

Proper Play of a Provisional Ball

Several years ago at the Atlantic Coast Conference Golf Championship, Bill Haas, then a senior at Wake Forest University, struck a tee shot off to the right into a wooded area. An official was present in a golf cart some thirty yards forward of where the stroke was made. After the group of three players had played, they put their golf bags on their backs and headed from the tee in the direction of their shots. Haas stopped to ask the official if there was a water hazard near where his ball had gone. The official responded in the negative. Haas then returned to the tee, announced to his marker that he intended to play a provisional ball and did so. Was this procedure proper or had he lost his opportunity to play a provisional ball when he went forward of where he played his tee shot? The answer is that in this circumstance the procedure of going forward did not preclude his play of a provisional ball.

According to the Rules of Golf, if a ball may be lost outside a water hazard or may be out of bounds, to save time the player may play another ball provisionally in accordance with the lost ball Rule, which means the provisional ball must be played from the spot of the previous stroke. In stroke play, the player must inform his marker or a fellow-competitor that he intends to play a provisional ball and he must play it before he goes forward to search for the original ball. Because the sole purpose of the provisional ball Rule is to save time, the only way the player can effectively do so is to play the provisional ball before he goes forward for the purpose of searching for the original ball. This does not preclude a player from playing a provisional ball even though he has proceeded from where he last played in the direction of the original ball. In the Haas case, the player walked forward for the purpose of questioning an official to determine something that affected his thinking about the advisability of playing a provisional ball. Since he had not gone forward for the purpose of searching for the original ball, he was entitled to play a provisional ball.

Suppose that Haas had not walked forward to question the Rules official but rather simply had gone forward the thirty yards towards the place where his original ball was likely to be. Would he be permitted to play a provisional ball in this case? The answer is yes. A player is considered to have gone forward to search when he has proceeded more than a short distance, which is interpreted to be if he has gone more than approximately fifty yards.

In the above case involving Bill Haas, the player's uncertainty about playing a provisional ball may have rested on a common misconception about play of a provisional ball. Some believe incorrectly that a player may not play a provisional ball if his original ball might be lost in a water hazard. There are two important principles to remember about situations where a player may be considering play of a provisional ball in the presence of a water hazard where his ball might be in the water hazard: [1] a provisional ball may be played if the original ball might also be lost outside the water hazard or out of bounds, that is, the possibility that the original ball is in a water hazard may not preclude play of a provisional ball and [2] a provisional ball may not

be played if the original ball is clearly not lost outside the water hazard or out of bounds, that is, in the absence of a reasonable possibility that the ball is lost outside the water hazard or is out of bounds, a player may not play a provisional ball. These principles apply at the time that the player is considering play of a provisional ball and has not yet gone forward to search.

Sometimes, believing his original ball might be lost outside a water hazard, a player properly plays a provisional ball from the tee, goes forward to search, and then discovers that it is known or virtually certain that his original ball is in a water hazard. The question then arises as to whether he did proceed correctly in playing the provisional ball. The answer turns on the fact that when he played the second ball from the tee it was in the belief that his original ball might be lost outside a water hazard. The subsequent discovery that the area into which his ball was struck is a water hazard is irrelevant. In this situation, the player must abandon the provisional ball and proceed under the water hazard Rule.