

# The Superintendent, The Rules of Golf, and Course Maintenance

Compartmentalizing is a common mistake with course maintenance and the Rules.

BY BOB BRAME

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *The words and phrases in italics are definitions within The Rules of Golf.*

**G**olf course maintenance, or the conditioning of the course upon which golf is played, cannot be separated from the Rules that define the game. The Rules of Golf, in combination with the Decisions on The Rules of Golf, are thorough and precise. They guide the play of the game and define the course upon

which it is played. Golf is the Rules — if The Rules of Golf aren't being applied, don't call it "golf." The Bible tells us in 2 Timothy 2:5, "... if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules." The Rules should guide course maintenance and not the other way around.

Superintendents are faced with an assortment of challenges in today's golf course maintenance,

This overhanging tree compromises turf quality and forces the need to mark *ground under repair*; however, the marking is inconsistent and opens the door to legitimate complaints from players.





Ruling challenges can occur when adjacent obstructions like this cart path and drainage inlet become an *obstruction* with bordering *casual* water following a rainfall.



and they typically do a good job of balancing the demands and expectations. Yet, for most, credibility would be elevated if The Rules of Golf were given full consideration. In addition, fully merging the Rules and course maintenance will improve the final product and serve to properly accommodate players. To these ends, this article identifies the top ten Rules-related mistakes as seen by select USGA staff within the Championship, Regional Affairs, and Green Section departments. Those polled were independently asked, “How would you list and prioritize the top-ten Rules-related mistakes made by superintendents?” Candidly identifying and learning from past mistakes is the best way to avoid repeats in the future.

## #10 — TREES AND ROUGH

Although some golfers continue to resist acknowledging that trees (too many and/or poorly positioned) compromise turf health, this is not a gray area — they do. Not only will thin, weak turf directly impact playability, it also opens the door to more serious issues like equipment damage and the effectual marking of *ground under repair*. In addition, tree roots creeping along or just below the surface are dangerous and may force a player to declare the ball unplayable, which brings a penalty stroke.

While it is important for the rough to inflict some penalty and in so doing reward a ball hit on the fairway or *putting green*, pace of play and *lost balls* (stroke and distance) should be carefully considered. The rough height and density should be appropriate for the grass being grown, course/hole design, and the median skill level of players.

## #9 — OBSTRUCTIONS

The Rules cover both movable and immovable *obstructions*. However, too many *obstructions* can adversely impact play, as can even a few that are too close to the centerline. Give careful consideration to tee signs, benches, ball washers, irrigation control boxes, yardage markers, tree stakes and cables, hazard stakes, and the like. If immovable, how straightforward is obtaining relief? Two adjacent obstructions can pose a challenge. Or can it be moved without unreasonable effort, without unduly delaying play, and without causing damage? While the *Committee* may activate a Local Rule declaring a movable *obstruction* to be an immovable *obstruction* (i.e., marking stakes, other than *out-of-bounds* stakes that are deemed fixed — Decision 33-8/16), this is normally not recommended. Clashes can occur when adjacent *obstructions* like cart paths and drainage inlets become, following a rainfall, *obstructions* overlapped with *casual water*. Care should also be exercised to minimize the chances of a ball being lost in an *obstruction* like a drainage inlet grate with openings larger than a ball.

## #8 — LOCAL RULES

Local abnormal conditions may require the *Committee* to establish Local Rules. Yet The Rules of Golf must not be waived by a Local Rule. Aeration, as an example, is common and necessary for the conditioning of healthy and dependable golf turf. This may bring the need to implement a Local Rule granting relief when a ball is on or in an aeration hole. Implementing the suggested Local Rule (The Rules of Golf,



Appendix I, Part B: 3c) is a far better strategy than skipping needed aeration work. Extreme wet weather may suggest value in activating a Local Rule for “preferred lies.” The Local Rule for “embedded ball” (Appendix I, Part B: 3a), on the other hand, is always used at USGA Championships, and it is recommended that clubs/courses do likewise for regular play. Stones in *bunkers* may need to be declared movable *obstructions* (Appendix I, Part B: 4) to improve player safety and help hold down the operating budget. Power lines, ant hills (certain situations — Decision 33-8/22), and play from *wrong putting green* collars (Decision 33-8/33) may also point to the proper utilization of Local Rules. Conversely, providing relief without penalty should a player’s stroke be interfered with by exposed tree roots is not an authorized Local Rule (Decision 33-8/8) — cut down the problematic trees.

## #7 — DIVOT FILLING

On one hand, the unfortunate fate of a ball settling into a divot scar cavity is part of the game. While it may be a bit irritating to hit a ball straight down the fairway and find it in a divot scar, such occurrences will likely balance out and impact all players reasonably the same over a long enough period of time. On the other hand, it is far better to fill divot scars with a mix that improves playability and maximizes recovery growth. The middle ground of doing some and not others or being inconsistent with the process is likely the worst posture. The preference is to fill divot scars on a regular schedule and provide a smooth playing surface. While this applies primarily to fairways and approaches, it’s also important on tees for recovery more so than playability; and don’t forget ball drops, as a properly dropped ball must be played as it lies. Sand and loose soil (the components of divot filling mixes) are *loose impediments* on the *putting green*, but not elsewhere, which means it cannot be removed or smoothed without penalty if doing so would improve the lie of the ball, area of intended *stance* or swing, or *line of play* (Rule 13-2). Fill those divot scars completely and smoothly.

## #6 — HOLE PLACEMENT, LINERS, AND FLAGSTICK

It’s important to position the *hole* on the *putting green* to facilitate good pace of play. Caution

must be exercised near slopes or contour changes and close to the edges of the putting surface. Green speed, hole design, putting surface contours/slope, weather conditions, play volume, and the median skill level of players must be factored into *hole* placement decisions. It’s also important to avoid cutting a new *hole* close to a recovering *hole* plug. The frequency of *hole* changing should be such that a crisp, clean edge is provided. A player touching or attempting to repair a ragged or grown-over edge prior to holing out could result in a penalty (Decisions 16-1a/5 and 16-1a/6). Liners, if they are used (and they always are in today’s golf course maintenance), must be sunk at least one inch below the surface. Cutting the *hole* straight and the subsequent insertion of a liner should hold the *flagstick* directly in the middle and in so doing yield uniform access around the perimeter.

Decision 16-1c/3 states that a player may attempt to raise or lower an old *hole* plug to make it level with the surface. Recognizing that the superintendent and maintenance staff are not going to want players attempting such repairs, it’s important for the staff to provide a smooth surface that stays smooth throughout the season following a *hole* change. A high or low *hole* plug that cannot be readily repaired could result in *ground under repair* on the putting surface (see Decisions 16-1c/3 and 25/17).

## #5 — GREEN MOWING

A player is allowed privileges and also is subject to restrictions on the *putting green* that don’t apply *through the green* or in *hazards*. This means that it is very important to accurately determine when a ball is on the putting surface. A ball is on the *putting green* when any part of it touches the *putting green*. Mowing must be done frequently enough to provide a clear distinction between the *putting green* and the adjacent turf, commonly called the collar or approach. Greens are usually mowed daily during the playing season, although it is not unusual for the cleanup passes around the edge to be skipped occasionally in an effort to



Careful thought should be given to hole locations, which includes an evaluation of green speed, hole design, putting surface contour/slope, weather conditions, play volume, and the median skill level of players. Spread the wear around the green, but be fair and sensible.



minimize turf wear and possible thinning. This practice must be closely monitored to ensure that good definition is maintained. Utilizing lighter-weight mowers equipped with solid front rollers to maintain the cleanup passes can aid in minimizing wear while still allowing regular mowing. In the process, the same actual cutting height (not necessarily the same bench setting) should be provided by all *putting green* mowers to guard uniform playability. The height and mowing frequency of the adjacent turf must be in sync with greens to achieve the desired definition.



There must be a distinct edge defining *bunker* margins for the Rules of Golf to be applied.

#### #4 — BRUSH AND CLIPPING PILES

Grass clippings and other brush or debris that have been abandoned and are not intended for removal are not *ground under repair* unless so marked. If the intention is to remove the piles, they are *ground under repair*, even if not so marked. The question is: Why make someone ask? Remove grass clippings and brush or debris piles immediately. Not only will this eliminate *ground under repair* status confusion, it will also help reduce the related risk of *lost balls* and in so doing guard the pace of play. Clippings that are spread in the predominately out-of-play rough or in areas between holes should be spread so that they cannot be found later by the same person who did the original spreading. Even slight clumping should be prevented if the area is in play (inside the *out-of-bounds* marking).

While there may be times when economics suggest returning clippings during fairway or approach mowing, this can pose a problem. Clippings (*loose impediments*) that adhere to a ball cannot be removed other than on the *putting green*. As such, when clippings are not caught and removed on fairways and approaches, some type of follow-up cleaning like blowing or dragging may be needed to disperse and settle clippings into the turf canopy. Regulating growth to reduce clipping production may also aid both playability and agronomics.

#### #3 — BUNKERS: EDGING AND RAKES

Similar to the *putting green*, it's important for a player to know whether or not the ball is in a *bunker*. A ball is in a *bunker* when any part of it touches the bunker. A player's activities in a bunker are regulated. Since *bunkers* are *hazards*, a strong case could, and for many should, be made for holding *bunker* maintenance to more reasonable levels. However, there must be a distinct edge defining the interface for The Rules of Golf to be applied. Sand must not be spilled or pulled over the *bunker* margins (Decision 13/1). Adequate sand depth and good internal drainage should coexist with proper edging. Maintenance must also consider Rule 23 (*Loose Impediments*) — if the ball lies in a *hazard*, the player must not touch or move any *loose impediment* lying in or touching the same *hazard*. *Loose impediments* are natural objects, which includes twigs, branches, leaves, and stones, although a Local Rule can be activated that changes the status of a stone to a movable *obstruction*.

Decision Misc./2 states that the *Committee* must decide on the placement of rakes in *bunkers*. However, it is recommended that rakes be placed outside of bunkers on the away side and parallel to the intended *line of play*. It is common for too many rakes to be utilized, which further complicates control and placement. Keeping rakes in their proper place is a matter of significant and ongoing communication with players, but it starts with the maintenance staff.

Please note that a *bunker* is a *bunker*. The term “low maintenance” or “waste” added to “*bunker*” changes nothing. If there is a desire to have a low-maintenance or waste area, where clubs can be grounded and *loose impediments* removed, eliminate any descriptive tie to the word *bunker*. Design adjustments may also be





needed — *bunkers* are prepared areas; natural sandy areas are not!

## #2 — TEE MAINTENANCE AND MARKER PLACEMENT

The *teeing ground* is the starting place for the hole to be played. This means it must be clearly defined and free of interferences. The surface should be smooth and firm, and there should be no surrounding obstructions, trees, or other plant growth compromising full access. Depending upon the size of the mowed surface and the hole design, markers (the outside edge of which defines the front and sides of the *teeing ground*) will commonly be placed five to six paces apart. They should be positioned so that a perpendicular line off the middle of the straight line between the two markers aligns with the hole's centerline; incorrect alignment can lead to a player accidentally hitting from outside the *teeing ground* (penalty of disqualification unless corrected — Rule 11). The depth of the *teeing ground* is two club-lengths. Full access allows a player to stand outside the *teeing ground* to play a ball within. A ball is within the *teeing ground* when any part of it touches the *teeing ground*. Considering both right- and left-handed players,

an adequate margin must be maintained for stance and swing. Markers should be moved regularly and systematically (usually daily or between *stipulated rounds* as authorized by the *Committee*). A player cannot legally move markers for the purpose of realigning them or to avoid interference from them (Decision 11-2/2).

As a side note, there are occasions when architecture prevents the allowed two club-length depth and ability to stand outside the *teeing ground* when playing a ball within. Design issues that compromise the Rules and course maintenance are topics for another article.

## #1 — COURSE MARKING

It's amazing how often a course is not properly marked. Amazing because the game is the Rules and they are dependent upon accurate marking. The common shortfalls in course marking include the following:

- Incomplete — not enough stakes, or missing painted lines.
- Inability to site between stakes or along painted lines due to tall grass, brush, and/or tree growth. This can make it difficult to determine where a ball last crossed the margin of a *hazard* and to then drop and play a ball.

Rakes should be placed outside of *bunkers*, but also on the away side and parallel to the intended *line of play*. Rakes should not be placed between a *bunker* and a *putting green*.





Detailed manicuring does not compensate for improper marking. The margins of a water hazard must be clear and precise, and encircle the hazard.

- Excessive use of red for lateral water hazard marking when some should be yellow (*water hazard*) or white (*out of bounds*).
- Incorrect marking of desert, rough, or wooded areas as a lateral water hazard when the area does not meet the definition of a water hazard (Decision 33-8/35).

- A Committee-declared environmentally sensitive area when such a distinction must come from an appropriate authority (i.e., a government agency or the like).

- Excessive or inadequate *ground-under-repair* marking. The most common issue is marking that is excessive and/or inconsistent. Tour the course carefully before marking and then be consistent. Avoid marking what is well out in the rough. *Casual water* is not *ground under repair*. Damage next to a cart path should normally be tied into the path (*obstruction*). When in doubt, miss on the no-paint side.

- Incorrect positioning of ball drops (i.e., *putting green* side of a *water hazard*).

## CONCLUSION

To move away from the identified mistakes and to eliminate compartmentalizing, there must be good communication within the maintenance department and between the superintendent and other key staff at the course. A clear understanding of responsibilities will set the stage for confidently moving forward. It's common for the golf professional and pro shop staff to take the lead in determining how the course will be marked and oversee the initial marking, with the maintenance staff then expected to keep the marking fresh and clear. Nonetheless, whether your course follows this model or utilizes a different approach, in the final analysis course maintenance and setup are the superintendent's responsibilities and as such he/she should ensure that The Rules of Golf are in fact guiding maintenance activities. Knowing the Rules and applying them to the art and science of golf course maintenance will elevate credibility and present the full challenge of the game.

## REFERENCES

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Thanks to all of the USGA staff who participated in the survey upon which this article is based. Special thanks to Jeff Hall and Tim Moraghan for their input.*

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