

THE EASIEST WAY BECOMES A HABIT

by

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NOBODY PLAYED GOLF in Arkansas until recently.

The game they played on the fairways was a mongrel one, sort of driving-range golf. They didn't use wooden tees on every shot from tee to green, but they might as well have. The practice of jiggling the ball around with hand or club-head is so far from the basic idea of the game that the placing of a peg under the ball on the fairways would not have been a whit more illegal.

The shocking thing is that a generation has come up, including this player, almost knowing no better.

It wasn't always so, we've learned. Until twenty years ago all the better players at the three or four established clubs in the state played the ball as it lay from tee to green. Then, somehow, "winter rules" crept in. Now they've swallowed us, whole. Or vice versa.

Just to fix the remainder of this discussion, let's make it clear that we're referring to the habits of our better players. Those who play for relaxation and exercise only and who do not aspire to peak proficiency and championships, let's leave them be.

Let's limit the area of our argument to (1) the championship players who want to be labeled real golfers, and (2) the teen-aged beginners, who ought to be started on the right track.

The theory behind "winter rules" notices posted on all the announcement boards at our tournaments was that our Arkansas fairways are not good enough to allow for decent lies. Players were urged to improve their lies with clubheads.

Posh on that!

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There isn't a course in the state where even a halfway respectable amateur tournament is held that doesn't boast fairways 500 per cent better than those which existed when the game's Rules were drawn up. Fairways are at least 200 per cent better than in the 1930s, when most state championships were conducted under USGA Rules.

Good Way To Learn

Too many divots, you say, and not enough maintenance workers to patch them. A few shots out of divots might teach the age-old lesson about replacing them.

And why should the issue be raised now? Well, it's a matter of conscience — and that always raises itself, with no prompting.

"We've been putting this off for years," one pro told us recently. "We've been cheating ourselves and cheating our game, and we keep saying 'next year, next year.' We're going to have to face it pretty soon."

The facing up times has arrived for some. Two sets of junior golfers have been leaving Arkansas for national competitions in the last two years.

"It's pitiful," said a man who accompanied them. "They learned under our 'tee-up' rules and they have little conception of how to hit the ball when they have to hit it right from a clean or worse lie. We've done that to those boys. It hasn't been their fault."

Visitors Are Amazed

Four youngsters from Texas, all good players, were visitors at the Country Club of Little Rock last spring. They were amazed at the lush fairways — as contrasted to their bare grounds back home.

What really amazed them, though, is that they were following USGA Rules of Golf at home, where things were tough, and "winter rules" here, where conditions were fine.

And they do say that one reason for the Texans' near-complete domination of golf is that they learned to play on hard-ground courses, hitting the ball from where it stopped.

"How do you think Jimmy Demaret got to be one of the greatest iron players?" another pro asked us. "He had to be perfect to get around that rough Galveston course, where he was pro for a spell, in those gales."



Added the same Little Rock pro:

"Yes, it might cost some of us, the pros and the better amateurs, three or four strokes a round for a while. But we'd be playing golf and eventually everyone would be better. Not being able to improve the lie would force us to keep our heads still, at least. Instead of slugging, we'd have to hit the shots right. Jacking the ball up, you can take a driver or any club and jump at the ball and still do fairly well. The result is more distance and less accuracy."

The pro guessed that no one in the Little Rock area had played the ball as it lay consistently.

"Some did it sometimes, just for the heck of it. Outside of the last state ASGA tournament, held at Riverdale Country Club, I can recall only one tournament in the state where the USGA Rules have applied in the last few years. That was the King Cotton Open at Blytheville. In that tournament a pro playing with me said it was the first time he had ever played a round without improving his ball in the fairway."

He Knew No Better

A recent ASGA Championship produced the sorry spectacle of a college star exceeding the limit—picking the ball up and placing it with his hands—in a quarter-final match. Some sideliners called this "breach"—even against "winter rules"—to his attention. He was apologetic, but he confessed that he had never known any better. And he was almost good enough to win the tournament.

It became time to call a halt, and a halt has been called. Pure USGA Rules have been ordained for every Greater Little Rock competition. The new interest the switch has created is tremendous. Why was it done?

For one thing, no Arkansan was eligible for any USGA competition. Few will want to enter, but few will want to say that they could never be accepted, no matter how well they play in Arkansas. The rub is that the USGA this year has ruled out all handicaps based on "winter rules" performances. It has gone further than that. Handicaps will not be recognized unless they have been figured by the USGA Golf Handicap System for Men, which insists that the course or courses used also be rated the USGA way.

The changeover ought not to be too painful.

The youngsters should be able to learn quickly. They'll need help from the pros, but that can come in the form of "no winter rules" edicts for all club, area and state competitions. The teen-agers will have to practice to meet that. And they'll be weaned in short order.