

Rules Of Golf Can Be Weird And Wild

BY WILL COCKRELL
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Last month at the Doral Open in Florida some of us saw a television replay of a marvelous shot out of a water hazard by Paul Azinger, PGA touring professional, which was also the source of the most definitive penalty in golf: disqualification.

Azinger's ball was completely submerged in a greenside hazard. As he addressed the ball Paul had one foot in the water and the other perched on small rocks which bordered the hazard, but were still clearly inside the painted line marking the boundary of the hazard. In his attempt to settle into his stance his spikes were slipping on the rocks and Azinger made a flicking motion with his foot which tossed several small pebbles aside.

Officiating By Fans Watching TV

That movement looked perfectly natural for a person trying to get the best balance possible for a very difficult shot. However, some "legal eagle" watching TV knew that the rocks were "Loose Impediments" as defined in Rule 23 and as such, they could not be moved when both the ball and the loose impediments were within the boundaries of the hazard. The rest of us watching were fascinated by the unique difficulties of the shot and, like Paul, never gave the loose pebbles a thought.

Azinger pulled off the miraculous shot, digging the ball out of its watery perch and deposited it on the green. He finished his round and went on the following day to shoot a good score which kept him in contention. The Rules Committee of the tournament was alerted by that "legal eagle" in the meantime and they reviewed the TV tape of the incident causing Azinger to be disqualified for submitting an incorrect score lower than that which he should have had if he had penalized himself for moving a loose impediment in a hazard.

Rules Not Fair, But Equitable

The ruling was correct under The Rules of Golf, but many golfers would scream that it was unfair to penalize the player so long after the fact. It brought to mind a similar incident involving Craig Stadler who used a towel to keep his trousers clean while kneeling to hit a ball tucked under some low branches of

a tree. Stadler was not aware that he would later be found in violation of Rule 13-3, in that he was deemed to have been "building a stance" when he used the towel.

That ruling resulted in a penalty which altered Stadler's score and caused such an uproar that the incident became the basis for an addition to "The Decisions on the Rules of Golf." The "Decisions" is an annual publication of the United States Golf Association which interprets the rules when clarification is necessary or when two or more rules appear to be in conflict in a given situation.

Decisions On The Rules Of Golf

Most golfers have seen or read a rule book on occasion and many carry a copy in their golf bag. Few golfer have seen or care to see the thick little book on "Decisions on the Rules of Golf." All professional golfers have a copy and one is generally available around the Pro Shop to settle the occasional dispute regarding the rules. Referees and other rules officials at tournaments always have a copy nearby a few "Rules Freaks" like myself order one every year.

"Decisions" is not recommended for light weekend reading. It is a reasonably organized book with good cross referencing, but reads more like a set of court decisions than anything else. It is not a book one would read from cover to cover. Rather, one weird decision leads to another as you skip around in the book from one rule to another. The most striking reaction I get is the underlying humor of many situations which are addressed in the "Decisions."

It is frequently hard to imagine how a golfer can find himself in some of the circumstances found in these pages. What if a dog, squirrel,

or some other animal picks up your ball and runs off with it? Well, if you know that such an animal is defined as an "Outside Agency" under the rules, you will know that you may substitute another ball for the one lost.

It is lost in fact, but not "lost" under the rules.

From The Weird To The Ridiculous

The circumstances found in "Decisions" range from the weird to the ridiculous. Until you forage through some of the decisions you cannot imagine how many wild situations can actually be encountered in a round of golf. For an example: your ball and that of a competitor are lying close to each other in a bunker. If the competitor feels that your ball may interfere with his stroke, he may require you to lift your ball under Rule 22. After he plays you replace your ball and play your shot. If his shot or his sand divot has altered your lie, you may reconstruct your lie before replacing your ball. So far everything is pretty straight forward under regular rules.

But what if he is satisfied that your ball does not interfere with his shot, and then makes an unexpectedly poor swing which dislodges and moves your ball? Is he penalized for hitting a "wrong ball?" Do you play the ball as it lies or must you replace it? Can you reconstruct your lie? Does it make any difference if you were competing in match play instead of stroke play? What if in playing his shot he uncovers and strikes a ball that was out of sight in the sand? And what if that ball struck and moved your ball? Worse yet, what if the uncovered ball was the same brand and number of your ball? How do you proceed? Weird, yes. Wild, yes. And all these circumstances are covered in the "Decisions."

Having perused this publication for several years it would seem that, as Ed McMahon says, "All the weird circumstance you could ever imagine are contained in these decisions. Wrong again Camel Breath." Each year new and even more weird decisions are added to the list. It is also interesting that when the rules

moguls start splitting smaller and smaller hairs, they often reverse or rewrite previous decisions.

Are You A Trivia Buff?

If you are one of those people who like to play trivia games, here's an idea for you to consider. After a round with your friends or on a rainy day at the course when everyone is sitting around and you don't have the ACC Tournament or anything else to argue about, try this. Borrow the "Decisions on the Rules of Golf" from the Pro Shop, open it to any page and read one of the questions on the rules. Let everyone else make a bet on what the decision should be.

Soon someone will remember a similar occasion when they got a bad ruling that cost them a few bucks. You will be laughing and jousting with one another in a matter of minutes. Here is a clue for finding some of the wildest decisions: check out the decisions for hazards and loose impediments. You will find that Paul Azinger was not alone in his confusion over the rules.



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