

The Case for the Stymie

J. Victor East has had an unusually diversified career in golf. Robert T. Jones, Jr., has said of him: "It is my opinion that Mr. East possesses knowledge and experience in the game second to no one. He has been a capable tournament player, a keen student of the technique of playing, and an outstanding model maker and designer of golf clubs."

Mr. East began his golf career as professional to the Royal Sydney and the Royal Melbourne Golf Clubs in Australia, came to the United States with Joe Kirkwood, entered the field of club designing with distinguished success, and now is Export Manager for the Wilson Sporting Goods Co.

By J. VICTOR EAST

Mr. Richard D. Chapman's hard-luck story "Freak of Fortune" in the September, 1948 issue of the USGA JOURNAL was read with interest.

Holding a different viewpoint, I would say any modification of the stymie rule such as he advances would, in my opinion, rob the game of some part of its skill, which skill serves to differentiate between the real champion and the not-so-great player.

To support my contention, one has to go back to basic principles and draw attention to the fact that the primary skill in golf springs from having to get the ball into a 4¼-inch hole, and that for the most part the ball is propelled through the air.

Fundamental Difference

This getting of the ball off the ground is the fundamental difference between golf and other ball games in that due provision for lofting the ball is found in the implements. Not only are the clubs shaped to get the ball up but the resilience of the ball itself and its surface markings have been designed with special regard for this purpose.

Now, with equal equipment, let's say any two persons start out to determine which is the better player; knowing the Rules regulate the order of play, it is safe to say the winner will be the one who has the best control of distance and direction.

At this point, one senses the likely remark, "Oh, yes, but what about the element of luck?" To this, my reply would be that the laying of a stymie does not always come from luck, and that any stymie can be played successfully. In support of this more immediate statement, I could, from what has become a rather extensive ex-

perience, describe many classical examples of stymies being laid and made. That would, however, require more space than is now available, so I will confine myself to only two notable instances, in which they have been successfully negotiated.

Kirkwood's Solution

In the final of the Glen Eagles 2,000-guinea tournament in Scotland in 1921, Joe Kirkwood and the late Abe Mitchell were having a great match. At the 14th hole in the first round, Joe was faced with a rather difficult stymie: his ball was about six to seven feet from the hole, and Abe's had come to rest in Joe's direct line, about 30 inches from the cup.

The green surface was almost flat, quite hard and fast. With putter in hand, Joe keenly surveyed the chances of holing out by going around Abe's ball. When satisfied this was well nigh impossible, he changed to the idea of pitching over the intervening ball, and for the purpose called for his niblick.

With his eyes constantly on the problem, he made a few trial passes with the niblick. Then quite apparently he figured his ball would, after landing, bounce too high to take the hole.

Having in turn given up the ideas of going around or carrying over Abe's ball, a new thought developed: why not land his ball short of the other ball, low-bounce it over, and go on into the hole?

The thought became a decision: Joe got his mashie, or No. 5 iron, from the caddie and, with the pattern of the shot in mind, his execution was perfect. This was testified by the gallery which, it is not unfair to state, had been distinctly pro-Mitchell, for



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as Joe's ball holed out the applause was tremendous. Beyond this, in the next morning's newspaper the celebrated cartoonist, Tom Webster, elaborated on the incident by showing Kirkwood's ball spiraling down the flagpole into the hole.

As recently as 1946 Chick Evans, who, as almost every living golfer knows, was the holder of both the USGA Open and Amateur Championships, had reached the third round in the British Amateur Championship. He was then pitted against a major in the Indian Army.

After the 14th hole the major had Chick dormie 4. By dint of some birdies Chick won the 15th, 16th and 17th holes. Then, with his ball only 10 feet from the cup after his second shot at the 18th, it appeared he was in a fair way to get another birdie to square the match. But when his opponent's third came to rest two inches from the hole in a dead stymie, it looked as if Chick's chances of getting his next and critical shot into the hole were nil.

This indeed was a tense situation, but, as Chick later said, "You know, no matter how bad any situation may look, it has always been my experience that if one will only pause and think, a way out will come to him."

Evans's Greatest Thrill

Then he went on to say, "That's what happened in this case, because it seemed to me that if I could only play my ball so it would be almost spent at the edge of the hole, the influence of the cross-wind would help it drop. It did just that," said Chick, "and when the ball dropped, I got the greatest thrill of my whole golfing experience."

Beside the point is the fact that the major got a birdie at the first extra hole and won the match. What is of interest is the revealing thought of this one-time great national champion, namely, that mental composure combined with resourcefulness and the necessary skill will overcome seemingly impossible situations.

Whether it be the "ground route" as used by Chick in this case, or the "air route" such as Joe Kirkwood partially resorted to at Glen Eagles, both require precision in the basic skill of the game. Since the stymie becomes one of the finer mediums of proof of who has it and who has it not, in my humble opinion the best interests of golf will be served by not making any further changes in the stymie rule.