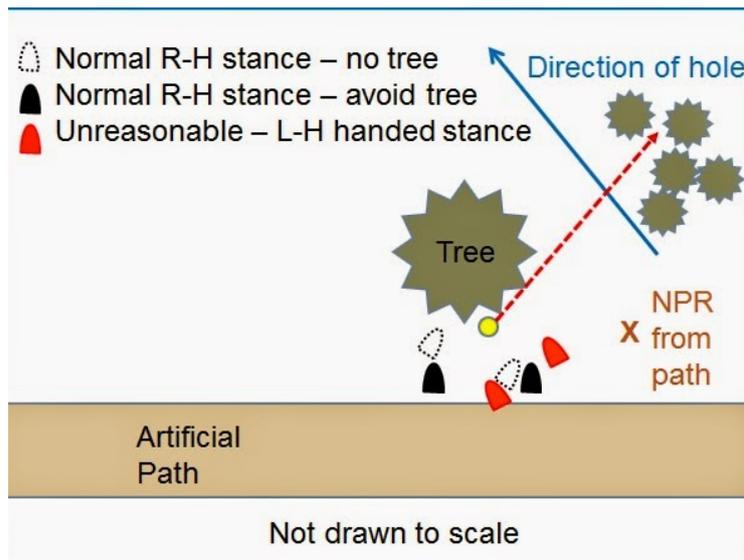


The Rules of Golf Are Not Always Black and White



Anyone who takes an interest in the Rules of Golf will know that, despite the preciseness and complexity of the 34 Rules and the 1,200+ Decisions on the Rules, there are still many subjective areas, some of which may require an understanding of the intent of the player before a ruling can be assessed.

One example of a situation for which a subjective ruling may have to be made is when a player claims that they are entitled to relief from an immovable obstruction, or abnormal ground condition, that only interferes with their intended stroke if they adopt an unusual stance, or direction of play. Normally, they would not be able to claim relief just by adopting an unusual stance for the stroke, because of the exception that is quoted at the end of this paragraph, but there are instances where it may be justified, because an unusual stance is reasonable in certain circumstances. So, if a player's ball lies immediately behind a tree they may choose to play it left-handed, or in a direction that is not towards the hole. If a nearby path does not interfere with a stroke to the hole, but does come into play if the stroke has to be made in a different direction, or with a different stance, then it may be reasonable for the player to seek relief. However, in many cases, it is these Exceptions to Rule 24-2, Relief from an Immovable Obstruction, and Rule 25-1, Relief from Abnormal Ground Condition, that prevent the player from taking unfair advantage of relief by claiming that they will have to use a non-orthodox stance or swing, or play in an unlikely direction.

*A player may not take relief under this Rule if (a) it is **clearly unreasonable** for him to make a stroke because of interference by anything other than an immovable obstruction, or (b) interference by an immovable obstruction would occur only through use of an **unnecessarily abnormal stance, swing or direction of play**.* (The exception to Rule 25-1 relating to interference by an abnormal ground condition is similarly worded. I have highlighted the key words).

The purpose of these Exceptions is to prevent the player from fortuitously obtaining free relief when it is clearly impracticable for them to make a stroke because of interference by something from which free relief is not available. In the diagram above, I have tried to illustrate a scenario where there is an artificial path close to the tree that the player's ball lies behind. In adopting their normal right-handed stance the path does not interfere, but the player claims that to extricate their ball they would have to adopt a left-handed

stance for which the path would interfere, allowing them to take relief without penalty by dropping a ball within one club-length of the nearest point of relief that avoided the path, not nearer the hole (point X in the diagram). In many cases, after taking the drop away from the path, the ball would come to rest where the tree was no longer in the line of play and the player could play their next stroke right-handed, having turned an 'impossible' stroke into a relatively straightforward stroke, without incurring a penalty. So, before the player takes relief the marker, fellow competitor, opponent or official must decide whether, in their opinion, the left-handed stroke would be reasonable in the circumstances. The question that has to be asked is if the path was not there would the player have decided to play to the side of the tree with a left-handed stroke, meaning that they would have to reverse the club face (assuming that the player did not carry a left-handed club). Most players would not have the ability to be certain that they would; a) hit their ball using this unnatural stroke, and b) advance their ball far enough to ensure that their next stroke was unobstructed. (Note in the diagram that if the player misjudges their left-handed stroke their ball could end up in dense trees). So, in many (most!) cases, the stroke would be unreasonable and relief would not be available. However, it has to be accepted that there are rare occasions where the 'manufactured' stroke could be deemed reasonable and relief could then be taken from the path if it interfered with the stance for the left-handed stroke. The ruling is obviously subjective, depending on such factors as, the position of the ball, the size of the tree, the line of play to the hole, other adjacent features (e.g. trees, bunkers and water) and the ability of the player; scratch players are obviously more likely to successfully execute this type of stroke than high handicappers. Where there is doubt, the ruling should be against the player taking relief. If they disagree, they should play a second ball, carefully following the procedure laid down in Rule 3-3, which includes reporting the facts to the Committee as soon as the round has finished.

Some other potentially subjective areas of the Rules include;

- Where did a ball that comes to rest in a water hazard last cross the margin of the hazard?
- Was the area of intended swing improved to the advantage of the player after they had knocked down some leaves from an overhanging tree branch during a practice swing (see **this blog**)?
- Did a conversation about weather conditions (public information) constitute advice because it may have convinced a player to change their club selection after it started?
- Did a player address their ball by grounding their club immediately behind (or in front of) their ball just before it moved (see **this blog**)?
- Where was a ball at rest when it was mistakenly played by another player in a different group?
- What was the exact position of a ball at rest on a putting green when it was moved by a fellow competitor's ball played from the fairway?
- Did a player cause their ball in the rough to move as they approached it, or was it due to the wind, gravity, or vibrations as a train passed?
- Does placing a ball in a pocket breach Rule 22-1, which states that a ball lifted because it is interfering or assisting in the play of another ball may not be cleaned by the player, unless it was lifted from the putting

green (see **this blog**)?

- A player may not repair a spike mark that is in the vicinity of a hole until play of the hole has been completed. How far does this area extend?
- And perhaps the most subjective of all golfing situations, has a player unduly delayed play by their slow play?

I hope that readers will see that not all Rules situations are black and white; players must examine all the facts and make their best judgement. Where there is doubt seek the opinions of others and do not try and take advantage.