

Can't Touch This

What you need to know as Handicap-Posting season begins in New England



#RulesToTheMax

*Max Doctoroff, PGA
New England PGA Tournament Director*

Dear Fellow NEPGA Professionals,

I hope you are all staying safe and healthy during this extremely strange and troubling time, and that your and your families' health is unaffected as we all wait out the Coronavirus together. Surely we are anxiously awaiting the day that we can all get back outside and back to our usual routines, but all we can do for now is make the best of this unexpected quality time with our families and pets at home. While golf is temporarily banned in my home state of Massachusetts, I for one have dug up my old copy of the Tiger Woods Golf video game from 2012 – desperate times call for desperate measures, when you're facing the familiar springtime itch to play some golf!

As of the time I'm writing this, not everyone in the Section is in the same boat as me—several states in New England are still allowing golf to be played, albeit with certain social distancing measures in place. We can expect those social distancing considerations to still be the norm, at least for a short while, once courses start opening again when the epidemic has mostly run its course. As such, the USGA has loosened up a bit on their Rules of Golf and Rules of Handicapping, to allow golfers to play the game they love, without unduly compromising their health or the integrity of the game.

Perhaps the most common points of contact on the golf course are the

flagsticks, as it's common for at least one player in every group to touch a flagstick 18 times per round. In order to keep the risk of virus transmission to a minimum, the USGA has authorized the Committee to prohibit players from touching the flagstick in their Code of Conduct. While the Committee has the right to assign blanket penalties for breach of this Code, it is not recommended, since many players will pull the flagstick out of years of habit (and not an intentional breach of the Code. It would be more appropriate to assign penalties only for intentional acts, not instinctual ones).

In a similar vein, cup liners are another common touch-point that could transmit the virus from person to person. In order to mitigate this, many clubs have found solutions such as raising cup liners above the surface of the green, or putting inserts in the cup that prevent a ball from falling into the hole (and therefore eliminating the need to touch the cup liner when removing a ball). While the Rules of Golf regarding this have not changed (i.e. a ball still needs to be holed in the traditional way if one is to play strictly by the Rules), the USGA is temporarily allowing scores under such conditions to be acceptable for handicaps. When applying this allowance for handicaps, players must use the most likely score guidelines described in Rule 3.3 of the Rules of Handi-



capping. Again, this is a temporary revision to the Rules of Handicapping, and is only in effect until the USGA retracts it.

The last major Rules clarification related to illness prevention has to do with bunkers, since bunker rakes are another common touch-point that could transmit a virus from golfer to golfer. Many clubs have removed all the rakes from the golf course, resulting in un-raked bunkers in many cases. In order to deal with this, the USGA has specified that Committees may institute a Local Rule that deems all disturbed areas in a bunker as ground under repair, allowing players to drop a ball elsewhere in the bunker, within one club length of the disturbed area. Please note that under ordinary circumstances, this type of relief is not appropriate, as occasionally finding your ball in a footprint is part of the game, but these are not ordinary circumstances. The USGA offers several other suggestions, of more and less severity, for how to deal with the absence of bunker rakes, and you can find those in their FAQ.

Remember that if you should choose to institute any of the measures described above, it is up to the Committee whether or not the scores are allowable for handicapping purposes (i.e. even though the USGA will accept the scores, the Committee can decide that they are not acceptable for their club). Please see the USGA's FAQ at the link on this page for more details on the topics above, as well as some solutions for certifying scorecards while social distancing, or reach out to me directly for more info. Stay safe, and I hope to see you all as soon as possible.



COVID-19 RULES AND HANDICAPPING FAQs

The guidance below supplements a memo released by the USGA as to how the Rules of Golf and Rules of Handicapping apply in response to questions received from golf course owners, administrators, tournament organizers and golfers. You can view that memo [here](#).

As was noted in that memo, it is not the intended purpose of the below guidance to either encourage or discourage anyone from playing the game, but rather, in our governance role, to help golf course operators, committees and golfers better understand how the Rules of Golf and Rules of Handicapping apply to the various questions we have received.

The questions received fit into four main topics. In each of the four topics below, the guidance provided serves both to directly answer the questions asked as well as cover additional considerations that might also serve useful.

FLAGSTICK

May a course remove all flagsticks to minimize the possibility of exposing players to coronavirus?

May a committee introduce a code of conduct that does not allow players to remove (or even touch) the flagstick?

The flagstick serves an important purpose in the game of golf – that is as an indicator to a player as to where the hole is located on the putting green or a target for shots.

If a Committee decides to set-up a golf course without flagsticks, consideration should be given as to how best to support such a decision by providing players the location of each hole on the green. Whether this is general guidance (such as in the right front portion) or through a detailed hole-location sheet.

As another means of minimizing exposure to players, a Committee might decide to introduce a code of conduct that prohibits players from touching or removing the flagstick. As is authorized under Rule 1.2b, such a code could also include penalties (such as one penalty stroke or the general penalty) if a player is in breach of its standards.

Before a Committee decides to introduce such a restriction, it is recommended that consideration be given to the fact that removing the flagstick is an instinctual, even automated, act for many players. Drafting such a code of conduct to restrict only deliberate acts to affect the outcome of the hole would be reflective of that reality and would mean that a player who instinctually removes the flagstick would not get a penalty in doing so.

If a Committee takes any of the above actions, it is at the discretion of the Committee whether scores would be acceptable for handicap purposes.

BUNKERS AND BUNKER RAKES

We have removed all bunker rakes from our course to help stop the spread of coronavirus. What options do we have for players who end up in unraked areas?

By removing rakes from the course, the Committee has various options as to how best to address the likely possibility of a player's ball coming to rest in an unmaintained area of sand and should consider which is the best approach under your unique circumstances.

If you have limited play and most players at your course use a golf cart, the best approach might be to ask that each player takes a rake with them.

If it is decided that no additional Rules will be put into effect to deal with these areas, it would be



advisable to strongly encourage that players try their best to smooth the disturbed area with a foot or a club.

Additional options could include changing the status of bunkers to be part of the general area. This would give players additional options under multiple relief rules (Rules 16 and 19) and would remove the restrictions normally in effect under Rule 12.

Ground under repair could be used in two different manners. The first being to declare all bunkers to be ground under repair and treat them as part of the general area. This would allow players the option to take free relief outside the bunker under Rule 16.1. The second is to treat disturbed areas only as ground under repair. This would still allow a player free relief from such areas, but would require such relief to be taken elsewhere within the bunker.

As a last resort, we have fielded questions as to whether a Committee may add a preferred lies local rule that would allow a player to place the ball elsewhere in a bunker without penalty (such as within one club length of where the ball came to rest). While that may seem like a good option in that it requires players to play from the bunker, there will be times when no effective relief would be available to a player, such as when a bunker is frequently played from and large areas are unraked. It would be recommended that the other options, such as those listed above are considered first, noting that using the ground under repair options above ensure a player will get full relief and when dropping from knee height, balls very rarely plug.

If a Committee takes any of the above actions, it is at the discretion of the Committee whether scores would be acceptable for handicap purposes.

SCORECARDS AND SCORING

We are holding a competition, but want to limit how scorecards are exchanged both between players and after the round to the Committee. Do you have any recommendations?

The Rules already allow numerous options to address these concerns noting that certifying a score does not require a physical signature, nor does it require a physical scorecard.

If a Committee wishes to run a competition using a form of electronic scoring, this could come in many forms, such as asking that each marker send an email to the Committee and the player he or she is marking for, including the player's hole-by-hole scores. The player can then reply to verify the accuracy of the card.

When electronic methods are used, such as the email example above or similar methods that involve text messaging, the Committee should decide when a scorecard would be considered to have been returned. For example, this could be when the player responds certifying that the scores are correct or some other action that the Committee might consider more appropriate.

A Committee might also wish to employ the above method but also combine these with a physical scorecard by having the marker take a picture of the completed scorecard and either email or text it to the Committee using the same process described above.

If physical scorecards are the preferred method, a Committee may wish to have the player and marker not exchange cards but rather verbally communicate the hole-by-hole scores to the Committee verbally in the scoring area. Additionally, verbal confirmation could be a substitute for the physical signature. As with the electronic scoring methods described above, the Committee should be diligent to clearly define when a scorecard has been returned, such as when a player leaves the golf shop if that is where the process takes place.

If a Committee takes any of the above actions, it is at the discretion of the Committee whether scores would be acceptable for handicap purposes.

MODIFICATIONS TO THE HOLE; NOT REQUIRING THAT PLAYERS HOLE OUT

A number of questions have been received that relate to modifying the hole so that players no longer need

to reach into the hole to remove a ball to minimize the possibility of exposing golfers to coronavirus.

These have included some courses setting holes so that the hole liner remains an inch or two above the surface of the green while others have placed various objects into the hole or around the flagstick (such as foam pool noodles or plastic piping) so that a ball is unable to fall to the bottom.

While in all of these instances, the ball is not holed per the Rules of Golf (Rule 3.3c), a round played under these conditions will result in an acceptable score for handicap purposes using the most likely score guidelines (see Rule 3.3 of the Rules of Handicapping).

While the most likely score procedure is intended to support certain formats of play where the player is not required to hole out (such as in match play when the player's next stroke is conceded or in fourball stroke play when a partner picks up), it is also temporarily in effect where the above described safety measures are being used.

When using most likely score, the player should consider the number of strokes most likely required to complete the hole, and determine whether the ball would have been holed or not. Most likely score is at the player's best judgment and should not be used to gain an unfair advantage.

This measure is temporary and in effect within the United States until advised otherwise by the USGA.

The above guidance will continue to be updated. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact the Rules of Golf and Rules of Handicapping departments using the information below:

Rules of Golf Department

rules@usga.org

908-326-1850

Handicapping Department

hdcquestions@usga.org

908-234-2300 Ext. 5