has no right to appeal unless the referee consents.

### **34-2/7 Correction of Incorrect Ruling by Referee in Match Play**

**Q.** In singles match play, the players obtain a ruling from the referee, and the referee incorrectly advises one of the players that he has incurred a loss of hole penalty. Both players lift their balls and walk to the next tee. The referee then learns of the incorrect ruling. Should the referee correct the error?

**A.** If neither player has made a stroke from the next teeing ground or, in the case of the last hole of the match, if the result of the match has not been officially announced, in equity (Rule 1-4), the referee must correct the error. The referee must direct the players to replace their balls and complete the hole, with the correct ruling applied. Otherwise, it is too late to correct the error and the loss of hole penalty must stand.

### **34-3/3 Player in Match Makes Stroke from Wrong Place Due to Incorrect Ruling; Procedure for Player When Error Discovered**

**Q.** In a match, a player obtains a ruling from a referee and proceeds on the basis of that ruling, which involves dropping a ball and playing from a wrong place. The Committee then learns of the incorrect ruling by the referee. Should the Committee require the player to disregard the stroke or strokes made after the incorrect ruling and proceed correctly?

**A.** Unless a serious breach is involved or the player has been seriously disadvantaged due to his playing from a wrong place, the ruling may not be reversed or corrected once the player has made a stroke from the wrong place.

If a serious breach is involved or the player has been seriously disadvantaged due to playing from a wrong place, in equity (Rule 1-4), the error must be corrected by the Committee up to the point where the opponent makes his next stroke on the hole concerned. If an opponent does not make a stroke on the hole after the ruling was given, the incorrect ruling may be corrected before either player makes a stroke from the next teeing ground or, in the case of the last hole of the match, before the result of the match is officially announced. Therefore, even if, for example, the player has conceded the opponent's next stroke and the opponent has lifted his ball, the Committee should direct the player to proceed correctly and the opponent to replace his ball, without penalty. If it is too late to correct the error, the strokes made after the incorrect ruling must stand with no penalty.

The following principles are established in the Decisions for resolution of an incorrect ruling in match play:

- An incorrect ruling must, in equity (Rule 1-4), be reversed unless after the incorrect ruling either player makes a stroke on the hole, except as below in playing from a wrong place.
- In all situations, after the incorrect ruling, if either player makes a stroke from the next teeing ground or the results have been officially announced, no correction may be made.
- If a serious breach is involved or the player has been seriously disadvantaged due to playing from a wrong place, in equity (Rule 1-4), the error must be corrected by the Committee up to the point where an opponent makes his next stroke on the hole concerned. After that point, no correction may be made; however, the player incurs no penalty for having played from a wrong place.

## STROKE PLAY

Complete guidance is given in Decision 34-1/1.5 for the Committee to follow in resolving matters where a player in stroke play has been given incorrect information on the Rules and the player, who is entitled to act on such information, does so in his subsequent play. However, there are situations where a referee has ruled incorrectly that require immediate correction. For stroke play, three of above Decisions, which are typical of the procedures of the Committee, are representative of the principles for the Committee to follow in resolving an incorrect ruling:

### **33-7/5 Play of Wrong Ball Not Rectified on Advice of a Referee**

**Q.** In stroke play, a competitor plays two strokes on the 14th hole and then plays a wrong ball for what he believed to be his third stroke. He plays a total of four strokes with the wrong ball, holing out with it. He then discovers the error. Before teeing off at the 15th, he asks a referee as to the procedure. The referee told the competitor to proceed and consult the Committee when the round was completed, instead of telling him to rectify the error as prescribed in Rule 15-3b.

Should the competitor be disqualified as prescribed in Rule 15-3b?

**A.** No. In the circumstances, the competitor should incur a penalty of two strokes for a breach of Rule 15-3b. The disqualification penalty that he also incurred under that Rule should be waived by the Committee under Rule 33-7, since the competitor's failure to correct his mistake was due to the error of the referee.

Generally, strokes played with a wrong ball do not count in the player's score. However, in this case such strokes must be counted. Otherwise, the competitor would not have a score for the hole. In equity (Rule 1-4), his score for the hole would be 8: the two strokes he played with his ball, the two penalty strokes for playing a wrong ball and the four strokes he played with the wrong ball.

### **34-3/1.3 Competitor Incorrectly Advised to Cancel Stroke**

**Q.** In stroke play, a competitor's second stroke on a hole strikes the equipment of a player in another group. The competitor consults a referee before making his next stroke, and the referee incorrectly advises him that he must cancel and replay the stroke without penalty, which he does. Having replayed the stroke, the competitor then takes two more strokes to hole out. The competitor plays from the next tee and, prior to returning his score card, the referee's error comes to light. What is the ruling?

**A.** The referee's decision to require the competitor to cancel and replay the stroke stands. In such circumstances, the competitor's score for the hole concerned would be 4.

### **34-3/3.3 Competitor in Stroke Play Makes Stroke from Wrong Place Due to Incorrect Ruling; Procedure for Competitor When Error Discovered**

**Q.** In stroke play, a competitor obtains a ruling from a member of the Committee and proceeds on the basis of that ruling, which involves dropping a ball and playing from a wrong place. The Committee then learns of the incorrect ruling by the Committee member. Should the Committee require the player to disregard the stroke or strokes made after the incorrect ruling and proceed correctly?

**A.** Unless a serious breach is involved or the competitor has been seriously disadvantaged due to his playing from a wrong place, the stroke made after the incorrect ruling must stand with no penalty.

If a serious breach is involved or the competitor has been seriously disadvantaged due to his playing from a wrong place, and the competitor has not played from the next teeing ground or in the last hole of the round, has not left the putting green, in equity (Rule 1-4), the Committee must correct the error.

The Committee must direct the competitor to cancel the stroke made from the wrong place and any subsequent strokes and proceed correctly. The competitor incurs no penalty for playing from a wrong place. If it is too late to correct the error, the strokes made after the incorrect ruling must stand with no penalty.

The following principles are established in the Decisions for resolution of an incorrect ruling in stroke play:

- An incorrect ruling must, in equity (Rule 1-4), be reversed, except as below.
- If the incorrect ruling involves the player playing from a wrong place and a serious breach is not involved and the player has not been seriously disadvantaged due to his playing from a wrong place, the ruling may not be reversed or corrected.
- If the incorrect ruling involves the player playing from a wrong place and a serious breach is involved, or if the player has been seriously disadvantaged due to his playing from a wrong place, the ruling must be corrected. However, if the player has played from the next teeing ground or, in the case of the last hole of the round, if the player has left the putting green, no correction may be made.
- A referee's decision incorrectly requiring a competitor to cancel and replay a stroke must stand after the player has played from the next tee.
- There is no penalty to the player as a result of an incorrect ruling.