

In the Spirit of the Game of Golf

“Golf is played, for the most part, without the supervision of a referee or umpire. The game relies on the integrity of the individual to show consideration for other players and to abide by the Rules. All players should conduct themselves in a disciplined manner, demonstrating courtesy and sportsmanship at all times, irrespective of how competitive they may be. This is the spirit of the game of golf.” - Etiquette Section, The Rules of Golf, 2016-2019.

All games have rules that define individual games but the game of golf is alone in having a code of behavior on the course called Etiquette. In the case of a serious breach of etiquette, the Committee may disqualify a player under Rule 33-7.

Besides the cautionary words in the Etiquette section of the Rules of Golf, the Decisions on the Rules of Golf contain several examples of unacceptable behavior with resulting penalties for violations of the spirit of the game or as not in keeping with the spirit of the rules. Generally, violations of the former kind result in a penalty of disqualification and of the later kind, a lesser penalty. However, it depends on the circumstances.

Here are five examples of violations of the spirit of the game with resulting penalties.

In a match, B is 1 up on A playing the 14th hole. A and B take 6's at the 14th hole, but B, assuming A scored a 5, says: "We are now all square". A says nothing although he knows that both have scored a 6 and he is still 1 down. At the end of the 17th hole, B, believing he is 2 down, concedes the match, although in fact he is only 1 down. A's conscious failure to correct B's misunderstanding of the state of the match is so contrary to the spirit of the game that the Committee should disqualify A under Rule 33-7 and reinstate B.

In a stroke-play hole-by-hole play-off, B has completed the hole in 5 strokes. Having no other readily available means for determining B's score at that point, A, who has a putt for a 5, inquires as to the number of strokes B has taken for the hole. B wrongly states that he (B) has holed out in 4 strokes. A picks up his ball without marking its position, potentially incurring a one stroke penalty, based on his understanding that B had won the play-off. B then corrects his error. If B intentionally misled A, B is disqualified under Rule 33-7. If B simply made a mistake, B incurs no penalty.

A's ball lies on the putting green. A requests B, his opponent or fellow competitor, to attend the flagstick, and B complies. A putts and B fails to remove the flagstick. A's ball strikes the flagstick. If B failed to remove the flagstick for the purpose of causing A to incur a penalty, B is disqualified,

in both match play and stroke play, under Rule 33-7 for taking an action contrary to the spirit of the game.

In a four-ball match-play competition, a player purposely putts away from the hole to a position slightly farther from the hole than the spot where his partner's ball lies and on the same line to the hole as his partner's ball. The player then putts towards the hole, and the roll of his ball is helpful to his partner in determining how much his putt will break. Such procedure is contrary to the spirit of the game. In match play, in equity (Rule 1-4), the player should be disqualified for the hole and, since his action assisted his partner's play, the partner should incur the same penalty (Rule 30-3f).

A competitor's ball is lying through the green. He asks a fellow competitor to remove a loose impediment lying near his ball because he believes that the removal of the loose impediment might cause his ball to move and knows that if the loose impediment is removed by an outside agency, the competitor incurs no penalty. The fellow-competitor removes the loose impediment. Irrespective of whether the ball moves as a result of removing the loose impediment, the action of the competitor is so contrary to the spirit of the game that the Committee should disqualify him under Rule 33-7. The fellow-competitor incurs no penalty for removing the loose impediment unless the Committee is satisfied that he was aware of the competitor's intention to circumvent a Rule. In that instance, he should also be disqualified under Rule 33-7.

Violations less severe than those above, which are characterized as violations of the spirit of the Rules, result in lesser penalties, which are generally given under Rule 1-4 as points not specifically covered by the Rules. Here are two examples.

A player may change caddies during his stipulated round. However, a player may not briefly change caddies for the purpose of receiving advice from the new caddie. Although not a specific violation of the rules, it would be contrary to the purpose and spirit of the Rules for a player to change caddies briefly for the purpose of circumventing Rule 8-1 (Advice). Therefore, in equity (Rule 1-4), the player who does so would incur a penalty of loss of hole in match play or two strokes in stroke play for each hole at which the action occurred.

A player's ball lies on an artificially-surfaced path. The player determines his nearest point of relief and measures the one club-length in which the ball may be dropped under Rule 24-2b. As the player is concerned that the ball, when dropped, may roll into an unplayable lie, he takes a ball from his bag and drops it in the area to test where his original ball may roll to if he elects to take relief from the path. He did not intend to put the second ball into play. As the player had no intention of putting the dropped ball into play, that ball did not become the ball in play, and his original ball

on the path remained the ball in play. However, it is contrary to the purpose and spirit of the Rules for a player to test what may happen when he drops his ball. Therefore, in equity (Rule 1-4), the player incurs a penalty of loss of hole in match play or two strokes in stroke play.

As can be seen by the actions of the Committee in these incidents, the player in the game of golf is governed not only by the individual Rules of Golf but also by the important, integral and essential section of the Rules on Etiquette that gives a code of behavior on the course.