

Highlights in the Development of the USGA Rules of Golf, 1895-2008

[originally published in 2011 by the USGA in USGA.org]

When the United States Golf Association was founded in December 1894, it was for the “purposes of promoting the interests of the game of golf, to promulgate a code of rules for the game, and to hold annual meetings at which competitions shall be conducted for the amateur and open championships in the United States.”

This article will focus on the second purpose, to promulgate a code of rules for the game, noting that, for its initial championships in 1895, the USGA adopted the Rules of Golf written by the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews. The story continues through many twists and turns, nearly ending with a code solely authored by the USGA in 1947 before a joint code was fashioned by both the USGA and the R&A acting in close concert in 1952.

The oldest surviving written Rules of Golf are those of the Honorable Company of Edinburgh Golfers and were set to paper for an annual challenge for the Edinburgh silver club in 1744. The next oldest code is that of the R&A, written in 1754 for its silver club competition. It is nearly a word for word version of the earlier Edinburgh code. For many years, the 1744 code was somehow lost and it was commonly thought that the R&A code of 1754 was the oldest known code. In fact, all the golf historians around the time of the founding of the USGA made reference to the R&A code of 1754 as the earliest known Rules of Golf. It was not until 1937 that a retired English civil servant, C. B. Clapcott, discovered the 1744 code in the last two pages of the first minute book of the Honorable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, then known as the Gentlemen Golfers.

During the early 1800's, other clubs were formed and each developed its own rules. Over time, these codes came to vary widely and it was only much later in 1897 that the clubs hosting the British Amateur championship asked the R&A to form a Rules of Golf Committee to assume the role of periodically revising and writing the Rules of Golf for the entire golfing world. The first code written by this committee was in 1897 but the latest R&A revision available to the USGA for its championships in 1895 was the R&A code approved in September 1891. Inasmuch as Charles B. Macdonald of Chicago Golf Club was one of the founders of the USGA and a vice-president of the USGA, there was no question that the first competitions conducted by the USGA would be according to the Rules of Golf as approved by the R&A. Macdonald, who claimed the first US Amateur trophy in 1895, had been schooled at St. Andrews University some twenty years earlier and had played with the likes of Old Tom Morris, developing a great respect for the traditions of the game of golf including its rules.

Bound up in these traditions was a statement of the definition of an amateur golfer and the USGA adopted a similar statement to that of the R&A for their competitions. The Rules of

Amateur Status have historically been incorporated into the Rules of Golf but that story is for another place.

Almost immediately after the competitions of 1895, the USGA realized the need for some clarification of the meaning of terms in the rules and on July 18, 1896 the executive committee of the USGA appointed a special committee consisting of Macdonald and Laurence Curtis of The Country Club of Brookline, Massachusetts, to prepare a report interpreting the Rules of Golf. Their work, which was undertaken through consultation with the R&A, resulted in the first printed Rules of Golf issued by the USGA on June 10, 1897. The preface to this document states, "The special committee have made no change in the code of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, revised in 1891; but they have appended to said rules the rulings of the United States Golf Association, based upon the results of many decisions of committees or experts, or upon customs which have obtained in the best clubs in Scotland and England." The added interpretations were not of great significance so one could conclude that the first USGA Rules of Golf was essentially that of the R&A as of 1891.

Over the next fifty years, this process of the R&A issuing infrequent revisions to the rules and the USGA adding interpretations generally without substantive changes continued until 1947 when the USGA published an entirely revised code independent of the R&A. From the time of the last major revision of the rules by the R&A in 1934, pressure had been building for major changes to the rules. Serious discussions had been taking place between the USGA and the R&A but were interrupted by WWII. The 1947 USGA code combined the rules for match play and stroke play much as in today's format, in contrast to that for prior years of dealing only with match play in the main part of the book with added stroke play rules in a separate section at the end. The R&A responded in 1950 with what was characterized by some as an experimental code with greatly reduced penalties in all sections stemming from reducing the penalty for a ball lost, out of bounds or unplayable to distance only. Finally, in 1952, the USGA and R&A jointly conceived and issued a revised Rules of Golf, ending the practice of the USGA simply adopting the R&A rules with some interpretations. However, during these fifty years there were exceptions where the USGA adopted a specific provision contrary to that in the Rules of the R&A. The most notable of these relatively few contrary provisions dealt with balls and clubs.

In the early days of golf, the game was played with a ball made of feathers tightly packed into a leather cover that was both expensive to make and of short playing life. The introduction of the hard gutta-percha ball in 1848 provided the game with a more durable ball but also one that flew much farther, thus bringing with it a new problem that made courses much shorter to play. An even longer ball came into use in the early 1900's with the invention of the rubber wound ball. At this time, although there were intricate rules for many elements of the game, there were no rules governing golf balls. With the development of balls that flew further than those of traditional design, there was a call for regulation and this was a prominent topic in golfing journals during the period 1900-1920.

Discussions between the USGA and the R&A began in earnest in 1920 with an informal conference at Muirfield, Scotland with the objective of setting specifications for the ball's size and weight to specifically limit performance. For a short while, it seemed that there was agreement on a maximum weight of 1.62 ounces and a minimum size of 1.62 inches and the R&A amended the 1920 Rules of Golf in May of 1921 to that effect. However, divergence in opinions soon appeared as the R&A moved in the direction of preferring to limit the specific gravity of the ball not its size and weight, which would have the effect of producing a floating ball. However, over the next few years, both the USGA and the R&A conducted experiments with various sizes and weights. The USGA concluded that a ball of lighter maximum weight of 1.55 ounces and a larger minimum size of 1.68 inches might be a desirable solution to the perceived problem of increased distance that a ball carried. The R&A remained to be convinced and concluded at their spring business meeting in 1929 to postpone any action on the ball specifications until further investigation. The USGA unilaterally implemented its conclusions to take effect as of January 1931. The reaction of the golfing public was swift as evidenced by letters from readers and an entire page in the July 3, 1931 edition of LIFE magazine that included a petition to be presented to the USGA stating that "We believe that the new ball is a failure. We vote that the old ball be restored to official standing." The USGA lighter ball was labeled the "balloon ball" and consequently in 1932 the USGA promptly responded with a new standard - the maximum allowed weight was increased to 1.62 ounces and minimum size of 1.68 inches was retained as the larger minimum size was popular with American golfers.

Thus, although the USGA and the R&A agreed on a standard maximum weight of 1.62 ounces, an official stalemate existed beginning in 1932 regarding the size of the ball with the USGA specifying a minimum size of 1.68 inches and the R&A allowing a smaller ball with a minimum size of 1.62 inches. Even with adoption of the joint code of 1952, the two sides agreed to disagree with each side continuing with their respective standards except that for international competitions the smaller size ball was permitted even if held in the United States. Eventually in 1990, the Rules of Golf adopted the USGA specifications of a minimum size of 1.68 inches for use worldwide.

As to clubs, a minor rift developed between the USGA and the R&A over the use of a putter with attachment of the shaft at the center of clubhead. The R&A banned this type of construction for putters in 1909 but the USGA interpreted the rules as allowing such putters. It wasn't until 1952 that both the USGA and R&A agreed on the USGA position.

Beginning in 1914, steel shafted clubs were not allowed by either the USGA or the R&A as not a permissible departure from the traditional form and make of golf clubs. The USGA relented and approved steel shafts in 1924 followed by the R&A in 1929.

With the approval of steel shafts, players soon noticed that these shafts were long-lasting but did not have the torsion of hickory thus limiting the ability of the player to curve the ball. A new

technique evolved in carrying a large number of clubs to achieve the same result. This development offended the traditionalists who were accustomed to carrying only a few, perhaps as few as five or six, and the USGA responded in 1938 with a preamble to the 1938 Rules of Golf specifying that a player is limited to carrying a maximum of fourteen clubs. Interestingly enough, there was no penalty statement associated with this prohibition until 1939 when the USGA added a penalty of disqualification. When the R&A added the fourteen club limit in 1939, there was no penalty statement. In 1952, the joint code included the restriction to fourteen clubs with an associated penalty of disqualification. In 1956, the rules were again revised to relax the penalty of disqualification to a loss of hole in match play and two strokes in stroke play upon discovery of a violation.

Since the time of the jointly issued Rules of Golf in 1952, uniformity has been the guiding principle for cooperation between the USGA and R&A, which today has resulted in a rules umbrella of some 34 rules and almost 1300 decisions that are identical in both the USGA and R&A editions of the rules documents. This has been assured by a process starting with each side having a Rules of Golf Committee where issues are discussed and a Joint Rules of Golf Committee where these issues are jointly decided. For the USGA, this is the culmination of what had its beginnings in that report by Macdonald and Curtis in 1897.