

A Modification of the Rules of Golf for Golfers with Disabilities

Blind:

Definition of "Coach"

The status of the coach and the duties that he may perform should be defined clearly. Without this clarification, it would be difficult, for example, to determine how a blind golfer must proceed if his ball were to strike his or another player's coach after a stroke. Therefore, the following Definition is suggested:

Coach

A "coach" is one who assists a blind golfer in addressing the ball and with alignment prior to the stroke. A coach has the same status under the Rules as a caddie.

Note 1: A player may ask for and receive advice from his coach.

Note 2: A player may have only one coach at any one time.

Note 3: A coach may also be referred to as a "guide". For the purpose of applying these modifications, a guide has the same status under the Rules as a coach.

Rule 6-4 (Caddie)

There is nothing in the Rules that would prohibit the coach of a blind golfer from functioning as his caddie. For a variety of reasons, however, a coach may not be able to perform the duties of a caddie. Therefore, it is permissible for a blind golfer to have both a coach and a caddie.

In these circumstances, however, the coach must not carry or handle the player's clubs except in helping the player take his stance or align himself prior to making the stroke, or in assisting him as permitted by analogy to Decision 6-4/4.5. Otherwise, the player would be subject to penalty under Rule 6-4 for having more than one caddie. Likewise, if a player has more than one coach at a given time, he is subject to penalty under Rule 6-4.

Rule 8-1 (Advice)

In view of the Definition of "Coach", it is suggested that Rule 8-1 be modified as follows:

8-1. Advice

During a stipulated round, a player must not:

- a. give advice to anyone in the competition playing on the course other than his partner, or
- b. ask for advice from anyone other than his partner, either of their caddies or, if applicable, their coaches.

Rule 13-4b (Touching the Ground in Hazard)

The following additional Exception under Rule 13-4 is permissible:

Exceptions:

4. Provided nothing is done that constitutes testing the condition of the hazard or improves the lie of the ball, there is no penalty if a blind golfer grounds his club in a hazard preparatory to making a stroke. However, the player is deemed to have addressed the ball if the club is grounded immediately in front of or immediately behind the ball, whether or not the player has taken his stance.

Rule 14-2b (Position of Caddie or Partner)

Due to the complexities involved in aligning a blind golfer, it may be difficult or unreasonable to expect the blind golfer and his coach to comply with Rule 14-2b.

Therefore, there is no penalty if a player's coach positions himself on or close to an extension of the line of play or the line of putt behind the ball during a stroke, provided the coach does not assist the player in any other manner during the stroke. However, given the intent of Rule 14-2b, it may be appropriate to prohibit a coach from remaining in a position that contravenes this Rule if he is performing the duties of a coach or a caddie for two different players simultaneously.

Amputees

At present, the only significant issue with respect to amputee golfers is the status of prosthetic devices. Decision 14-3/15 clarifies the R&A's position on such devices and is included here for reference.

14-3/15 Artificial Limbs

An artificial leg or arm is an artificial device within the meaning of the term in Rule 14-3. However, as such a device is used to alleviate a medical condition and the player has a legitimate medical reason to use the device, Exception 1 to Rule 14-3 applies, even if an artificial leg has been modified to aid a player in playing the game or an artificial arm has a fitting specially designed for gripping a golf club.

However, the Committee must be satisfied that an artificial limb so modified does not give the player any undue advantage over other players. If the Committee is not satisfied of this,

Exception 1 to Rule 14-3 does not apply and use of the device would constitute a breach of Rule 14-3.

Clubs used by a player with an artificial arm must conform with Rule 4-1 except that an attachment may be fitted to the grip or shaft to assist the player to hold the club. However, if the Committee believes that the use of a club modified in this way would give the player an undue advantage over other players, it should deem the attachment an artificial device contrary to Rule 14-3.

Players in doubt about the use of a device should raise the matter as soon as possible with the Committee.

A potential issue for some lower extremity amputee golfers who wear a prosthesis is their inability to climb into or out of bunkers, a situation that probably occurs rather infrequently. On that basis Rule 28 (Unplayable Ball) should apply without need for further modification.

Golfers Requiring Canes or Crutches

Definition of "Stance"

The use of assistive devices raises the question of what constitutes taking the stance. This is a critical element in determining relief from an immovable obstruction (Rule 24-2) and abnormal ground conditions

(Rule 25-1) and whether a player is subject to penalty if his ball moves prior to his making a stroke. The following Definition is recommended:

Stance

Taking the "stance" consists in a player who is using an assistive device placing the device and, if applicable, his feet in position for and preparatory to making a stroke. The assistive device is deemed to be part of the player's stance.

Rule 6-4 (Caddie)

By analogy to Decision 6-4/4.5, someone, including another caddie or player, who assists a player with the retrieval of his ball is not acting as the player's caddie. Such an act does not constitute a breach of Rule 6-4, which prohibits a player from having more than one caddie at any one time.

Rule 13-2 (Improving Lie, Area of Intended Stance or Swing, or Line of Play)

The interpretation of what constitutes a player "fairly taking his stance" is one of the most difficult judgement calls in golf. Whereas most of the Rules are objective, this Rule is highly subjective. Decision 13-2/1 (Explanation of "Fairly Taking His Stance") lends some clarification to this phrase, but significant grey areas remain. The disabled golfer who is using an assistive device is entitled to bend or even break the branches of a tree or bush in order to fairly take his stance. However, he may not use the device to deliberately hold back branches that would otherwise interfere with the area of his intended stance or swing, or line of play. There is not, nor will there probably ever be, a substitute for the judgement required to interpret this Rule.

Rule 13-3 (Building Stance)

The use of assistive devices by disabled golfers does not constitute building a stance within the meaning of the term in Rule 13-3. Another issue relating to this Rule concerns the following query:

If a player builds a stance so that his supporting crutch does not slip during the swing, is he in breach of this Rule?

This is an interesting question, because the answer is also dependent on the concept of "fairly taking his stance" (Rule 13-2).

A player who "builds a stance" by creating a raised mound of soil against which he braces his crutch would be in breach of Rule 13-3 for building a stance. However, a certain amount of "digging in" with the feet is permitted. By analogy, this would allow for some "digging in" with an assistive device in an effort to prevent slipping, but there is a point beyond which the player would be in breach of "fairly taking his stance". As noted in the discussion of Rule 13-2 above, this is a very subjective determination that the Committee must make after considering all of the circumstances.

Rule 13-4a (Testing the Condition of the Hazard) and Rule 13-4b (Touching the Ground in the Hazard)

Decision 13-4/0.5 clarifies that a player may not gain additional information about the condition of a hazard through actions other than those that are necessary to allow him to reach his ball and take his stance. Therefore, a player who enters a hazard with canes or crutches would not be in breach of Rules 13-4a or 13-4b, provided his actions are not intended to test the condition of the hazard.

Rule 14-2a (Assistance)

Prior to the stroke, it is permissible for a disabled golfer to accept physical assistance from anyone for the purpose of positioning himself or any assistive device that he is using. The provisions of this Rule apply only while the player is making a stroke.

Rule 14-3 (Artificial Devices, Unusual Equipment and Unusual Use of Equipment)

Assistive devices are considered artificial devices or unusual equipment under Rule 14-3. However, a player is not in breach of Rule 14-3 if

- (a) the device is designed for or has the effect of alleviating a medical condition,
- (b) the player has a legitimate medical reason to use the device, and
- (c) the Committee is satisfied that its use does not give the player any undue advantage over other players.

Rule 16-1e (Standing Astride or on Line of Putt)

In view of the proposed Definition of “Stance”, it is recommended that Rule 16-1e be modified to read:

e. Standing Astride or on Line of Putt

The player must not make a stroke on the putting green from a stance astride, or with either foot or any assistive device touching, the line of putt or an extension of that line behind the ball.

Exception: There is no penalty if the stance is inadvertently taken on or astride the line of putt (or an extension of that line behind the ball) or is taken to avoid standing on another player’s line of putt or prospective line of putt.

Rule 20-1 (Lifting and Marking)

Rule 20-1 states in part:

If a ball or ball-marker is accidentally moved in the process of lifting the ball under a Rule or marking its position, the ball or the ball-marker must be replaced. There is no penalty, provided the movement of the ball or ball-marker is directly attributable to the specific act of marking the position of or lifting the ball. Otherwise, the player incurs a penalty of one stroke under this Rule or Rule 18-2a.

This Rule requires no modification for use by disabled golfers. However, because physical limitations and assistive devices, especially chairs, may restrict access to the ball, the Rule should be interpreted loosely enough to give the disabled golfer the benefit of the doubt in cases where “directly attributable” becomes an issue.

Rule 22 (Ball Assisting or Interfering with Play)

Disabled golfers using assistive devices may be inclined not to lift their balls on the putting green in an effort to reduce the potential for damage to the putting green surface. This is not the problem it may seem to be, as the player may authorise another person to mark the position of and lift his ball.

Rule 24-2 (Immovable Obstruction) and Rule 25-1 (Abnormal Ground Conditions)

The amended Definition of “Stance” would entitle a player to relief from an immovable obstruction or an abnormal ground condition if, in fairly taking his stance, the obstruction or the abnormal ground condition interfered with the positioning of his assistive device. However, the Exceptions under Rules 24 and 25 would preclude relief for a player who has interference from these conditions as a result of placing his assistive device in an unnecessarily abnormal position for the required shot or using an unnecessarily abnormal direction of play.

Rule 28 (Ball Unplayable)

It is a fact that one able-bodied golfer may attempt and successfully execute a stroke with a ball that another able-bodied golfer may have deemed unplayable. It is also a fact that the disabled golfer who requires the use of canes, crutches or any other type of assistive device may occasionally be unable to make a stroke at a ball that the able bodied golfer could play.

For example, a player using crutches may need to deem a ball that lies on a steep slope of wet grass unplayable in an effort to eliminate the possibility of injury from a fall. However, this situation is not any different than a case where the balls of two able bodied golfers lie on a gravel cart path, that has been declared an integral part of the course, and one player makes the stroke and the other player deems his ball unplayable, thus obviating any chance of an injury from flying gravel.

One might argue that because the situations noted above are potentially dangerous, Decision 1-4/10 (Dangerous Situation; Rattlesnake or Bees Interfere with Play) should apply, and the player should be entitled to free relief as prescribed by that Decision. While the situations described in the preceding paragraph are potentially dangerous they are not analogous to the circumstances contemplated or the answer offered in Decision 1-4/10. That Decision concerns the player who encounters a dangerous situation that is both totally out of his control and unrelated to the normal playing of the game (see Decision 1-4/11). Additionally, it presupposes that the player's ball is in a playable position. If this were not the case, the player would have to proceed under the unplayable ball rule incurring a penalty stroke, rather than obtaining free relief as prescribed by the Decision.

Ultimately, all players must exercise their best judgement in determining whether they are placing themselves at risk by making a particular stroke. If they are, then their best option may be to deem the ball unplayable. Rule 28 must govern in these situations. Providing relief without penalty in any instance in which there may be a potential for injury will create an unmanageable situation ripe with the potential for abuse.