

Regular Repetitive Practice Leads to Better Scores on the Course

No, this is not an article about the kind of practice that involves beating it out on the range – this is about making the effort towards the kind of mental practice that will dramatically improve your understanding of the Rules of Golf. If done properly, this kind of regular repetitive practice will lead to better scores on the course during competition by avoiding unnecessary penalties. Furthermore, while it's important to avoid needless one- and two-stroke penalties, there is always the specter of disqualification if a player returns a score card without including a penalty stroke or strokes for a violation of which he was unaware. Consider the following as a little incentive to read further.

In 1995, Matt Gogel, a former University of Kansas standout player, disqualified himself for a score card violation during Tour School qualifying. In an earlier round, he had properly taken relief for an embedded ball but the ball, when dropped, had rolled into an adjacent bunker. He incorrectly thought this was simply bad luck and that he was required to play the ball as it lay in the bunker since it had not rolled and come to rest more than two club-lengths from where it struck the ground or rolled and come to rest closer to the hole. It was only during a later round that he found out that he should have lifted the ball in the bunker and dropped it again under Rule 20-2c (i). Because he played the ball from a wrong place, in the bunker, his score card for the round should have included the penalty of two strokes. Since it did not, his incorrect score card called for a penalty of disqualification under the Rules in effect at that time, which he reported to the officials. Matt later made it to the Tour in 2000 and was quite successful at that. One will never know if correct knowledge of the Rules or proper play in 1995 at Tour School would have allowed him to get there five years earlier.

About that time in 1995, a writer began a log of similar violations of the Rules by players at the national level. Less than ten years later the number of entries had grown to over 200. How is it that such a large number of fine competitive players were caught up in a seemingly endless list of inadvertent and various violations of the Rules of Golf? Nearly all successful players have learned the principle that “practice makes perfect” and without hesitation will spend many hours on the range hitting hundreds of balls to improve their competitive scores. These same individuals will occasionally read the Rules booklet but seldom devote any serious time to study of the Rules despite the fact that a good working knowledge of the Rules might lead to better scores on the course or eliminate any possibility of what happened to Matt Gogel.

But the story of Rules violations continues to this day. The list of unintended problems with the Rules sadly includes the names of two former University of Florida players. James Vargas was disqualified for failing to sign his score card at a Tour

School second stage qualifier. When asked how this happened, James said he wasn't sure, that it was all a blur. Although he is now doing well on the Hooters Tour, his next chance for the big tour must wait until later.

Camilo Villegas was disqualified at a PGA Tour event for influencing the movement of his ball in motion by moving loose impediments on the path of the moving ball, a violation of Rule 23-1. The incident itself carried a penalty of two strokes but he returned his score card without the included penalty and was subsequently disqualified for having an incorrect score card under the Rules in effect at the time. It was reported that Camilo said he did not know of the Rule that caused his DQ.

What can the serious player do to increase his understanding of the Rules? The answer comes from the educational experience that any college player has from his university days. Think back to the college courses that gave the greatest increases in knowledge and how they were conducted. Compare two courses, one with a single long exam at the end and another with several shorter quizzes throughout the semester. The first might be considered the easiest but the latter would give the highest probability of long term learning because of the reinforcement given by repeated feedback on the taught lessons. And so it is with studying the Rules of Golf. The old saying, "what is hard by the yard is easy by the inch," is right on target for study of the Rules. The idea is to take small parts and repeatedly review them, getting feedback through small quizzes on what is learned before moving on to other parts. Simple reading of the Rules will not lead to long term retention of what the book says. So where can a player get access to proven quizzes that have accurate answers to real problems on the course?

Take a look at the website, THROUGHTHEGREEN.ORG, which has among other things, a number of quizzes of varying length and difficulty, all reviewed by experts for accuracy and coverage. If a college player were to select one of these quizzes, say the INTERCOLLEGIATE BASIC EXERCISE, and work through the exercise, he might not score as well as he would like the first time through. However, he should study the answers given in the guide for coaches on the website. Then, he should repeat the exercise in a week and see if mistakes could be eliminated or at least reduced. This process repeated over time will lead to a significant increase in his understanding of the principles covered by the exercise. The two collegiate exercises (BASIC and ADVANCED) on the website were especially designed for college players in stroke play competition with their needs in mind. Only a small amount of time each week will lead to a great increase in Rules knowledge.

The stories of players with inadvertent Rules violations seems to be at the forefront now and is a topic that leads some to call for changes in the Rules to accommodate or excuse players for not knowing the Rules. The call is "to adapt to

modern times” by reducing penalties or eliminating them altogether for well-intentioned but ignorant players. Perhaps a better solution might result by first asking the question that Jim McCabe, senior writer of GolfWeek magazine has posed, “In what other sport do we excuse players from not knowing the Rules?” Of course the answer is “none.” Rather than reducing penalties, players should be encouraged to improve their knowledge of the Rules through study comparable in method, if not duration, to their practice time on the range. Go to the website, THROUGHTHEGREEN.ORG, and give a try to the quizzes there and see how that will improve your understanding of the Rules of Golf. Your work in improving your knowledge of the Rules of Golf might just lead to a reward in avoiding the fate that many have suffered by a premature ending of an important competition.