IN THIS CHAPTER

- Rules 101: Discovering how the rules began
- Finding out the who, what, when, where, and why behind the rules
- Figuring out the roles played by the two major golf organizations, the USGA and the R&A

Chapter 1
Who Made the Rules?

We didn't make the rules, and our grandfathers didn't either. A bunch of Scotsmen in the game's ancestral home put together the first set of rules in the 1700s, when America was still a colony and "Tiger Woods" would be understood as a scary area in India or Russia. Since then, millions of people have swatted balls around grassy fields, enjoying (usually) the game called golf.

Most golfers pay close attention to the rules that govern the game. In this chapter, I help you understand where those rules came from, who made them up, and why they are so important. I also show you how they have broken many a player's heart over the years — not because I enjoy the suffering of others, but because the Rules of Golf will do that sometimes.

Taking a Brief Glance at the Rules of Golf

The original rules of the game, written in 1744 by a club known as The Gentlemen Golfers of Leith, contained 13 "Articles & Laws in the Playing at Golf." (See Figure 1-1.) Ten years later, they were adopted by The Society of St. Andrews Golfers — better known today as the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, or simply the R&A. They were, in all their 18th-century charm, as follows:

I. You must Tee your Ball within a Club length of the Hole.

II. Your Tee must be upon the ground.

III. You are not to change the Ball which you strike off the Tee.

IV. You are not to remove Stones, Bones or any Break-club for the sake of playing your Ball, except upon the fair Green, and that only within a Club length of your Ball.

V. If your Ball come among Watter, or any Wattery filth, you are at liberty to take out your Ball and throw it behind the hazard, six yards at least; you may play it with any club and allow your Adversary a stroke for getting out your Ball.

VI. If your Balls be found anywhere touching one another, you are to lift the first Ball till you play the last.

VII. At holing, you are to play your Ball honestly for the Hole, and not to play upon your Adversary's Ball, not lying in your way to the hole.

VIII. If you should lose your Ball by it being taken up, or in any other way, you are to go back to the spot where you struck last, and drop another Ball, and allow your Adversary a stroke for the misfortune.

IX. No man, at Holing his Ball, is to be allowed to mark to the Hole with his club or anything else.

X. If a Ball be stop'd by any person, Horse, Dog, or anything else, the Ball so stopped must be played where it lies.

XI. If you draw your Club in order to strike, and proceed so far in the stroke as to be bringing down your Club — if then your Club should break in any way, it is to be accounted a stroke.

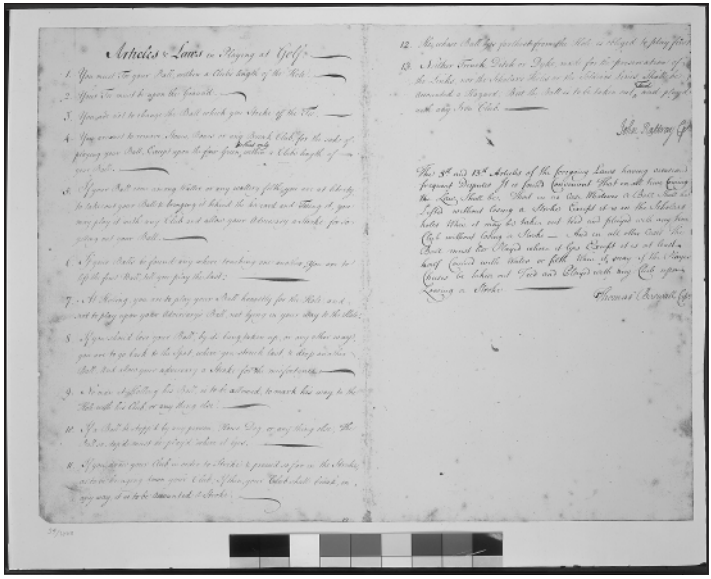
XII. He whose Ball lies further from the Hole is obliged to play first.

XIII. Neither Trench, Ditch nor Dyke made for the preservation of the Links, nor the Scholars' holes, nor the Soldiers' lines, shall be accounted a Hazard, but the Ball is to be taken out, Teed, and played with any iron Club.

As this language indicates, these rules were designed for match play and the consequences were very simple: If you violated any part of the code, you lost the hole and moved on to the next. Golfers in those days were insistent on playing the ball "as it lay," and if for some reason they were not able to do that, they lost the hole.

This list is of great historical interest and significance to anyone who enjoys playing the game. It's also a hoot to go over when you consider some of the wording and, of course, the rules themselves. For example, what type of "Bones" were the folks from Leith talking about in Rule IV? Animal bones were not uncommon on the village greens of the time. And how about the word "Break-club"? It refers to a large pebble or obstacle that could break your wooden club. As for "Wattery Filth," that's how folks back then described the slime left by a receding tide. "Adversary" seems a quaint way to identify one's opponent, and we shouldn't be surprised by a provision about a ball "stopp'd by any person, Horse or Dog," (though it's rare to see horses on a golf course these days).

And how could a player not love Rule VI, which eventually became known as the "stymie" rule? It meant that if another player's ball lay between your ball and the hole, you couldn't ask them to mark it. In other words, you had to find your way around it, which often meant chipping your ball *over* the other one, or hitting yours to one side and then finishing it up. Talk about making a difficult game even harder . . . .


Articles & Laws in Playing at Golf

PGA TOUR Archive/Getty Images

FIGURE 1-1: Golf's original rules dealt with animal bones and "Wattery filth."

Figuring Out the Hows and Whys Behind the Rules

No one can say for certain when golf was actually founded. It is known, however, that the sport was popular among residents of St. Andrews — the site of Scotland's first university, supposed final resting place of the country's patron saint, and once a religious center — as far back as the early 1400s. In fact, golf had gained such popularity in that ancient city that in 1457, King James II banned it, together with European football, because young men were said to be neglecting their archery practice. The King seems not to have considered how many barbarians a good Scotsman could cudgel with a *mashie niblick* (a 7-iron).

Golf did not have an official code of conduct until the Golfers of Leith (later known as the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers) got together in 1744. It was another decade before The Society of St. Andrews Golfers adopted those rules themselves, making only one minor change of procedure in the process. So like life back in those rough-and-tumble times, golf was a pretty chaotic undertaking at first, and it didn't seem to matter much to the players whether you could remove "Bones" or not.

But the Scots, it seemed, prized order in their growing game, and in time, that code of St. Andrews was adopted. As the game evolved in the late 18th century, many players and clubs adopted the same regulations. Other groups were still making up their own rules, but the St. Andrews club eventually became acknowledged as the game's leading authority, and in an 1812 meeting, it created a revamped code by which the sport should be played. Called "Regulations for the Game of Golf," it included a total of 27 specific rules, some of which had been part of the original list. But many other regulations were new, and they dealt with a variety of interesting issues, such as what to do when your ball lies in "Rabbit-scrape" or what happens if your ball hits your "adversary's caddy."

A personal favorite is the one that reads: "WHEN a ball is completely covered with fog, bent, whins &c. so much thereof shall be set aside as that the Player shall have a full view of his Ball before he plays." Few golfers have much idea what "bent" or "whins" are. ("Bent" refers to wild bentgrass, and "whins" are what the Scots call gorse.) In any case, it's a sound policy to take a good look at the ball you're hitting.

DIFF'RENT STROKES: THE R&A AND THE USGA

Today, members of the R&A and the United States Golf Association (USGA) meet regularly to discuss possible rule changes. They co-publish *The Official Rules of Golf,* and they usually see eye to eye. But the two ruling bodies have had their fair share of differences as well. Consider, for example, the fact that for decades the R&A allowed a golf ball that was smaller than the one used in the U.S. The difference was small but significant, and it took an extraordinary amount of time and effort before it was decided in 1990 that golf balls must have a minimum diameter of 1.68 inches. With that, the smaller "British ball" disappeared from play.

An even more contentious issue between the two organizations involved the so-called "springlike effect" of certain drivers. The USGA maintained that thin-faced titanium drivers popularized by

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clubmakers such as Ely Callaway helped golfers hit balls farther by acting as a sort of trampoline. The USGA worried that such drivers threatened the integrity of traditional golf courses and the game's future. It instituted a special test for "springlike effect" and created a list of clubs that didn't pass that test, a sort of FBI Most Wanted List that made Callaway an outlaw.

The R&A, on the other hand, did not believe "springlike effect" to be a problem at all, and chose not to test clubs for that characteristic. As a result, golf clubs considered illegal by the USGA, which governs the game in the U.S. and Mexico, were perfectly allowable for competition in the rest of the world.

Finally, in 2002, the two organizations resolved their differences. They compromised on a limit to the springlike effect, joined hands, and spoke with one voice about the rules — at least until the 2020s.

TECHNICAL STUFF

As a matter of course, the USGA continues to govern golf in the United States and Mexico, while the rest of the world follows the Royal & Ancient (though it's worth noting that Canada is self-governing but affiliated with R&A). The two organizations have worked closely together almost from the beginning, with the USGA enjoying representation on the older group's Rules of Golf Committee starting in 1907. But soon the R&A and USGA started to drift apart, and it became clear that something had to be done. And so, in 1951, representatives of both bodies — along with others from golf associations in Canada and Australia — met in a committee room in London's House of Lords. After much debate, they produced a unified code of rules that set a standard for the world.

Recognizing Who Makes and Enforces the Rules

It's important to know about the organizations in charge of making — and enforcing — the Rules of Golf: the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews (commonly called the R&A) and

the USGA. The R&A is based in St. Andrews, Scotland, whereas its American counterpart is headquartered in Far Hills, New Jersey. Both organizations are run by men and women who devote untold hours to the game, tend to take themselves quite seriously, and own an inordinate number of blue blazers (if they reside in the New World) or tweed jackets (if their base of operations lies on the other side of the pond). Some people say that members of both groups can be a little uptight, far removed from beery afternoons on the links (a term meaning "golf course by the coast" but often used for any course), and perhaps a bit carried away with the power and prestige of their positions. But we should give those folks proper credit for caring enough about the game to become so involved and put in so much volunteer time. After all, they spend hours on the job and receive very little in return.

The R&A

The Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews came about for two primary reasons. Back in the mid-18th century, a handful of local golfers wanted to create a private club so that they could better enjoy the sport and the camaraderie the game so often nurtured among its practitioners, both on and off the course. They were described as "22 Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Kingdom of Fife." (Fife is a part of Scotland north of Edinburgh, the nation's capital.) These gentlemen — all male, all part of the Scottish aristocracy — wanted to create an annual contest for a trophy that they hoped would establish St. Andrews as the game's home and help restore the significance it enjoyed in years gone by, when royalty and religious leaders frequently visited the seaside community. The Reformation had taken some of the spiritual sheen away from the town, the huge cathedral once attended by Scottish hero Robert the Bruce lay in ruins, and the underfunded university was in danger of being moved. When all else fails, they seemed to think, the best thing to do was to emphasize golf!

So they founded a golfing society. The first written record of their club reads:

> "the Noblemen and Gentlemen above named being admired of the Ancient and healthful exercise of the Golf, and at the same

> time having the interest and prosperity of the ancient city of St. Andrews at heart, being the Alma Mater of the Golf, did in the year of our Lord 1754 contribute for a Silver club having a St. Andrew engraved on the head thereof to be played for the Links of St. Andrews upon the fourteenth day of May said year and yearly in time coming. . . ."

In essence, the founders of the R&A were following the lead of the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith, a group generally considered to be the world's oldest golf club. But that initial group never gained the prominence of the R&A, largely because they had to move several times in search of less crowded courses than the five holes they had had at Leith. That lack of continuity and cohesion, combined with the growing strength of the duffers from St. Andrews, helped make the upstart R&A the major player that it is today. (It didn't hurt that King William IV granted royal patronage to the R&A in 1834.)


TECHNICAL STUFF

Today, the R&A has three areas of responsibility:

- It administers the Official Rules of Golf.
- It runs the Open Championship, often called the British Open, as well as several other key professional and amateur competitions.
- It operates a private club with more than 2,000 members.

A network of committees runs the organization and uses funds garnered from running the highly profitable Open Championship to finance golf initiatives around the world, especially for young golfers. It also contributes a great deal of time and money to the advancement of golf course maintenance and conservation.

The USGA

The USGA is a much younger association, born at a New York City dinner party a few days before Christmas in 1894. The impetus for that gathering — which included delegates from the Newport (Rhode Island) Golf Club; Shinnecock Hills Golf Club of Southampton, New York; The Country Club of Brookline, Massachusetts; the Chicago Golf Club; and the St. Andrew's Golf

Club in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York — arose from a dispute that year over the crowning of a national amateur champion. Both St. Andrew's and Newport had staged invitational tournaments, each declaring its winner to be the amateur champ. The ensuing controversy made it clear to the powers of golf, which was just becoming popular in America, that a governing body was needed not only to run both professional and amateur championships on a national level but also to administer the rules. The end result of that lavish dinner was the USGA, with Theodore A. Havemeyer elected as its first president. The next year, the association staged both the U.S. Open and U.S. Amateur Championships at Newport. A month after those events, played on consecutive days in October 1895, the first U.S. Women's Amateur was played at the Meadow Brook Club in Hempstead, New York.

Not surprisingly, the USGA has grown quite a bit since then. Today it represents more than 9,700 member clubs and courses as well as more than 600,000 individuals and boasts more than $800 million in assets. It is run, for all intents and purposes, by a 15-member Executive Committee.

One of the USGA's primary duties is to stage national championships. It now puts on more than a dozen, catering to the widest possible range of golfers. There is, for example, the U.S. Amateur Public Links, which is for public-course players, and the U.S. Mid-Amateur for amateur competitors above the age of 25. It also has events for girls and boys, as well as seniors. In addition, the USGA conducts the Walker Cup in cooperation with the R&A. That biennial match, first held in 1922, pits players from the U.S. against a team from Great Britain and Ireland. A similar competition for women, the Curtis Cup, began ten years later.

But tournaments are only part of the USGA's duties. Rules are of primary importance as well, and the organization works with the R&A not only to make new ones but also to help interpret and enforce the rules. In addition, the USGA and R&A administer the game's unique handicap system, which allows golfers of different abilities to compete against each other on relatively equal terms. The game's ruling bodies work hard to improve course conditioning and maintenance throughout their domains by conducting research, disseminating information on greenkeeping, and running education programs. The USGA also operates

an extensive research and test facility for clubs and balls, primarily to ensure that the traditional character of the game is not radically changed by new equipment. It also rules on the amateur status of players and runs the USGA Museum and Library (holding more than 100,000 volumes) at its headquarters in Far Hills, New Jersey.

Understanding How Important It Is to Know and Follow the Rules

I don't know of any sport where the rules are so valued and followed so closely as they are in golf. The rules are one of the things that make golf great. There is no other game in which self-policing of the rules is so critical — so honored not in the breach, but in their observance.

Take a sport like baseball. Think of the stories you've heard about pitchers scuffing up balls, batters pretending they were hit by a pitch, or outfielders knowingly trapping line drives and doing all they can to fool the umpire into thinking they actually made the catch. Ever see a baserunner who knew he was tagged out at second base but was ruled safe turn to the umpire and say, "Sorry, but I was out. I am going back to the dugout now"? The answer is no, because that sort of attitude doesn't exist in baseball. Instead, both before and since replay review and the "robo umpire" came along to scrutinize close calls, the prevailing idea has been "try to get away with as much as possible."

But golf is different. If your ball moves as you get ready to hit it out of the rough, you must call a penalty on yourself. If you inadvertently ground your club in a hazard, you call that, too, even if no one else saw it happen. "You do that because the rules are sacred in this game," said Joseph Cantwell, a longtime rules official. He went on:

> "They are one of the things that separates it from other sports. They permeate the entire game, and the attitude of the players. They make golf what it is in many ways, because people follow them so closely. People who play golf expect that

sort of behavior and attitude from themselves and from the people they are playing with. The bottom line is, they all want to know they are playing by the same rules. And they want to make sure they follow them."

So make sure you know the rules. No one can be expected to recite and understand all 25 rules and their various subsets and appendixes. But read *about* them. Talk about them. Try to understand them. And be sure to follow them. The game — and the people who play it — deserve that much from all of us golfers.

TIP

It's this simple: If you don't follow the rules, you are cheating, and cheating is like the scarlet letter of golf. Several touring pros have at one point or another been accused of playing a little fast and loose with the rules during a tournament. Perhaps they didn't mark their balls carefully on the green or moved a stone or leaf from a hazard. Whether those allegations were fair or not, they have dogged those players for the rest of their careers.

I have known of some regular weekend hackers who went to local country clubs to play in member-guest tournaments and were accused somewhere along the way of not following the letter of the law when it came to completing their rounds. They were told in no uncertain terms that they were not welcome back. Ever. The moral here is simple: no sport takes its rules more seriously than golf.

THE TEN BIGGEST MILESTONES IN RULE-MAKING

1744 — The first code of rules is written by the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith, later known as the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers. Ten years after that, the Society of St. Andrews Golfers adopts those regulations with only one minor change of procedure. In time, that group will become known as The Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews and evolve into one of the primary governing bodies of golf.

1897 — The R&A forms the first Rules of Golf Committee.

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1922 — Limits are imposed on the weight and size of golf balls for the first time, in an attempt to inhibit distance.

1929 — Steel shafts are permitted on clubs, signaling the demise of the hickory shaft. Tree-lovers rejoice.

1939 — From this point on, players can carry only 14 clubs in their bags.

1952 — The first unified code of rules is agreed upon by the USGA and the R&A, as well as golf associations from Australia and Canada. In the same year, the quirky "stymie rule," which decreed that a golfer could not ask an opponent to mark his ball if it blocked his putt on the green and had to use other means to get over or around it, was abolished, much to the dismay of those who loved the havoc that rule often wreaked.

1960 — Distance-measuring devices are banned. The ban lasts for more than half a century — until 2019, when DMDs (distance-measuring devices), commonly called rangefinders, are allowed in most but not all circumstances.

1990 — The 1.68-inch ball becomes the only legal ball, and the smaller "British" ball quickly goes out of style.

1998 — The USGA tests clubs for "springlike effect," a move that stirs the ire of equipment makers, confuses consumers, and leads to the introduction of so-called *outlaw drivers* that do not conform to association regulations. It also creates a temporary rift between the USGA and the R&A. Even Arnold Palmer gets into the act, saying he has no problem using one of those non-conforming boomers when he plays casual rounds of golf with friends. Golf traditionalists are shocked.

2019 — In one of the most consequential years in the game's recent history, the Rules of Golf are reduced from a total of 34 to 24. In addition, rangefinders are legalized; the time allowed to look for a lost ball drops from five minutes to three minutes; and players are allowed to leave the flagstick in the hole while putting.

Taking a Look at the Rules' Ins and Outs

Though I believe in strict adherence to the rules of golf, I do have my opinions about which ones matter the most and which ones make the most — or least — sense. Here's an informed and opinionated look at that crucial topic.

Recent changes in the rules

For decades, there were 34 Rules of Golf. There are now 25 (with the 25th added in 2023), including many that have been codified in the past 20 years. That's a blink of an eye in the context of golf's long history.

In 2004, the R&A and USGA resolved their differences about the "springlike effect" of modern drivers, standardizing their testing methods and limiting the effect. They also set the maximum legal size for the head of a driver at 460 cubic centimeters. Until then, drivers had been growing as titanium and other materials proved strong enough for hollow-headed drivers with ever-larger *sweet spots* (the area on the clubface that provides the best contact) to pound innocent golf balls farther and straighter. The 460-cc maximum — about half the size of a liter bottle of water or soda — has been standard ever since.

In 2008, the governing bodies allowed players to advise each other on distances — they could now share yardages without being penalized. Eight years later, the rules were amended to prohibit anchoring a club against the body, as players using extra-long putters had been doing to steady their strokes. Long putters are still legal but can't be stabilized against the body during the stroke.

Then came 2019, a year golf nerds will never forget. After seven years of intensive study and behind-the-scenes discussion, the USGA and R&A's "Rules Modernization Initiative" brought a slew of improvements. For one thing (or rather, two dozen things), the rules themselves were trimmed from 34 to 24. The

new, cleaner two dozen simplified and clarified what golfers could and could not do on the course.

Among many changes, the time allowed to find a lost ball was reduced from five minutes to three — a big difference for those of us who tend to spend too much time in the rough. Rangefinders are legalized for most purposes. Players are allowed to choose whether to remove the flagstick when putting or to leave it in. (You're wise to leave it in on long downhill putts. The flagstick might stop a putt that would otherwise race past the hole — your ball might even fall in!) In addition, penalty drops, which had long been taken by dropping the ball from shoulder height, would now be taken from knee height, which helped keep the ball from plugging into sand or mud and could keep it from bouncing out of the drop area. And the dreaded double hit — when your club strikes the ball twice on the same stroke, often on a bunker shot or one from the rough — was now legal. Before 2019, a double-hit, which is almost always a terrible shot, earned a one-stroke penalty. Deleting the penalty was a show of mercy by the game's rule-makers.

More recently, in 2023 the admirable new Rule 25 permitted specific allowances for golfers with various disabilities. Since then, physical assistance and other aids have helped more people with vision impairments and other disabilities enjoy the game.

Golf's five best rules

I should probably call the rules described in this section five *of the best* rules, because it's hard to single out any as being better than the others. But I like these and hope that golfers pay special heed to them.

» **Rule 1:** According to this rule, you must play "the course as you find it and play the ball as it lies." This is the essence of the game — but what if unusual, surprising, or downright crazy things happen during your round of golf? That's what the rest of the rulebook covers.

- **Rule 6.3:** This rule says you are responsible for playing your own ball. Put an identification mark on it to be sure (see Figure 1-2). For some of my friends, that's like elementary school art class, and they enjoy decorating their Titleists, Callaways, and Srixons with various dots and initials. The colors and designs may be different, but the intent is the same: Be sure you have hit your ball. If you hit another player's ball — which might be the same make and model as yours — you lose the hole in match play and suffer a two-shot penalty in stroke play.
- **Rule 6.4:** According to this rule, the player or side that has the *honor* — the right to tee off first — on the first tee is determined by the order of the draw. (Many golfers flip a tee in the air instead, with the player closest to the pointy end of the tee claiming the honor.) The side that wins a hole takes the honor at the next hole. If a hole is halved, the side that had the honor on the previous tee retains it. I like this rule because having the honor on the tee means you just won a hole, and the longer you keep it, the better you feel. It's a constant reminder that you are doing well, and you want to keep the honor as long as you can. There are even betting games that earn you points — and ultimately some extra cash — for having the honor most often during a match.
- **Rule 19:** This rule indicates that if your ball is unplayable, you have three options. You can play it from where you hit your last shot; drop it within two club-lengths of where your ball is now, no closer to the hole; or keep the point where the ball is between you and the hole and drop a ball on that line. (You can go back as far as you want.)
- **Rule 25:** Golf's newest rule makes the game more accessible to players with disabilities. Other rules are waived — in the interest of fairness — for players who can't reasonably follow all the rules but can still enjoy the game.

Oh, and here's one unofficial rule to keep in mind: Make sure to have fun on the course!

FIGURE 1-2: So you know it's yours . . .

Three weird rules decisions

I should qualify this to mean three *interpretations* of the rules, because who am I to say that any of golf's rules are weird? But sometimes the ways they are enforced can be ridiculous because players, spectators, and officials lose all common sense and insist on the strictest of applications, even when a player made no attempt to cheat. It drives me a little crazy when that happens

» **Rule 19.2a:** Consider an incident during the 1979 British Amateur Championship. Golfer Reg Gladding drove his ball into the top of a bunker during a closely contested match. Fearful that he would start an avalanche of sand if he stepped in from the top, he chose to enter the hazard from below, carefully taking his stance. During his swing, however, he lost his balance and fell backward to the bottom of the bunker. Sand came pouring down after him, and so did his ball, striking him in the back. According to what was then Rule 19-2a, which stated that if a player's ball was accidentally deflected or stopped by himself, his partner, or either of their caddies or equipment, he lost the hole. Gladding not only lost face but also the match. Fortunately — but too late for Gladding — the rule was changed in 2019. Today, under Rule 11.1, there is no penalty if a ball in motion is accidentally deflected. The golfer simply plays the ball where it lies after the deflection.

- **Rule 13.3:** At a PGA Tour event in 1997, Craig Stadler laid down a towel to hit a shot underneath a tree from his knees. A TV viewer called in, accusing Stadler of violating Rule 13.3, which says that a player may not build a stance. Of course, the mustachioed man known as The Walrus didn't think he had done anything wrong, so he went ahead and signed his scorecard when he was done playing. After all, he was only trying to keep his pants from getting dirty. But when rules officials learned of the phone call, they disqualified him. More than 20 years later, in a show of common sense, the USGA and R&A stopped letting TV viewers call the shots. Since 2018, the rules have prohibited viewers (and emailers and texters) from calling violations on golfers.
- **Rule 4.4:** Two friends of mine were playing in the club championship at their course one day. They both had the same caddie, who was carrying double. And because they both bought their equipment from the head professional there, they had the same color and type of bag and irons. Even the head covers on their woods looked similar. The match was tied after three holes, and the players stepped to the tee of the 4th, a short, scenic par-3 that requires a carry over water. The fellow who had the honor took a quick look at the flag to judge the direction and strength of the wind, and then asked the caddie for an 8-iron. The caddie complied, and my friend hit his shot, dropping his ball just a few feet from the pin. He was pleased with his efforts until his opponent said he had played the shot with *his* club (because the caddie had accidentally reached into the wrong bag). As a result of what was then Rule 4.4a (now Rule 4.2), which decrees that a player may use only the clubs they selected at the start of the round, he lost the hole through no fault of his own.

Golf's most controversial rules

Twenty years ago, the most controversial rule in golf was Rule 4.1a, which relates to the design and manufacture of clubs. Basically, it simply says that players "must use a club that conforms to the requirements in the Equipment Rules." (Today you can find those rules at `www.usga.org`.) Simple enough, right? Not

really, because in those days, golfers, golf media, and the game's governing bodies were collectively up in arms over the "springlike effect" I mention earlier in this chapter — a technological development that sent golf balls springing off drivers faster and farther.

The USGA bans the springlike effect

The problems with that notorious effect began to surface in the mid-1990s, when USGA officials started hearing stories about high-tech drivers being built in Japan with incredibly thin faces that acted as a sort of catapult with balls. Their fear was seated not only in what was currently available in Asia but also in what technological advancements might be coming down the road. So the association decided to take action in the form of developing a test, and if a club exceeded a limit for what is called a *coefficient of resolution* (COR), or springlike effect, it was deemed "nonconforming." That designation meant that such a club was illegal for use in USGA-sanctioned events.

It didn't take long for news of that move to electrify the golf community, and equipment makers were, for the most part, horrified. In May 1998, Callaway Golf, which made most of its profits on oversized, titanium-head drivers known as Big Berthas and Great Big Berthas that added both distance and control to golfers' games, began warning retailers and consumers of what it characterized as a campaign to deprive the golfing masses of new game-enhancing clubs (and deprive Callaway of revenue). About that same time, USGA president F. Morgan "Buzz" Taylor began explaining his organization's side of things — and fueling the fire — by saying that the USGA's mission was to "preserve and protect the game's ancient and honorable traditions . . . and there is not one lawyer in the world who is going to get in our way of doing that."

The next month, at the U.S. Open in San Francisco, the USGA formally announced its proposal to test for springlike effect. Other equipment makers, notably the people at Acushnet Company, which makes Titleist balls and clubs among other products, began questioning the USGA's intentions and also its logic. Acushnet's argument was that springlike effect was a non-issue,

and a bit more distance off the tee was by no means bad for the game. If anything, the thinking went, a little springlike effect would help bring more people into the game (and help manufacturers recover from what had been a series of tough years at the end of the 1990s). Then, in the fall of 1998, the USGA approved its test for springlike effect, and when it released its first list of nonconforming drivers, a new offering from Callaway, called the ERC, was on the list.

The R&A stays neutral

As the USGA tried to explain its rationale for the springlike effect testing, the R&A remained strangely quiet, declining to take a stand on the issue. Its official line was that it was unconvinced the phenomenon even existed and felt that more research was in order before any conclusions could be drawn. (Unofficially, the R&A said it had to proceed with great caution so as not to provoke charges of collusion with the USGA and restraint of trade, which might result in costly antitrust litigation with equipment makers.)

While the R&A studied the issue, Callaway, still among the most prominent of the clubmakers, began to exploit the difference of opinion by aggressively marketing its driver in Japan and Europe (where the R&A, not the USGA, is the ruling authority). The club was well received, and a number of pros on both those tours start using the club. Although it was not officially being sold directly in the U.S., hundreds of ERCs found their way into America through the gray market, often for prices exceeding $1,000.

This split between the two organizations concerned industry observers, who worried about the confusion that could arise with two sets of rules in place. But most expected the matter to be resolved in rather short order, with the R&A coming over to the side of its American counterpart and at the very least endorsing the USGA's fears over springlike effect, if not its actual mode of testing. But the R&A surprised almost everybody in golf by deciding in the fall of 2000 *not* to test clubs for springlike effect, concluding that the current generation of thin-faced drivers did not pose a threat to the game.

Global ramifications of the USGA/R&A split

The fallout from that decision was huge. In countries that followed the R&A — everywhere except the U.S. and Mexico — the issue of springlike effect didn't exist, and there were no restrictions on clubs like the ERC. But in the realm of the USGA, clubs like the ERC were considered illegal. That included the all-important PGA Tour as well as any club or local event where USGA rules applied, and, technically, any round of golf where a score was going to be turned in for USGA handicap purposes.

But the use of the ERC, which one media jokester dubbed "Evil Rocket Club," would not be easy to police. First of all, there were already a number of "gray market" ERCs being used in the U.S. when the R&A announced its decision on springlike effect. Also, a number of smaller companies were soon making models of their own. But shortly after it heard about the R&A's ruling, Callaway said it would begin selling a new driver in the U.S. that did not conform to USGA regulations — you can guess which one — and enlisted none other than Arnold Palmer to endorse that move, with the man golf fans called "The King" saying it was fine to use a conforming club in tournament play and a nonconforming one at other times. Several other major manufacturers said that as a matter of survival, they, too, would have to develop and bring to market nonconforming clubs of their own.

To some people, using nonconforming clubs was not a big deal. They bought into Palmer's argument that as long as Callaway's nonconforming clubs were not being used in tournament play, they are all right. But to many others, myself included, that rationale missed the point. As it stood at the time, nonconforming clubs were against the rules whether you are playing in the Masters or enjoying a match among friends on a Sunday morning. So playing with them was, in essence, breaking the rules (because USGA rules govern all play in the United States). If you used a nonconforming club, you were cheating. And cheating with an illegal club is really no different than teeing up a ball in the fairway or grounding your club in a bunker.

Finally, everyone can get along — almost

In 2003, the governing bodies resolved their differences, establishing a global standard for COR. Since then, the springlike effect that caused so much trouble has been limited — and so have disputes over the equipment players use.

Except for the golf ball.

For decades now, better-designed golf balls and stronger, fitter, better-trained players have combined to send drives farther than ever. In 1980, the average PGA Tour drive traveled 256.9 yards. Dan Pohl led all boppers with an average of 274, and 40-year-old Jack Nicklaus came in 10th with a average poke of 269. By 2025, the *average* drive topped 300 yards — 306 yards and 8 inches, to be precise — with South Africa's Aldrich Potgieter on top with an average of 325. (Rory McIlroy, shown in Figure 1-3, came in second at 323 yards.) Such distances threatened to make many golf courses obsolete, with modern Tour pros hitting wedges to greens their predecessors had hoped to reach with fairway woods.

FIGURE 1-3: Rory McIlroy stands only 5'9" but averaged 323 yards off the tee in 2025.

Ramsey Cardy/Getty Images

In 2023, the USGA and R&A announced a change to Rule 4.2, which governs the ball: the now-famous "golf ball rollback." Starting in 2028, they said, a new testing system would limit

how far a ball could go — not much more than 315 yards when struck with a driver swung at 125 miles per hour. This limit would require golf-ball manufacturers to make balls that conformed to that standard, or those balls couldn't be played by professionals in events sanctioned by the governing bodies. What's more, the same standard would apply to all golfers starting in 2030.

Some golfers objected. They weren't alone. The PGA Tour, which doesn't want a new limit on crowd-pleasing blasts of 300-plus yards, opposed the rollback. So did the PGA of America, which represents teaching pros at courses all over the country. The rollback's opponents noted that the new standard would cost PGA Tour pros 10 to 15 yards off the tee, making them seem suddenly puny. The rollback's proponents said the change would cost the average golfer only about five yards — a negligible difference for most of us. Many observers wondered why the R&A and USGA hadn't set a new standard for professionals while leaving other golfers alone. After all, amateur baseball players use metal bats, which offer the same springlike effect as titanium drivers, but must switch to wooden bats when they join major- and minor-league teams.

The rollback remains controversial. It's the latest big story in the ongoing saga of the Rules of Golf — and it won't be the last.