



When the Rules of Golf Collide with Golf Course Maintenance

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Televised golf features courses that are nearly perfect in every respect. Sure, there are those fortunate folks who play courses in similar conditions on a daily basis, but most of us get our golf enjoyment on layouts that are far less pristine and in some ways more challenging. While players at top courses often gripe about the “lack of consistency” in their bunkers, we just want some sand in ours.

Although we all play by the same set of rules, there are numerous rules scenarios that occur far more often on low-budget courses than on those with far greater resources. Just a few examples include rocks in bunkers, hazards that are not defined, and old irrigation ditches.

These situations and many more will be addressed in a series of brief articles. The goal is to help the golfer and the staff at low-budget courses enjoy the game while still within the Rules of Golf.

Scenario #1 – Lateral water hazard not defined

We have all seen the perfectly marked lateral water hazards on television - bright red lines that intersect perfectly straight red stakes that define the exact margin of the hazard. Players can easily select any one of the five options as outlined in Rule 26 – Water Hazards (Including Lateral Water Hazards). <http://www.usga.org/Rules-Books/Rules-of-Golf/Rule-26/>

Every course should strive to keep its boundaries and hazards marked at all times, but marking paint and stakes are expensive, and it is a labor-intensive and time-consuming task to mark a course. With a limited staff, the mowing personnel cannot be expected to stop at every stake to remove it and then replace it after mowing. In fact, Rule 33-2 (The Course) specifically states that it is the responsibility of the Committee to define water hazards and lateral water hazards (33-2a). Unfortunately, few low-budget courses have such a committee. As a result, many low-budget courses can mark only once or twice per year for a special event. Otherwise, the players are on their own when it comes to determining whether or not the ball is in the hazard.

So, how does the player handle the situation depicted in Figure 1?

Answer:

Unlike other sports where the playing fields are very uniform, golf courses offer an infinite variety of situations. It is impossible for the rules to address every situation. But like other sports, it is imperative the “field of play” be defined. Imagine a football field with no sidelines or a baseball field with no foul lines. Defining hazards and course boundaries is so important to playing the game by the rules that every course needs to figure out a way to get this done regardless of their budget. But, should a player find her ball in an unmarked hazard, there are two decisions that address the problem – 26/2 (Ball Within Natural Margin of Water Hazard but Outside Stakes Defining Margin) and 26/3 (Unmarked Water Hazard). Both stress the importance of defining the margins. Decision 26/2 refers to “the natural boundaries of the water hazard” and is most relevant in this case. Thus, the player should determine the

natural boundary of the hazard as best as possible. Figure 2 shows one interpretation of the natural boundary of this hazard. Of course a player in the next group might have a different interpretation of where the line should be, thus illustrating the necessity of a fixed delineation of the hazard.

Inexpensive grade stakes can be purchased from the local hardware store and tipped with the appropriate color paint. The low-budget course might also consider soliciting the help of volunteers to keep the stakes upright and visible. The bottom line? Properly marking the course should be viewed as a necessity, not a luxury.



Figure 1 – This lateral water hazard is unmarked. Is the ball in the hazard or not?



Figure 2 – Red line superimposed on the picture depicting the “natural boundaries of the water hazard”.