

Immovable obstructions: 'musts,' 'mays,' 'shoulds'

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It was my first year learning the *Rules of Golf* as an SCGA intern. I was at the Nissan Open and Fred Couples had just struck his tee shot onto a cart path mere feet away from me. I was elated as there would undoubtedly be an elaborate ruling that I would be right in the midst of! Well, the Rules officials never showed up, Fred proceeded to nonchalantly flick a few tees out of his pocket, drop his ball, and go about his round.

Rule 24-2b says that we *may* take relief from an immovable obstruction anywhere on the golf course except when our ball lies in either a water or lateral water hazard.

The first step of this process is determining the nearest point of relief (NPR) — the closest spot to where your ball lies, not nearer the hole, where your stance, area of intended swing and lie of ball would no longer have interference from the obstruction from which you are taking relief.

Here's a cautionary note: **in almost every situation there is only one nearest point of relief**, and it won't always be in your favorite spot — in fact, it may be the antithesis of relief!

Imagine a cart path running along the left side of the fairway. To the immediate left of that cart path is thick brush. Now picture a right-handed golfer whose ball lies on the far left side of that cart path (see photo right). In this example, the nearest point of relief is in the brush! This is why we as rules officials recommend that players determine their nearest point of relief prior to lifting their golf ball. Once they've lifted their ball, only to find that the NPR was an undesirable position (e.g. in the middle of a tree or bush), they would be subject to a one stroke penalty if they elected to replace their ball at its original position

(Decision 18-2a/12).

Decision 24-2b/1 says you *should* determine your NPR by using the club with which you would have made your next stroke if the condition were not there to simulate the address position, direction of play and swing for that stroke. The question you need to be asking yourself when taking relief is, "How would I play this shot if the obstruction didn't exist?" The NPR will be the spot where your club is grounded in such a simulated address position.

MYTH #1: *The player must measure with clubs and place tees in the ground during this process.*

Is this process required? NO! The word *should* makes this entire process a recommendation. You are not required to simulate this position, nor are you required to measure with clubs

or place tees in the ground marking these specific spots. However, this exercise will provide you with exact reference points to drop your golf ball in an acceptable area.

If you elect to take relief, through the green, you *must* lift the ball and drop it without penalty within one club-length of and not nearer the hole than the nearest point of relief.

Decision 24-2b/2 states that if you drop and play from an incorrect location, you will be subject to penalty for playing from a wrong place. In the Fred Couples example, although he didn't follow the recommended procedure, he was able to visually determine an

acceptable location to drop, and thus there was no penalty involved.

Now that we've dropped the ball, there are still some common questions that arise. Example No. 1 is a player who drops from a cart path onto the slope of a closely mown area. The ball strikes the ground on an acceptable spot and rolls two club-lengths from where it first struck the side of the slope.

MYTH #2: *When taking relief, the dropped ball must stay within one club-length of the nearest point of relief.*

As long as the dropped ball first strikes a part of the course within one club-length of the NPR, the ball *may* roll up to two club-lengths from the spot at which it first struck the course (but no closer to the hole) — thus potentially coming to rest up to three club-lengths from the NPR! (Decision 20-2c/1). A strong knowledge of the rules can improve your drop situations and baffle eager onlookers watching the entire process.

Example No. 2 is a player who drops in deep rough but, luckily, drops into a position where the ball is sitting up perfectly. When determining the NPR, the player used a 9-iron, as that was the club the player would have most likely used had the obstruction not existed. However, now that the player has an ideal lie, he reaches into his bag and selects a three-wood (a much longer club that results in him once again standing on the cart path when addressing the ball). Is this permissible? Yes.

When taking relief from an immovable obstruction, a player *must* obtain complete relief from his stance, swing, and lie of ball. Provided the player encounters no interference from the obstruction with his 9-iron (the club initially used to determine the NPR), that dropped ball is in play and the player may now select the 3-wood or any other club of his choice, even if his stance would be on the cart path (Decisions 24-2b/4 & 20-2c/0.8).

All of us encounter obstructions on the course. Knowing how to deal with them is essential to a good round of golf.



Before lifting your ball from an immovable obstruction, determine your nearest point of relief. In this case, the golfer would probably be better off hitting from the ball's original lie rather than dropping in the bush.