

Sergio and the gopher

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If Ridgewood Country Club doesn't have a Carl Spackler on staff it may want to start looking for one. For those of you who don't know, Spackler is the gopher-obsessed assistant superintendent played by Bill Murray in the film *Caddyshack*. If you haven't heard about the story of Sergio Garcia and the gopher hole, you must have missed the exciting final round of The Barclays at Ridgewood CC which was the first playoff event in the PGA Tour's FedEx Cup.

At The Barclays, Garcia finished in a three way tie with Vijay Singh and Kevin Sutherland. Garcia and Singh drained 25 and 24 footers for birdies to eliminate Sutherland on the first playoff hole.

Garcia's second shot on the second playoff hole (hole 17) ended up behind a huge red oak tree. It looked as though Garcia did not have a line to go directly at the green; he would have to slice or hook a shot around one of the sides of the tree. But as Garcia looked at the terrain on which his ball lay, he noticed something out of the ordinary. Garcia's ball had ended up above or around a number of gopher or mole tunnels and holes. At this point he waived over PGA Tour Rules Official Slugger White for assistance.

Under Rule 25 (*Abnormal Ground Conditions, Embedded Ball and Wrong Putting Green*) a player is entitled to free relief when a ball lies in or touches the condition or when the condition interferes with the player's stance or the area of his intended swing. Under the Rules, an *Abnormal Ground Condition* is defined as any casual water, ground under repair or hole, cast or runway on the course made by a burrowing animal, a reptile or a bird. A *Burrowing Animal* is defined as an animal (other than a worm, insect or the like) that makes a hole for

habitation or shelter, such as a rabbit, mole, groundhog, gopher or salamander.

As White and Garcia looked closely at the terrain, they both noticed an animal popping its head out of the ground about five feet away from Garcia's ball. Garcia went over to take a closer look and even pulled apart turf to expose the obvious gopher hole. White determined that this was sufficient evidence to rule that he would grant relief to Garcia claiming there

In Garcia's case, the Exception to Rule 25 would not apply as he clearly had the opportunity to make a stroke at the ball in some direction around the tree. The exception does not apply if any reasonable stroke exists, even if it is not a stroke at the hole, and despite the fact that after relief the player does have a stroke at the hole.

were runways from the burrowing animal interfering with his stance and lie of ball. White then assisted Garcia in determining his nearest point of relief. Garcia then dropped a ball within one club length of his nearest point of relief and was able to play a hooking shot around the tree towards the green.

While many people may say this was a lenient ruling, none of us sitting on our couches at home could truly see the actual condition of the turf around Garcia's ball and whether there were actual casts or runways there. I have also heard the argument that Garcia should not have been given the drop because he had no shot at the green with the tree in his way. The exception under Rule 25 states a player may not take relief under this Rule if it is clearly unreasonable for him to make a stroke because of interference by anything other than an abnormal ground condition. In Garcia's case, this exception would not apply as he clearly had the opportunity to make a stroke at the ball in some direction around the tree. The exception does not apply if any reasonable stroke

exists, even if it is not a stroke at the hole, and despite the fact that after relief the player does have a stroke at the hole.

There are a number of Decisions on *The Rules of Golf* that deal with Rule 25 and specifically burrowing animal hole relief similar to Garcia's situation (note that Decision 25-1b/22 deals with the exact Garcia situation):

Decision 25-1b/19: *Ball Lies on Mound Made by Burrowing Animal; Unreasonable to Play Stroke Due to Bush*

Q. A player's ball lies under a bush and it is clearly unreasonable for the player to play a stroke at it. However, the ball lies on a mound made by a burrowing animal. Is the player entitled to relief without penalty under Rule 25-1b?

A. Under the Exception to Rule 25-1b a player may not obtain relief from an

abnormal ground condition if it is clearly unreasonable for him to play a stroke due to interference by something other than such a condition. Therefore, in the circumstances described, the player is not entitled to relief.

Decision 25-1b/22: *Cast of Burrowing Animal Interferes with Sideways Stroke; When Relief Granted*

Q. A ball is behind a tree so that a sideways stroke is the only reasonable stroke for the player. However, a cast made by a burrowing animal interferes with the backswing for a sideways stroke. Is the player entitled to relief under Rule 25-1b?

A. Yes, and if relief gets the player out from behind the tree, he is entitled to play towards the green.

This was a good example of a player knowing the appropriate Rule and, therefore, taking proper advantage of the Rule. That's something for all of us to ponder.

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