

'The Big Wiesy' and The Rules of Golf

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Remember what it was like when you turned sixteen? Getting your driver's license, high school dances, starting your first job and receiving your first paycheck are all exciting events for a teenager. Imagine it's your fourth day on the job and you're about to get that first paycheck for \$53,126 (you're a child prodigy). Before you know it they're taking that check away because of a rookie mistake. An unintentional error that many before you have committed and gotten away with! Sounds like a fish tale, right? Welcome to Michelle Wie's world.

Lots of us were watching Wie's debut as a professional at Bighorn Country Club last month and we all know her outcome at that event. She was disqualified under Rule 6-6d for returning a score lower than actually taken for a hole during the third round.

Let's break down her disqualification. During that third round, Wie proceeded under Rule 28 (Ball Unplayable) after her ball ended up in a bush. A player may declare his or her ball unplayable at any place on the course except in a water hazard. Under Rule 28, the player has three options, all under penalty of one stroke: (1) play a ball as nearly as possible at the spot from which the original ball was last played; (2) drop a ball behind the point where the ball lay, keeping that point directly between the hole and the spot on which the ball is dropped, with no limit to how far behind that point the ball may be dropped; or (3) drop a ball within two club-lengths of the spot where the ball lay, but not nearer the hole.

Wie chose to proceed under the third option; however, she dropped nearer the hole than where the original ball lay. Wie did not realize at

the time she had dropped nearer the hole; thinking that her drop was valid, she proceeded with her round.

It wasn't until Wie was playing her fourth round on Sunday that the drop was questioned by a spectator and brought to the attention of a Rules official. Following the round, the Rules official brought Wie and her caddie to the location of the drop, at which point the official determined that she had dropped closer to the hole. Therefore, she had played from a wrong place under Rule 20-7. The penalty for playing from a wrong place is two strokes in stroke play (or loss of hole in match play) provided the player has not committed a serious breach. Wie's

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penalty was not a serious breach, but because she did not add the two-stroke penalty to her third-round card, she was disqualified for signing for a score lower than what she actually had on the hole.

It may seem severe to some to disqualify her for such a minor infraction. However, Decision 33-7/4.5 states that if a competitor returns her scorecard and the score for one hole is lower than actually taken due to failure to include a penalty which she did not know she had incurred, and the error is discovered before the competition has closed, the competitor is disqualified.

The timing of when the spectator notified the officials was a big part of the story. Had the spectator notified the official prior to Wie returning her scorecard on Saturday, Wie could have correctly added the two-stroke penalty to her scorecard. Had the spectator notified the official after the competition had closed, Wie would have avoided disqualification because she did not know she had committed a rules infraction

(Decision 34-1b/1).

So, what should the average golfer take from this situation? First, be careful when you take a drop. Note that clause (b) of Rule 28 says, "Drop a ball behind the point where the ball lay, keeping that point directly between the hole and the spot on which the ball is dropped." The word "directly" means just that; you should be able to draw a straight line from where you drop through where your ball originally lay and on to the flagstick. When clause (c) says no closer to the hole, it means just that. Make sure your ball is dropped in the correct place.

Second, if you see a rules violation, bring it up promptly. Waiting will only make it worse. Contact a Rules official as soon as possible. They are on the course to assist with relief procedures, act on rules violations and if possible, prevent rules violations.

Players have an obligation to call rules infractions on their fellow-competitors to protect the entire field. Players should get their markers involved if they are doubtful on how to proceed under the rules or when following the specific procedures under Rule 5-3 (Ball Unfit for Play) or Rule 12-2 (Identifying Ball).

This incident has brought *The Rules of Golf* into the spotlight. It's unfortunate that Wie will now call for a rules official every time she needs a ruling. She has a good understanding of the rules and proceeded correctly when taking a number of other drops during the tournament. Surprisingly, many touring professionals do not know the rules as well as they should. Whether you're a touring professional or a beginner, you should know the basic fundamentals of the Rules of Golf, including how to take relief from water hazards, obstructions and abnormal ground conditions.

The SCGA hosts Rules workshops throughout the year and I'm sure Wie's drop will be a hot topic of conversation. Michelle, you have an open invitation to attend one of our seminars; it might save you a few strokes in the future.