

THE HACKER

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When is a reed not a reed?

Regular readers will know that I am at my happiest when rallying against the rules of golf. However, in defence of the R&A one has to recognise that having written the generally asinine rule book they did then set to work on a number of ways that we, the golfer, could look to for guidance on what the rule book meant.

Therefore, if ever we are in doubt as to how to proceed on the golf course we are able to follow this simple path: First take out your rule book and hope that with a healthy dose of luck you can find the relevant page or entry. More often than not you will find that a volley of ball-fire is unleashed over your heads by the group behind before you have found the relevant entry. So you play on, unsure of the ruling. When you are next able you take to the rule book again and eventually find the relevant edict and you set about understanding the gobbledygook - yes it's in English but somehow reads more like Cantonese.

To cut a long story short, if the rule book leaves you still scratching your head then you can turn to the 'Illustrated Rule Book'. Frankly this is mostly the same old rubbish with some dodgy pictures. But any serious golfer, committee member or anorak will know that both of these former books are as good as useless without the accompaniment of the R&A's 'Decisions on the Rules of Golf'. This book is big, so big in fact that after putting page numbers up to leaf 546 they got so embarrassed they couldn't face continuing them for the index. Had they bothered they would have ended on 677. Should you get to the end of this option and still be unsure of the answer then your final option is to contact the R&A and get a definitive answer from the horses mouth as it were.

Now you would have thought that given all the above then the rules would have gained enough clarity to avoid areas of contention. And yet I recently found myself embroiled in an argument over a rule which has been given an awkward slant by the power of television. This argument was not the first time this particular rule has gone centre stage in the clubhouse, it will not be the last. I have also had identical 'discussions' at other clubs. To sum it up in a good old fashioned phrase: A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Actually that is probably being unfair because on this occasion, millions saw, or later heard of the problem but by the unfortunate act of selective retention have only remembered the peripheral points and not the key ones.

Let me go on by asking you this poser on the rule in question: 'When in a (water) hazard that is surrounded by reeds (that are inside the stakes) are you allowed to touch the reeds with your backswing?'

Now whether or not you know the answer shouldn't deflect the fact that the R&A's armoury of books, iPhone app & Decisions should eventually bring you to Rule 13-4 and the all important note that gives you the answer. However the problem with this rule is the fact many players no longer feel the need to consult the books because the rule is etched into their memory as they saw it played out live in their own living rooms when a professional golfer made one of the most honest and memorable calls in sporting memory.

The occasion was the Verizon Heritage Classic at Harbour Town Golf Links in USA in April 2010. Englishman Brian Davis made a birdie at the 72nd hole to force a play-off against Jim Furyk. However a wayward 7 iron at the first play-off hole left him in a marshy, sandy hazard with his ball resting amongst some straggly reeds. Now the bit that people remember is that on his backswing Davis thought he may have nicked one of the reeds and asked if a TV replay could be seen to see if this was the case. He had, marginally. His amazing honesty meant a two shot penalty which handed Furyk the title and over \$1m in prize money.

So given this extremely memorable, not to mention admirable, piece of televised sport you will find many a staunch golfer who will swear blind that if you touch a reed in a hazard it is a two shot penalty. I have seen it happen in competition where one competitor called the penalty on another and could quote the precedent down to the players name, the competition and the channel he saw it on. Television is powerful and the pictures would have left an indelible image for many: hazard, reeds, touch = 2 shot penalty.

But of course other discerning TV viewers that day may have listened a tad more carefully and would have realised that there was more to the ruling than meets the eye.

For the record the note to Rule 13-4 states that 'at any time, including at address or in the backward movement for the stroke the player may touch, with a club or otherwise, any obstruction, any construction declared by the committee to be an integral part of the course or any grass, bush, tree or other growing thing'. So in answer to my earlier question of whether you can touch a reed on your backswing, the answer is actually; 'probably'.

'Probably' because it is here that things get a little awkward and where you get to discover the actual reason for the two stroke penalty suffered by Brian Davis. To start with, the fact that Brian Davis hit a reed is a bit of a red herring. Yes it was a reed, but the crucial piece of information that swings the whole issue is that it was not fixed or growing. Everything now turns on its head. When is a reed not a reed? When it is a loose impediment. Because it was not fixed or growing then the unattached reed is actually deemed to be a loose impediment. Look up Loose Impediment in the definitions section of the rule book and it will tell you that they are natural objects such as leaves, twigs, branches and the like that are not fixed or growing.

Having established that the renegade reed is in fact a loose impediment means that Brian Davis fell foul of one of the main stays of Rule 13-4 - namely that the player must not touch or move a loose impediment lying in or touching the hazard.

But of course that is not what people remember so whilst you are allowed to touch a healthy growing reed in a hazard with your backswing, live television & selective memory means that arguments will continue to rage over this subject for years to come.