



Max Doctoroff, PGA
NEPGA Director of Rules & Competitions

RULES *to* THE MAX

Beyond A Reasonable Doubt

Clint Eastwood famously said, “I tried being reasonable. I didn’t like it.” Unfortunately for Clint, the Rules of Golf call on all players to act in a reasonable manner to avoid penalties and to take maximum advantage of our rights and privileges under the Rules. Sitting at my desk these last few minutes, I was able to brainstorm a handful of instances where the Rules use the word “reasonable” to guide players – can you think of any others? (I intentionally left at least one off this list, just to make sure it’s not an unfair exercise!)

The first 3 people to respond with a correct answer that I didn't mention gets a beer on me at their next tournament

The first, and likely most common Rule that depends on the reasonableness of players is the concept of “reasonable judgement” in Rule 1.3b(2). It’s important to remember that this idea only applies to questions of location: there are times when players are required to identify a location on the golf course, such as the point where their ball last crossed into a penalty area, the spot where they can place or drop a ball, the area of the course in which the ball lies (including whether the ball lies on the course), or whether the ball touches or is in an abnormal course condition. These questions arise in almost every round of golf you play, so the Rules want you to be able to identify the correct location promptly, and without fear of penalties for making mistakes. That’s where reasonable judgement comes in: “so long as the player does what can be reasonably expected to

make an accurate determination, the player’s reasonable judgement will be accepted even if, after the stroke is made, the determination is shown to be wrong.”

You’ll notice before too long that most of these Rules that lean on the reasonableness of players are intended to offer leniency to the players, so they can perform the functions of the Rules without worrying too much about unintended consequences. Another example of this is in Rule 9.4, which deals with causing your own ball at rest to move. Generally, if you move your ball at rest you’ll get a one stroke penalty, but there are some exceptions. One of the exceptions gives you a free pass on the penalty if you cause your ball to move while taking “reasonable actions” while applying a rule. This means that if you accidentally move your ball while marking, lifting or replacing your ball when allowed, while removing a movable obstruction, while restoring worsened conditions when allowed, while taking relief under a Rule, or while measuring under a Rule, there’s no penalty and you just need to replace the ball!

A third example where being reasonable can save you from a penalty lies in Rule 8.1b, which deals with the Conditions Affecting the Stroke (CATS). These conditions are your lie, area of intended stance and swing, line of play, and the relief area where you will drop or place a ball. In most cases, improving any of these CATS will cost you the general penalty, but again there are exceptions. One of these exceptions can save you from penalty if you

improve your CATS by taking “reasonable actions” to remove loose impediments and moveable obstructions. But where is the line between “reasonable” and “unreasonable?” Usually you’ll know it when you see it. Check out the video linked below for an example of that line was crossed at this year’s Hong Kong Open. While this player was allowed to remove the large dead branch (loose impediment) via reasonable actions, in this case there were vines growing around the branch, so it couldn’t be removed without tearing the vines out of the ground in the process. Tearing growing vegetation out of the ground is surely beyond what can be considered a reasonable action, so this player was assessed a two stroke penalty. [Click here for the video.](#)

Another Rule that depends on reasonableness of players is 5.6a, which outlines the penalties for unreasonable delay of play. It’s worth noting that this Rule addresses individual, isolated incidents that delay play (consistent, cumulative slow play is covered by another Rule). Since the penalty only applies for “unreasonable” delay, the rule book details what is considered reasonable and what is not. Reasonable: briefly stopping at the clubhouse for food or drink, or taking the time to consult with others in the group to decide whether to play out the hole when there is a normal (non-immediate) suspension by the Committee. Unreasonable: returning to the teeing area from the putting green to retrieve a lost club, continuing to search for a lost ball for several minutes

after the three-minute search time has expired, or stopping by the clubhouse for food or drink for more than a few minutes if the Committee has not allowed for it. If a delay is determined to be unreasonable, the penalty structure is incremental: one stroke for the first breach, general penalty for the second, and disqualification for the third.

The last instance I’ll cover where the Rules expect us to be reasonable has to do with taking free relief under Rule 16. As most golfers know, we get free relief from things like ground under repair, temporary water, immovable obstructions, and the like. An exception to this Rule, though, is that free relief is not allowed when playing the ball as it lies is “clearly unreasonable,” or if the player chooses a stance, swing, or direction of play that is “clearly unreasonable.” A common example is that it may not be reasonable to play a ball because of where it lies in a bush. One useful thing to remember as a referee, though, is that determining what is “reasonable” can depend on the skill level (or even just the ingenuity) of the player. Take a look at the video linked below, which features Bill Haas’ ball stuck in the middle of a bush. While our first instinct might be that it’s unreasonable to play the ball as it lies, Haas demonstrates that it was perfectly reasonable to do so. Haas shows us that it’s important to keep an open mind as we give rulings, since players can often surprise us with what they’re capable of doing. Unlike Clint Eastwood, Bill Haas tried being reasonable, and he liked it. [Click here for the video.](#)

*The Rules of Golf call
on all players to act in a
reasonable manner.*