

We all make mistakes

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I made a mistake. As a rules official, that's the last thing you ever want to be forced to admit. Moreover, it couldn't have happened at a worse time: my third day on the job and my first SCGA event.

I wanted to place the blame elsewhere — the smog, the traffic, the consistently beautiful weather — all things I was not accustomed to. However, it was my fault. I had made a wrong ruling and I was going to have to live with it.

As rules officials we are responsible for ensuring that competitions are played fairly in accordance with *The Rules of Golf* and such *Local Rules* or *Conditions of Competition* that may be in effect. The SCGA has a dedicated force of more than 100 Committeemen and staff who devote their time and expertise to ensuring that all SCGA, CGA and USGA qualifiers and championships are run in a professional and proficient manner.

Back to my story: I was the staff member in charge of SCGA Amateur Net Qualifying at Willowick GC in Santa Ana. Late in the round Committeeman Gary Albin radioed in a rules question about a player's ball that had ended up in a bunker. Prior to playing his ball out of the bunker, the player raked the mark created by his ball and also took a practice swing in the bunker, touching the sand with his club. What is the penalty?

Herein lies the beauty of *The Rules of Golf*. In other sports (e.g., football, baseball, basketball) officials need to make split second decisions. But in golf, we have the luxury of taking time and proper steps to make sure we get the ruling right. For us at the SCGA, these steps entail consulting the *Rules of*

Golf, the *Decisions on the Rules of Golf*, and seeking help from our fellow committee members. If a decision can't be reached after following those steps, we can always call the man upstairs, the USGA.

At Willowick, Gary handled the situation professionally and efficiently. He notified the player there was a potential penalty involved and that he would get back to him with the official ruling as soon as possible. Rules Chairman Tom McCutcheon and I discussed the situation back and forth at the scoring area. As we worked our way through our interpretation of

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the infraction, we began to realize there would not be a clear-cut answer. We knew under *Rule 13-4: Ball in Hazard; Prohibited Actions* that a definite penalty was involved. But how many strokes? I felt that it was multiple occurrences of a similar act (testing the bunker) resulting in one rule being breached more than once. In this case it would be a single two-stroke penalty. Tom felt it was two different acts resulting in one rule being breached more than once. In that case it would be two separate penalties, each of two strokes, a total penalty of four strokes.

We decided to get a few more opinions. Gary agreed with Tom, while SCGA Assistant Executive Director Kevin Heaney, who was also on site, sided with me. Eventually, we decided issue a two-stroke penalty. After the tournament was over, we called the USGA and discovered that we had been wrong. It is two separate penalties totaling four penalty strokes.

The raking of the bunker is a breach of 13-4a: testing the condition of the hazard or similar hazard

before making a stroke from that hazard. The practice swing that touched the sand is a breach of 13-4b: touching the ground in the hazard (or water in a water hazard) with a hand or club before making a stroke from the hazard.

In this case my wrong ruling turned out to be a favorable one for the player. It also demonstrates how we handle difficult rulings in SCGA tournaments. If a player in a stroke play round is uncertain of a ruling or of how to proceed in any unusual circumstance, he or she may, if necessary, play two balls under Rule 3-3. In this case, that wasn't necessary; the question was simple: two strokes or four. Later, the player, official and the Committee (usually the rules chairman and staff member) can evaluate the situation and make a final ruling (Rule 34-3 says the Committee's decision in such a case is final).

After telling this incident to some colleagues, I was reminded of a famous wrong ruling. At the 1994 US Open at Oakmont CC, Ernie Els was given a favorable, but incorrect, ruling by Trey Holland, 1994 Chairman of the Rules Committee and 2000 USGA President. On the opening hole of the final round Els yanked his tee shot left of the fairway into thick rough. A TV camera crane was positioned 100 yards ahead of Els's ball, directly between the ball and his line of play. Instead of ordering the crane to be moved, Holland incorrectly determined that it was a *Temporary Immovable Obstruction* and allowed Els line-of-sight relief.

Experienced rules officials preach two things: "There are two types of officials in this world: those who have made mistakes and those who will" and "If you haven't made a bad ruling, you haven't made enough rulings." Whether it's Holland (a rules expert), a novice rules official or a player, mistakes are going to happen on the golf course. It's the lessons learned from those errors that will make us better rules officials and better golfers.