

Grounding the Club in a Hazard

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During the semi-final match at the 2006 US Amateur at Hazeltine GC, Webb Simpson was surprised when the referee awarded him the 16th hole because his opponent, the eventual champion Richie Ramsey, grounded his club when his ball lay in long grass in a lateral water hazard. Ramsey might have been the more surprised of the two players as he protested that his club did not touch the ground in the hazard. In fact, his club did not touch the ground, so was this an incorrect ruling?

One of the most difficult Rules for a player to understand properly is Rule 13-4, Ball in Hazard; Prohibited Actions. This Rule also presents a challenge to good Rules officials as there are many shades of interpretation as evidenced by the many decisions relating to this one Rule in the USGA publication, Decisions on the Rules of Golf.

The part of the Rule of which Ramsey ran afoul was Rule 13-4b that says, “the player must not touch the ground in the hazard or water in the water hazard with his hand or a club.” But more directly applicable to his situation was Decision 13-4/8 When Club Touches Ground in Grass in Water Hazard that makes a statement about grounding the club in general – “When the grass is compressed to the point where it would support the weight of the club ... the club is grounded.” Thus, Ramsey could indeed be correct when he said that his club did not touch the ground but also be in violation of the Rule as interpreted by the Decision if his club was paced in the grass in such a way that the grass would support the weight of the club.

It's this latter point that proves difficult for a match play referee. When a player addresses his ball in a hazard in long grass by placing the club deep into the grass, he puts himself in jeopardy of being found in violation of the Rule. In Ramsey's case, it was the judgment of the referee, confirmed by the official monitoring the television broadcast, that Ramsey met the standard established by the Decision and should be penalized loss of hole.

Since the violation occurred before the stroke at the ball lying in the water hazard, the referee needed to decide when to tell the player of his situation. Because there may be circumstances of which the referee is unaware which would result in no penalty, the prudent official will generally wait until after the stroke as the referee did with Ramsey.