

A Journey through The Rules of Golf

By STEVE BIERNACKI
SCGA Assistant Director of
Rules and Competitions

Growing up, the last thing I thought I would be doing for a living is anything involved with the game of golf, much less that I would be a "Rules Guy." I was a baseball player — a catcher specifically — and wanted to play pro ball. Unfortunately, the Major Leagues require actual talent, not just desire.

The Rules of Golf, however, will allow one to become as proficient with them as one wishes. Thus, with a Rule book by my side I began to learn.

My path has led me from high school golf in Phoenix, Arizona, to the junior golf program at the Houston Golf Association, to a position as a Rules Associate with the USGA,

back to the west coast and my current position with the SCGA. Coast to coast and back again, all on account of *The Rules of Golf*.

The Rules of Golf are a funny thing: the more you know, the harder the questions become. The questions start innocently enough. "What is a water hazard," the kids would ask when I was in Houston. I would simply explain the definition of a water hazard and we would move on.

When I attended a PGA/USGA Rules of Golf Workshop, I learned that things were a bit more complicated than that. Those workshops introduced me to the *Decisions on the Rules of Golf* and why they were written. "What if I move my ball in play with a practice swing," the HGA members would ask. I would simply explain that the answer can be found in Decision 18-2a/20 and the player must replace his ball and incurs a one-stroke penalty. So far so good.

I did well on the test at that

first workshop and felt pretty good about myself. It was then that I got the call to the big leagues — the big leagues of golf that is.

The USGA allowed me to test and expand my skills in an arena that truly is one of a kind. Golf House (the USGA headquarters) is where the questions come fast and furious. A storm, eased once in awhile with moments to catch your breath . . . a trial by fire if you will. I had the opportunity to test my knowledge on a daily basis.

Sometimes more than a hundred rulings a day would pass through my cubicle via e-mail and telephone. "What is an impregnated ball," a USGA member once asked. That's right, this is not a typo, an "impregnated ball." Well, the jury is still out on that one, but the point is clear. I never knew what to expect.

Ultimately, as Rules officials, we never know what to expect on the course, either. This is why I came to the SCGA. I wanted to put my knowledge and skills to the ultimate test: becoming a living, breathing Rules Official. I want to become battle tested and earn my stripes. From a Rules standpoint, officiating an event is eight hours of boredom peppered with moments of sheer terror. The first time an official has to explain to a player exactly what their options are under the *Ball Unplayable* rule is a breathtaking experience. Honestly! A mind can go blank in a moment. Phone calls and e-mails don't have much personality. But a player? Whew, this is a different story!

And so I begin the next leg of my journey — the quest to go to battle and hopefully come out with flying colors. There are two types of officials in this world: those who have made mistakes and those who will. To quote my former manager, at the USGA, Jeff Hall, "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots."

I hope I get old.

Steve Biernacki joined the SCGA last year as one of two Assistant Directors of Rules and Competitions (Jeff Boyer is the other).

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