

## Are There Differences in the Rules of Golf for Match Play and Stroke Play?

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The answer is – yes, there are many differences and Rule 33 cautions us: “Certain specific Rules governing stroke play are so substantially different from those governing match play that combining the two forms of play is not practicable and is not permitted.”

Most obvious of the differences are the penalty statements in the Rules where the general penalty is loss of hole in match play or two strokes in stroke play. Less obvious are the specific Rules that apply to only one form of play. These include Rule 2-4, permitting the concession of a stroke in match play (in stroke play, all putts must be holed); Rule 3-3, allowing play of a second ball in cases of doubt in stroke play (in match play, the player in doubt must proceed as he sees fit and the opponent may make a claim to the Committee); and Rule 6-6, requiring the return of a correct score card in stroke play (in match play, there is no requirement for a score card although the players may keep an informal one).

When searching through 34 separate Rules, it would take some time to uncover all the differences between the two forms of play. It wasn't always this way. For a very long time, the Rules were written solely for match play, with stroke play an afterthought addressed in a special section.

In 1947, the USGA reorganized the Rules to integrate both forms of play into a coherent single set of Rules, much in the same form that we find them today. While this format is certainly preferred, it somewhat obscures the fundamental principle of match play, that is, influencing the outcome of the match is generally restricted to those playing in it.

A corollary of this principle is that a player may disregard or overlook a breach of the Rules by his opponent, provided there is no agreement between the players – see Decision 2-5/1. Thus, we have contrasting outcomes such that, in match play, a breach of a Rule that calls for a penalty does not always result in a penalty, whereas, in stroke play, a similar violation must always result in a penalty. Additionally, in match play, the reverse may sometimes be true. The player must suffer the penalty in a situation where there is no actual violation of the Rules and where an invalid claim of an incurred penalty is not disputed – see Decision 2-5/5.

Furthermore, in the absence of a referee accompanying the match, since the players involved are present to protect their interests, there is no reason for the Committee to take any cognizance of a Rules infraction that may be observed or that is reported in the absence of a claim, unless the players are in breach of Rule 1-3 (Agreement to Waive the Rules) or Rule 6-7 (Undue Delay) – see US Decision 34-3/100. In stroke play, every competitor has a direct interest in the play of all the other competitors and the Committee represents the interests of the remainder of the field. Thus, the Committee is under an obligation to apply the Rules uniformly to all competitors and to act on any

violation that is observed or that is reported to the Committee. These principles lead to some remarkable situations.

Consider the case where a player is late to the tee without a good excuse and the Note to Rule 6-3 allowing a five minute grace period is not in effect. In match play without a referee, if the players are ignorant of the Rules, a claim is not made and the match is played to a conclusion, the result would stand even if this violation of Rule 6-3 is reported to the Committee before the close of competition. This surprising outcome is proper because, in the absence of a timely claim, the Committee would have no authority to intervene – see Rule 34-1. In a similar situation in stroke play, the player would be subject to disqualification.

There are other examples. For instance, consider a situation where a player plays a wrong ball not moving in water in a water hazard. In match play, Rule 15 tells us that the penalty is loss of hole to his opponent. However, in a match without a referee, a claim must be made by the opponent for the penalty to take effect – see Decision 2-5/2. In the absence of a proper claim, the match continues without penalty. The opponent may make a later, timely claim if the fact that the player played the wrong ball was previously unknown to him. In stroke play, Rule 15 requires that the player must incur a penalty of two strokes without exception and that the error must be corrected by playing the proper ball before he makes a stroke from the next teeing ground. If he does not correct the error, he is disqualified.

If the Committee becomes aware of the player's violation of Rule 15 after conclusion of play but before the competition is closed, the results again differ for match play and stroke play. In the match play case, if a timely claim was not made, the Committee must rule that the result of the match stands as played. This would be true either as a result of the players being ignorant of the Rules or when the opponent decided to overlook the violation of the player. However, in the stroke play case, the Committee must assess the penalty to the player, either two strokes or disqualification as appropriate.

Nevertheless, in both match play and stroke play, there must be no agreement between the players to waive any penalty incurred in violation of a Rule. In such cases, the Committee must intervene to disqualify both players under Rule 1-3 and there is no time limit on applying this penalty, even after the competition is closed.

The differences between match play and stroke play are significant and the above principles and situations should be kept in mind, whether playing the game or acting as an official.