

Main Amendments to the Rules of Golf 2012-2015

R&A Rules and USGA have announced their four-yearly revisions to the Rules of Golf, which became effective worldwide from 1st January 2012. The good news is that there are very few changes that will cause us any difficulty in understanding or remembering. The majority of the changes are amendments aimed at improving the clarity of the Rules. I am pleased to present my summary of those changes that are most likely to affect golfers, whatever their handicaps or playing status.

- **Definition of Addressing the Ball:**

At present, a player has addressed their ball when they have taken their stance and have also grounded their club. Under the revised Definition a player will have addressed their ball as soon as they ground their club, whether in front of the ball, or behind it. There is no requirement to take a stance. Consequently, a player will no longer address their ball in a bunker or a water hazard, as the Rules do not permit the grounding of a club in a hazard.

- **Rule 6-3a. Time of Starting:**

Previously, a player arriving on the 1st teeing ground even 15 seconds later than their official starting time incurred the penalty of disqualification from the competition, unless the Committee had introduced a condition of competition reducing the penalty. Now, the penalty for players arriving within five minutes of their official starting time is two strokes in stroke play, or loss of the first hole in match play. Anyone who arrives more than five minutes late still incurs the penalty of disqualification.

Rule 12-1 (Seeing Ball; Searching for Ball)

Until 1st January 2012, there was no penalty for moving a ball while searching for it in loose impediments (e.g. leaves) in a hazard, whilst there was a penalty for the same act through the green (e.g. in the rough). Many golfers considered this differentiation curious as the player whose ball was in a hazard was treated more favourably than the player whose ball was not in a hazard. With the change, a ball covered by loose impediments moved during search will be treated the same both in hazards and through the green - with a penalty stroke under Rule 18-2a and the ball must be replaced. Changes such as this one are steps towards the goal of simplifying the Rules.

- **Rule 13-4. Ball in Hazard; Prohibited Actions:**

This will be a welcome change for golfers and course maintenance staff alike. Players will be permitted to smooth sand or soil in a hazard at any time, including before playing from that hazard, providing it is done for the sole purpose of caring for the course and nothing is done to improve the position or lie of their ball, the area of their intended stance or swing, or their line of play. How often have we wanted to smooth irregularities made by previous groups at the back of a bunker when our ball lies waiting to be played at the front? Well, now we can.

- **Rule 18-2b. Ball Moving After Address:**

Most of us will have been sympathetic when Pdraig Harrington penalised himself one stroke during The Masters in Augusta, in 2008, because his ball had moved after he had addressed it, even though the movement was obviously caused by the gusty wind blowing around the course. There have been several other similar, high-profile incidents since then. An Exception to Rule 18-2b now exonerates the player from any penalty if their ball moves after it has been addressed (remember the new definition of address) when it is known or virtually certain that they did not cause the ball to move.

Please note that the above are my interpretations of only the most important revisions to the Rules of Golf effective from 1st January 2012. For the detail of all the amendments please refer to the 32nd edition of Rules of Golf, as published by R&A Rules and USGA.

Good Golfing,
Barry Rhodes