



## **RULES MODERNISATION: DISCUSSIONS RELATING TO STROKE AND DISTANCE RELIEF**

### **1. Purpose of this Paper**

The proposed new Rules retain the stroke-and-distance procedure as the only relief option for a ball that is lost outside a penalty area (formerly known as a water hazard) and a ball that is out of bounds.

It is recognised that the need for players to use the stroke-and-distance procedure creates issues for pace of play. For that reason we have looked hard at possible alternatives that would not require players to go back to play from the previous spot. We have not yet found any solution that we think is effective and consistent with the principles of the game, but we are continuing to pursue this. We would very much like to hear your creative thoughts on this matter.

To stimulate thinking, this paper:

- Explains the reasons for our current position, and
- Provides details of the various alternatives that have been considered to date.

### **2. Issues with the Stroke-and-Distance Procedure**

From the outset of the Rules Modernisation process in 2012, the stroke-and-distance procedure for a ball that is lost outside a penalty area or out of bounds has been under discussion. This procedure requires a player to return to where the previous stroke was made to play a ball under penalty of one stroke.

The following concerns have been identified:

- Slows Down Pace of Play: When a player has not played a provisional ball, the requirement to “go back” to where the previous stroke was made contributes to problems with pace of play at all levels of the game. At some golf courses, players are actively discouraged from proceeding under stroke-and-distance.
- Prevents Completion of the Hole: Players “going back” to play another ball are well aware of the adverse impact it will have on the players in their own group and following groups and, as a result, are often reluctant to do so, which means they cannot record a score for the hole.
- Non-Compliance with the Rules: In view of concerns with pace of play and the reluctance of players to impact their fellow-players adversely, it is not uncommon for groups of golfers playing among themselves to agree their own “made up” alternative option to the correct stroke-and-distance procedure. This creates the undesirable situation where golfers are choosing not to comply with the Rules.



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### **3. Alternatives to Stroke-and-Distance**

We recognise the natural hope that our modernisation initiative would deliver one or more alternatives to stroke and distance; given the concerns noted above, over the last five years we have given detailed consideration to the following alternative relief procedures for a ball that is lost or out of bounds:

#### **a. Stroke and Distance in Principle**

The stroke-and-distance relief procedure was established long ago in recognition of the fundamental principle that, when a ball is lost or out of bounds, the player cannot play the ball as it lies, which breaks the progression of playing from the teeing area until the ball is holed.

There are specific situations where the Rules allow the ball to be played from a different spot (with or without penalty) if the player knows where the ball ended up on the course and thus has a reference point. When the ball is lost, however, there is no reference point for taking relief. When a ball has been hit out of bounds, the player has failed to keep the ball on the course. The logical outcome in both cases, consistent with the nature of the game, is to count the stroke, give a penalty for losing the ball or hitting it off the course, and have the player try the stroke again.

Although there have been many attempts over time to find alternatives to the current stroke-and-distance procedure, the inability to resolve several concerns has led to no such changes being made. The basic concern in allowing the player to avoid proceeding under stroke and distance is that this would conflict with the fundamental challenge of the game: the player must play the ball so that it comes to rest on the course and can be found, or face having to play the stroke again.

#### **b. Retain Stroke and Distance as Only Relief Option for Lost Ball But Provide Alternative Option for Ball Out of Bounds**

A significant difficulty with finding an alternative to stroke and distance relates to the lack of an obvious reference point for a ball that is lost. With this in mind, one idea considered was to retain the stroke-and-distance procedure as the only option for a lost ball, but to give the player whose ball has come to rest out of bounds an alternative relief option where it is not necessary to return to where the previous stroke was made.

To date, our conclusion has been that it is inappropriate to allow a fundamentally different relief procedure for a ball that is out of bounds for the following reasons:

- Out of bounds is a strategic part of the challenge of playing some holes and this would be undermined if players could hit towards out of bounds with less concern for the consequences;
- There are sometimes safety reasons to avoid having players play towards out of bounds (such as balls possibly ending up on roads or adjacent properties), such that out of bounds should not be treated as just another obstacle from which relief is allowed; and



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- It is fundamentally a different thing to hit a ball outside the boundaries of the course than to hit it on the course and need relief.

### **c. Appropriate Penalty Under Any Alternative Procedure**

It was recognised that, when groups of golfers agree among themselves to use an alternative to stroke and distance, the player usually drops a ball somewhere around where the player or the group thinks the ball was lost or went out of bounds and takes a penalty of one stroke.

In reviewing the various alternatives to stroke and distance, we discussed whether there should be a penalty of one stroke or two strokes (noting that, at one point in history, the Rules applied a three-stroke penalty in stroke play, and at other times the penalty was distance-only with no added penalty stroke). While no definitive conclusions were reached, it was generally felt that any option that removed the need to return to where the previous stroke was made should carry a penalty of two strokes. This was based on the view that any alternative should seek to replicate the likely outcome of the stroke-and-distance procedure; in effect, the second penalty stroke would substitute for not requiring the player to return to make another stroke from where the previous stroke was made.

By way of example, a player who loses his or her tee shot and plays another ball from the tee into the fairway will be playing the 4<sup>th</sup> stroke from the fairway. In view of this, any alternative relief option that allows the player to proceed without returning to the tee should have the player playing the 4<sup>th</sup> stroke, which means a two-stroke penalty needs to be imposed.

### **d. Lost Ball**

Given the different nature of a lost ball versus a ball that is out of bounds, we reviewed independent alternatives for each situation.

The options considered for a lost ball, and the conclusions reached, are summarised as follows:

- (1) Estimate the spot where the ball was lost and drop at (or within some small distance from) that spot under penalty
  - Any option that requires an estimation of the spot where the ball was lost causes concern due to the inherent imprecision of the judgment and the likelihood of significant debate (and potential for disagreement) among players.
  - While estimating where a ball last crossed the margin of a penalty area has an element of judgment, that estimation is being done in relation to a defined edge – no such edge exists for a ball that is lost “somewhere” on the course (and judgment may be particularly difficult in cases where the ball in motion was deflected in an unknown direction and distance rather than going directly into a narrow area where it is lost).
  - The concerns about estimating where the ball is lost apply to all options that require such an estimation, but it is particularly acute when the relief



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procedure requires the player to drop at (or within some small distance from) that estimated spot.

- By its nature the estimated spot may well be in an unplayable area (for example bushes, trees or the like), and therefore taking relief at or near the spot would not be workable or attractive in many cases.

(2) Estimate the spot where the ball was lost and allow relief anywhere not nearer to the hole than that spot

- Concerns with the estimation of the spot, as outlined above, apply.
- This relief procedure gives huge scope for movement away from the estimated spot (for example, the player whose ball is lost in bushes behind the green approximately 20 yards beyond the hole could place the ball on or very near the green 21 yards from the hole), which would be a significant departure from other relief situations involving a penalty (i.e. from a penalty area or for an unplayable ball).

(3) Estimate the spot where the ball was lost and allow relief (not nearer to the hole) on the fairway of the hole being played

- Concerns with the estimation of the spot, as outlined above, apply.
- The nature of many holes (for example, par 3s) and the nature of many strokes resulting in lost balls (for example, those that don't go far or go considerably off line) mean that it will often not be possible to find a spot on the fairway of the hole being played or a spot on the fairway that is not nearer to the hole.

(4) Estimate the spot where the ball was lost and allow relief (not nearer to the hole) at a defined type of reasonably playable situation (such as the rough off the fairway or the like)

- Concerns with the estimation of the spot, as outlined above, apply.
- While it may be possible to define a reasonably playable situation on every hole on some courses (for example, those that have rough down both sides of the hole), it is not realistic to define a uniform procedure that would work for all courses.

(5) Allow relief anywhere on the line of flight of the ball

- This has the benefit of not requiring the estimation of the spot where the ball is lost, although it does require a judgment to be made.
- While this option could work well for many lost ball situations, it does not work well for all such situations (for example, if the line of flight of the lost ball is over the green, the player could take relief anywhere on that line on the green and, if relief on the green is not permitted, where should relief be taken and how will this be specified in a practical and workable manner for all holes?)

(6) Estimate the spot where the ball was lost and allow relief using the back-on-a-line or lateral relief options already available for penalty area and unplayable relief, but with an additional penalty stroke (total of two penalty strokes)



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- Concerns with estimation of the spot, as outlined above, apply.
  - This option would not work for all situations, such as when the estimated spot is in an area where the alternative options available to the player are not viable, meaning the player would still have to go back to play again under stroke and distance.
- (7) Estimate the spot where the ball was lost and allow relief on or behind the line taken at right angles from the hole and the estimated spot (that is, using a 90 degree relief option)
- Concerns with the estimation of the spot, as outlined above, apply
  - This option has the benefit of restricting the relief area (i.e. the player cannot move to the other side of the hole), but it is more complex than the other options and in some instances may not offer much of a relief option.
- (8) Provide dropping zones on each hole for a lost ball and allow relief in the dropping zone nearest to where the ball was lost but not nearer to the hole than that estimated spot
- Concerns with the estimation of the spot, as outlined above, apply, although the use of dropping zones for relief may reduce that concern
  - It would be impractical for the Committee to establish and maintain appropriate dropping zones on every hole for all situations where a ball could be lost on that hole.

### **e. Ball out of bounds**

The options considered for a ball that is out of bounds, and the conclusions reached, are summarised as follows:

- (1) Lateral relief within some distance (such as 80 inches, the proposed new equivalent of two club lengths) of, and not nearer to the hole than, where the ball last crossed the boundary
- There is a general concern that any reduction in the severity of the penalty for hitting a ball out of bounds could sometimes result in players more often risking a shot near the course boundaries and possibly result in more balls ending up on other property where damage could result.
  - This involves estimation of the spot where the ball last crossed the boundary line, but it can be argued that this is no different to estimating the spot where the ball last crossed the margin of a penalty area.
  - In many instances, relief within 80 inches (currently, two club lengths) from a boundary would not offer a very appealing relief option.
- (2) Estimate the spot where the ball last crossed the boundary edge and allow relief on or behind the line taken at right angles from the hole and the estimated spot (which would be combined with option (7) above for a lost ball)
- This would be subject to the concerns referenced above about diminishing the fundamental strategic challenge of many holes and about possibly increasing the number of balls played toward neighbouring properties.



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- This option has the benefit of restricting the relief area (that is, the player cannot move to the other side of the hole), but it is more complex than the other options and in some instances may not offer much of a relief option.
- (3) Provide dropping zones on any hole where there is a boundary, with relief being taken in the dropping zone nearest to the estimated spot where the ball crossed the boundary, but not nearer to the hole than that estimated spot (which would combine with option (8) above)
- The conflict with the fundamental challenge and the concern relating to neighbouring properties, as referenced above, apply.
  - It is likely to be impractical for the Committee to establish and maintain appropriate dropping zones on each hole for all situations where a ball could be hit out of bounds while playing that hole.

### **4. Conclusions on Alternatives to Stroke-and-Distance**

Having reviewed the various options provided in 3. above, our conclusion to date is that the identified possible alternatives to stroke and distance relief are not workable and/or not consistent with the principles of the game. Our reasoning can be summarised as follows:

1. There remains a significant concern that removing the requirement for the stroke to be replayed when a ball is lost or out of bounds conflicts with the fundamental challenge of playing the ball in a progression from the tee to the green.
2. There are significant concerns with any option that needs the player to estimate the location of a ball that is lost, as such estimates have the potential to be hugely inaccurate.
3. Even if an honest and reasonable estimation of the location of a lost ball is accepted, we have been unable to reach a conclusion that any of the relief options for a lost ball that have been identified to date provide a proper and uniformly appropriate alternative to the current position.
4. The current stroke and distance procedure is well understood and has been used for many years.
5. The introduction of several new Rules proposals (see 6. below) should reduce the number of occasions in the future where there is no alternative but to apply the stroke-and-distance procedure.

### **5. Providing an Alternative to Stroke and Distance by Local Rule Only**

Recognising the concerns with a Rule that involves estimating the location of a lost ball and the crossing point of a boundary and the related relief options, consideration was given to whether an alternative to stroke and distance could be offered by way of a Local Rule only. Standard wording for the Local Rule would be provided and Committees could adopt it as they see fit.



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An idea we explored was that estimating the spot where the ball was lost or crossed the boundary may be more acceptable under a Local Rule, with Committees being guided to introduce the Local Rule only for certain holes where they know that lost balls or balls hit out of bounds are common or for non-elite competitions where handicaps are applied and there are pressing reasons for speeding up play.

It would be the opposite of Local Rules such as the one-ball condition and the list of conforming driver heads, which are recommended for highly skilled golfers only.

In beginning to explore this idea, we identified a number of potential problems and were unable to conclude that it should be adopted. We are still considering this and similar options, and we invite thoughts from the public about other possible solutions.

### **6. Proposed Changes in the New Rules**

Despite not having found a viable and uniform alternative to stroke and distance, we are proposing several other Rule changes that should benefit pace of play and may reduce the number of times a player needs to return to the spot of the previous stroke to play under penalty, as follows:

- Penalty areas expanded beyond water hazards: Red - and yellow - marked “penalty areas” may now cover areas other than water. This means that, if there is an area on the course where balls are frequently lost, resulting in delays, the Committee can choose to mark this as a penalty area so that the player has options for relief that do not require going back to play under penalty of stroke and distance.
- Reduced time for ball search: A ball is lost if not found in three minutes (rather than the current five minutes) after you begin searching for it. This means that, even if the player has to return to play another ball having lost the original ball, there will have been less of a delay in play; and the shorter search time may also encourage more players to play a provisional ball when there is a possibility the ball will not be found.
- New “Maximum Score” form of stroke play: The Rules recognise a new “Maximum Score” form of stroke play, where your score for a hole is capped at a maximum (such as double par or triple bogey) set by the Committee, so that you can pick up and move to the next hole when your score will be at or above the maximum. Much like when playing match play or Stableford, when using this new form of play, players may be less inclined to return to play a ball under the stroke-and-distance procedure.



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### **7. Further Discussion and Feedback**

As stated above, over the last five years we have discussed the stroke-and-distance procedure and possible alternatives in depth, and discussions on these matters will continue until the new Code is finalised.

As part of the feedback and evaluation process, which is now underway, we would very much like to hear any creative thoughts on this matter.