

A beginner's guide to tournaments

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So you're going to play in a tournament? Unless you're a tournament "veteran," the thought may be unsettling, particularly if you're playing a course with which you're not familiar.

We see lots of problems in SCGA tournaments that could be alleviated if players would take some time in advance of the tournament to prepare themselves for the experience.

Know the Conditions of Competition

What's the format? Is the "one-ball rule" in effect? What's the dress code? Are caddies allowed and, if so, what's the dress code for caddies? How many qualifiers will advance.

These are just a few items typically discussed in the *Player Information Sheet* the SCGA e-mails to players in advance of each competition. It's obvious from the questions we get on the day of the event that not everyone reads the information ahead of time. That's a recipe for disaster.

If you're playing in a club or other event where the conditions are not sent in advance, you should arrive in plenty of time to learn what these conditions are and prepare to be flexible. For example, you should bring golf slacks (not jeans) to the course just in case the club has a no-shorts rule.

Know the Local Rules

The SCGA always distributes two forms of local rules for each competition. One is the "hard card," which contains local rules always used in SCGA competitions. The other is a separate sheet with flagstick placements on one side and local rules specific to the course on the other.

These rules are critical for you to know. In the recent Pacific Coast

Amateur Championship, a player received a four-shot penalty because he hit practice putts after finishing two holes, a violation listed on the Pacific Coast Amateur "hard card" that he had failed to pick up at the first tee. Some tournaments allow practice putting but the Pacific Coast did not. That's something the player should have checked before he started the round.

Check into your first tee at least 10 minutes ahead of your starting time

Rushing to make your tee time is another way to make your tournament experience an unhappy one. Starters often have last-minute

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instructions and reminders on the first tee: count the number of your clubs, make sure you have an identifying mark on your golf ball, that you have another player's scorecard, etc. Moreover, arriving early lets you meet your fellow competitors and take a couple of deep breaths before teeing off.

Know the rules for hitting a provisional ball and a second ball, and the difference

Few things will upset a player more than having to go back to the tee because he wasn't able to find his tee shot. Rule 27-2 of *The Rules of Golf* states that "If a ball may be lost outside a water hazard or may be out of bounds, to save time the player may play another ball provisionally in accordance with Rule 27-1 . . ." Particularly on a course with which you're not familiar, if you've hit a shot (from the tee or fairway) and you didn't see it come to rest, follow the procedures to invoke Rule 27-1.

You need to do this before you move forward; you can't decide later to play a provisional. Most importantly, be sure to announce to your fellow competitors that you are playing a *provisional ball* and make sure it's marked differently than your original ball. Playing a provisional ball doesn't cost you anything (think of it as a free practice shot) and it may save you lots of time and aggravation.

A second ball (Rule 3-3), on the other hand, is played when a golfer in a stroke play competition is in doubt as to his rights or how to proceed under *The Rules of Golf* or the Conditions of the Competition. This is a particularly helpful rule to know because often there isn't a rules official readily available to handle a sticky situation. In that case, follow the procedure (Rule 3-3a) carefully and continue playing. Remember, a second ball is not the same as a provisional ball.

Know when and how to take a drop

A basic premise of the game of golf is to play the ball as it lies and the course as you find it. However, there are times when you hit a ball into a water hazard, a lateral water hazard or onto an immovable obstruction (such as a cart path) and you need to take a drop. Many golfers don't know how or when to invoke this procedure and often end up costing themselves extra strokes and lots of time.

Carry a Rules book and know how to use it

As with many of the above examples, one big key is to have a current *Rules of Golf* book in your bag and know how to use the Table of Contents and index. You may not know the procedure for a second ball, but you can find it easily enough in the Rules book and quickly read the section to make sure you're following the rules properly.

Planning ahead and taking a little extra care before your tee time will make a tournament the fun experience it should be.