

Artificial Obstructions

By JOSEPH C. DEY, JR.
USGA EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

To most golfers, the Rules of Golf are just a maze of technicalities, and the high point of all is the one dealing with artificial obstructions. This is a delightful little section known whimsically as Rule 7(4). It is the cause of more inquiries to the USGA than any other Rule; of 100 written requests for interpretations handled thus far in 1950, eight dealt with our old friend 7(4).

The subject of artificial obstructions has more than passing importance for all golfers because it deals with a privilege accorded to the player. Many Rules are merely prohibitory or otherwise negative. Good old 7(4) gives you some rights, and it's well to know what they are.

Now, just what is an artificial obstruction? The first paragraph of Rule 7(4) goes into great detail in giving examples — boundary stakes (but not fences or fence posts), water outlets, drain covers, protective screens, bridges and abutments, shelters, material piled for removal, guy wires, to name only a comparative few.

The definition winds up this way: "... paper, bottles and similar artificial objects." Thus, distinction is drawn between artificial obstructions on the one hand and, on the other, such natural objects as worms, loose stones, leaves, twigs, or anything growing. The natural impediments, incidentally, are covered in Rule 7(2 and 3).

Having defined artificial obstructions, Rule 7(4) proceeds to state its purpose, in the following section, which is new to the code this year:

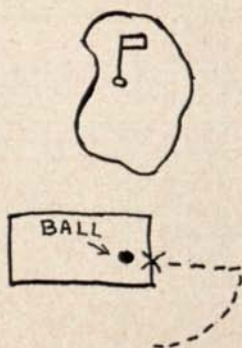
"Relief. The player is entitled to freedom from interference by an artificial obstruction in order to strike the ball in the direction of his choice (subject to limitations elsewhere in this Rule). This does not mean that the desired line of flight of the ball must necessarily be free of such interference. Regardless of how the desired line of flight may be affected,

the player is entitled to specific relief as follows:" whereupon the Rule goes into detail about the sort of relief you get in various situations.

The first type of relief is described in a paragraph which is identified as "(a) Removal of Obstruction." It says that you may remove any obstruction which is movable.

Next is "(b) Ball on or Within or Touching Obstruction." This charming paragraph deals with a ball lying on or within or otherwise touching an immovable obstruction. It says that in such a case you may lift your ball without penalty and drop it (or on the putting green place it) within two club-lengths of that point of the obstruction nearest where the ball originally lay; of course, the ball must come to rest not nearer the hole. The foregoing does not apply to play in a hazard; there's a separate clause for that, permitting a ball so situated in a hazard to be lifted and placed in a similar lie and position, etc.

Now what is "that point of the obstruction nearest where the ball originally lay"? That means exactly what it says — every word in the Rules of Golf has been well chewed over before getting into print. The diagram below illustrates what is meant:

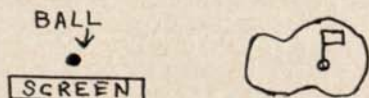


The rectangle is a drain cover. Point X is that point of the obstruction nearest where the ball originally lay. The rule says you may drop the ball within two club-lengths of that point. Thus, if the horizontal dotted line is two club-lengths long, you may drop the ball anywhere within the territory bounded by the dotted line, provided the ball comes to rest not nearer the hole than its original position.

That brings us to the last paragraph of Rule 7(4) — it is headed "(c) Obstruction Interfering." Bear in mind that every word carries a meaning. Now, then:

If your backward or forward swing or your stance is interfered with by an immovable obstruction which is within two club-lengths of your ball, you get the same sort of relief as described in paragraph (b). That is, you may lift the ball without penalty and drop it (or on the putting green place it) within two club-lengths of that point of the obstruction nearest where the ball originally lay. The foregoing does not apply in a hazard, because in that case you may place the ball in a similar lie and position, etc.

Now, to test your knowledge, here's a little sketch, much like one recently submitted by C. T. Littlejohn, Jr., of Honolulu:

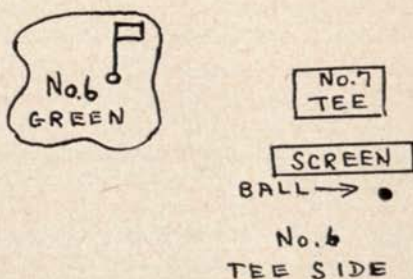


The ball is a foot away from the protective screen. The player's objective is the putting green shown. May the player lift the ball without penalty and drop it two club-lengths away from the screen?

No. It's true that the screen is immovable and is within two club-lengths of the ball. But it does not interfere with the player's backward or forward swing or his stance. So he has to play the ball as it lies.

Finally, here is a case presented by H. G. Mesing, Chairman of the Golf Com-

mittee of the South Hills Country Club in Pittsburgh:



No. 50-97, R. 7(4c).

Q: There is a protective screen about 30 feet long and 10 feet high back of our No. 7 tee and directly opposite to our No. 6 green (diagram submitted). Ball comes to rest on No. 6 tee side of the protective screen. The player contends that he is entitled to two club-lengths from the screen on either side of the screen. This would definitely give him the advantage, inasmuch as he would not have a clear shot to No. 6 green if he had to play his ball from No. 6 tee side of the screen. Were he permitted to play his shot from No. 7 tee side of the screen, he would have an open shot to the pin, which in our opinion is unfair advantage.

In the absence of specific local rule, what would be the decision of the USGA in this regard?

A: If the player is entitled to relief under Rule 7(4c), the ball must be dropped on the same side of the obstruction as its original position.

Under Rule 7(4c), an immovable obstruction must be within two club-lengths of the ball and must interfere with the player's backward or forward swing or his stance.

When these conditions prevail, the ball may be lifted without penalty and dropped "within two club-lengths of that point of the obstruction nearest where the ball originally lay, and must come to rest not nearer the hole." The point of the obstruction "nearest where the ball originally lay" obviously would be on the same side of the screen.

Rule 7(4, Relief) provides in part: "The player is entitled to freedom from interference by an artificial obstruction in order to strike the ball in the direction of his choice (subject to limitations elsewhere in this Rule). This does not mean that the desired line of flight of the ball must necessarily be free of such interference."