

Rhodes Rules School



So You Are
Going To Play
Match Play!

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So You Are Going to Play Match Play!

Most golfers play their competitive golf under the Rules of stroke play, which includes medals, strokes, bogey, par and Stableford competitions. However, many Golf Clubs and Societies run match play competitions, often scheduled to run over a full season, and in many countries there are also inter-club, inter-state or inter-provincial match play competitions. It is important to understand that there are many differences between the stroke play and match play formats of golf that players should be aware of if they do not want to incur loss of hole penalties, or worse, the unnecessary loss of a match.

Before we get into these differences let me clarify the situation regarding playing in a stroke play competition and a match at the same time. Rule 33-1 states that certain specific Rules governing match play are so substantially different from those governing stroke play that combining the two forms of play is not practicable and is not permitted. Of course, I am aware that many of you will enter a singles strokes play competition and, because there are four of you in a group, you agree to pair-off and have a little wager on a four-ball match, to keep things interesting. This could disqualify you from the singles competition if you do anything during the round that breaches the stroke play format. For example, you must putt out on every hole, respect the order of play, not give or receive any advice, or ignore a breach of Rule made by any player in the group.

Match Play Format



A match consists of one side playing against another side over a stipulated round. A hole is won by the side that holes its ball in the fewer strokes. In a handicap match, the lower net score wins the hole.

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Score Card

The Rules of Golf do not require players to keep a score card in match play, as each hole is either won by one of the two sides, or halved between them. The winner is the side who wins the most holes over the stipulated round, or an extension of that round if the match has to be played to a conclusion. For example, if a side is 3 holes up and there are only 2 holes of the stipulated round remaining, the match is over with a result of 3 and 2.

However, I am aware that a minority of handicapping systems, including the USGA Handicap System, require players to record and return their match play scores, as these authorities consider them to be acceptable scores for the purposes of peer review. (“Peer review” is defined in the USGA Handicap Manual).

Penalties

One penalty stroke in stroke play is also one penalty stroke in match play

In stroke play, the general penalty for a breach of the Rules is two strokes, whereas in match play it is loss of hole. A breach of the Rules that only incurs a one stroke penalty in stroke play ([click here](#) for a list of them) also incurs a one stroke penalty in match play, with two exceptions;

- i) The penalty for a first offence of undue delay may be modified to one stroke in stroke play and loss of hole in match play by a condition of competition (Note 2 to Rule 6-7).
- ii) In match play, there is a penalty of one stroke for purposely touching an opponent’s ball or causing it to move, except while searching for it, whereas in stroke play there is no penalty for moving a fellow competitor’s ball (Rules 18-3 and 18-2).

Note that Rule 19-5a provides an exception where a penalty of two strokes is incurred in stroke play, but there is no penalty in match play This Rule applies when a ball putted from the putting green is deflected or stopped by a ball at rest on the putting green (see later section on Ball in Motion Deflected or Stopped By another Ball).

Concessions (Rule 2-4)

A match: A player may concede a match at any time prior to the start or conclusion of that match.

A hole: A player may concede a hole at any time prior to the start or conclusion of that hole.

A stroke: Whereas in stroke play the player must finish every hole by holing out, in match play a player may concede a stroke to their opponent so that they can pick-up without holing out. This most commonly occurs where a player's ball comes to rest close to the hole and their opponent does not require them to hole out and concedes their next putt as a single stroke. The concession, which can only be made by a player and not a caddie or team captain, should be with an unambiguous, spoken statement, so that there can be no doubt that it has been made. In four-balls it is wise for one partner to take the responsibility for giving concessions, to avoid any misunderstanding. Once it is given, a concession cannot be declined or withdrawn under any circumstances. So, if you concede a short putt to your opponent, but they putt anyway and miss, it does not matter because they are still considered to have holed out with the conceded putt for the purposes of the match.



“The Concession”, Jack Nicklaus concedes Tony Jacklin’s putt to tie the 1969 Ryder Cup at Royal Birkdale.

Whilst there is no penalty when a player putts out after their next stroke has been conceded, if the act would be of assistance to a partner in a four-ball or best-ball match, the partner is, in equity (Rule 1-4), disqualified for the hole (Decision 2-4/6).

Doubt As to Procedure, Disputes and Claims (Rule 2-5)

If you are unsure of a Rule or a procedure in match play the Rules do not permit you to play a second ball, as they do in stroke play (Rule 3-3). You have to try and resolve the issue with your opponent without undue delay. If you cannot agree, a claim has to be made before teeing-off at the next hole. You must notify your opponent that you are making a claim, agree the facts of the situation and make it clear that you will be asking the Committee for a ruling.

Handicaps (Rule 6-2a)

Before starting a match in which handicaps are to be taken into account the players should determine from one another their respective handicaps. If a player begins a match having declared a handicap higher than that to which they are entitled and this affects the number of strokes given or received, they are disqualified; if the player declares a lower handicap they must play off that handicap unless it is corrected before the start of the match. There is no penalty if players fail to determine one another's handicaps before starting a match, but if this results in one of them not receiving a handicap stroke at a hole at which they are entitled to receive one, the hole stands as played (Decision 6-2a/1).

Time of starting Rule 6-3



Some players mistakenly think that the start time for a match is not as important as it is for a stroke play competition. This is not the case. If a player arrives at the first teeing ground late, but within five minutes of their start time, they lose the hole. If they arrive more than five minutes late they are disqualified. If both players arrive on the first teeing ground late, but within five minutes of their start time, each player would incur a penalty of loss of the 1st hole. Therefore, in equity (Rule 1-

4), the 1st hole is deemed halved and the match would commence on the 2nd hole (Decision 6-3a/3).

Note that if a player suffers an injury, or is ill and unable to play at the time arranged, the Committee may, with the concurrence of the opponent, postpone the match for a reasonable period (Decision 6-3a/1).

Discontinuance of Play (Rule 6-8a)

In stroke play players may not suspend play for bad weather, unless they consider there is danger from lightning. If they do, the Committee would be justified in disqualifying them. Not so in match play, where players may discontinue their match by agreement, unless by so doing the competition is delayed.

However, when either player decides that they want to resume play, the other must concur, otherwise there is no longer agreement between them (Decision 6-8a/5). If a match is discontinued by agreement, e.g. due to darkness or threat of lightning, the match must be resumed from where it was discontinued; the players do not start the match again, even if resumption occurs on a subsequent day.



Practice (Rule 7-1a)

Unlike in stroke play competitions, on any day of a match-play competition, a player may practice on the competition course before their round. However, occasionally a Committee may prohibit practice on the day in the Conditions of Competition, so it is wise to check first.

Advice (Rule 8-1)

In team match play golf it is important that team captains familiarise themselves with the conditions of competition. It is common for there to be a condition stipulating that only the team captain, or someone else that has been agreed by the captains prior to the start of the match, may give advice. A team captain who is also playing in the competition may not give advice to a team mate other than their four-ball or foursome playing partner (Decision 8/2).

Informing an Opponent of Your Breach of Rule (Rule 9-2b)

If you incur a penalty that has not been observed by your opponent you must inform them as soon as practicable. If you fail to do so before your opponent makes their next stroke you lose the hole. This penalty also applies if you give incorrect information during play of a hole regarding the number of strokes taken and you do not correct that mistake before your opponent makes their next stroke. You are always entitled to ascertain from your opponent the number of strokes they have taken on the hole.

Order of Play (Rule 10-1)

On the first teeing ground, both in stroke play and match play, the side that has the honour (i.e. plays first) is determined by the order of the draw. In the absence of a draw, the honour should be decided by lot (e.g. tossing a coin). Thereafter, the person with the honour (i.e. who won the

previous hole, or in the case of a halved hole played first on that hole) plays first from the teeing ground. Anywhere else on the course the ball farthest from the hole is played first. Whereas, there is no penalty in stroke play for playing in the wrong order, unless players have agreed to do so to give one of them an advantage in which case they are both disqualified, it is different in match play. If a player makes a stroke when their opponent should have played first, there is still no penalty, but the opponent may immediately require the player to cancel that stroke and play again, in the correct order, as nearly as possible at the spot from which the original ball was last played. In other words, if you think your opponent played a bad shot when they played out of turn you should say nothing, but if they played a good shot then you may want to ask them to cancel the stroke and, in correct order, play a ball as nearly as possible at the spot from which the original ball was last played (see Rule 20-5), in the hope that the result of their next shot will not be as good as the one that you required them to cancel.

In four-ball match play, balls belonging to the same side may be played in the order that the side considers best.



Ball A is farthest from the hole and in stroke play should be played first.

In match play, if A and B are on the same side, they may choose whose ball to play first.

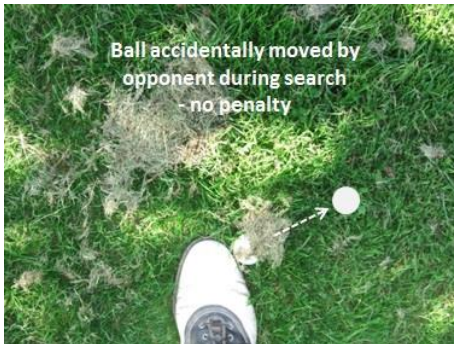
Playing from Outside Teeing Ground (Rule 11-4a)

Similarly, if a player when starting a hole plays a ball from outside the teeing ground there is no penalty, but their opponent may choose whether the stroke stands or require them to cancel their stroke and play again from within the teeing ground.

Wrong Ball in Match Play (Rule 15-3a)

A player who plays a wrong ball in singles match play loses the hole. If a player and an opponent exchange balls during the play of a hole the first to make a stroke at a wrong ball loses the hole; when this cannot be determined, the hole must be played out with the balls exchanged.

Ball at Rest Moved by Opponent, Caddie or Equipment (Rule 18-3)



In stroke play, when a competitor, their caddie or their equipment touches a fellow competitor's ball, or causes it to move, there is no penalty. In match play there is a one stroke penalty, except when it happens accidentally while searching for an opponent's ball. In both formats the ball must be replaced if it has been moved.

Ball in Motion Deflected or Stopped by Opponent, Caddie or Equipment (Rule 19-3)

If you play a stroke and your ball hits your opponent, their caddie, or their equipment you may choose whether to replay the stroke, or accept it and play your next shot from where it comes to rest. This might not seem fair if your wild shank has hit your opponent where it hurts and stops at their feet, but that is the Rule, so use it when it benefits you!



Ball in Motion Deflected by Opponent Caddie or Equipment in Match Play - no penalty and ball played as it lies or stroke cancelled and replayed (Rule 19-3)

Ball in Motion Deflected or Stopped by another Ball (Rule 19-5)

This is an unusual one, which not many match play golfers know about. If a putt from the putting green hits another ball at rest on the putting green, whether it is your partner's ball or your opponent's ball, there is no penalty in match play, whereas this would incur a penalty of two strokes in stroke play. Just play your ball from where it comes to rest and ensure that the ball that your ball moved is replaced back to where it was.

Playing From a Wrong Place (Rule 20-7)

In match play a player who plays from a wrong place loses the hole.

Four-Ball Match Play – Representation of Side (Rule 30-3a)

A side may be represented by one partner for all or any part of a match. A partner who arrives late for the start of a match may join it between holes, but not during play of a hole. However, they may give advice to their partner as soon as they arrive.



Four-Ball Match Play – Wrong Ball (Rule 30-3c)

If a player incurs the loss of hole penalty under Rule 15-3a for making a stroke at a wrong ball, they are disqualified for that hole, but their partner incurs no penalty, even if the wrong ball belongs to them.

Four-Ball Match Play – Penalty to Side (Rule 30-3d)

In those cases where the penalty for a breach of Rule is by the deduction of one hole for each hole at which the breach occurred, with a maximum deduction per round of two holes, (principally Rule 4, Clubs and Rule 6-4, Caddie) both players of the side are penalised and not just the player that breached the Rule.

Four-Ball Match Play – Disqualification to Side (Rule 30-3e)

A breach of any of the following Rules by one player incurs the penalty of disqualification from the match for both players in the side;

- Rule 1-3, Agreement to Waive Rules
- Rule 4, Clubs (using a non-conforming club)
- Rule 5-1 or 5-2, The Ball (using a non-conforming ball)
- Rule 6-2a, Handicap (declaring a handicap higher than entitled)
- Rule 6-4, Caddie (continuing play with more than one caddie)
- Rule 6-7, Undue Delay; Slow Play (penalised for a second offence during a round)
- Rule 11-1, Teeing (using a non-conforming tee)

Rule 14-3, Artificial Devices, Unusual Equipment and Unusual Use of Equipment
Rule 33-7, Disqualification Penalty Imposed by Committee

A breach of any other Rule resulting in disqualification only applies to the player who breached the Rule and only for the hole at which the breach occurred. However, if a player's breach of a Rule assists his partner's play or adversely affects an opponent's play, the partner incurs the applicable penalty in addition to any penalty incurred by the player (Rule 30-3f).

Ignoring a Breach of Rule Made By Your Opponent

Unlike stroke play, where you have an obligation to your fellow competitors to report every breach of a Rule that you witness, there is no such obligation in match play, as you may disregard, or overlook any breach of a Rule by your opponent. The reason for this is that only you or your side are affected by a breach of Rule by an opponent, it does not affect any other entrant in the match play competition. However, you still must not say anything to your opponent during play of the hole where the breach occurred, as under Rule 1-3 players must not agree to exclude the operation of any Rule, or to waive any penalty incurred by either side. If they do, the penalty is disqualification for both sides. So, you must wait until the result of the hole has been decided and at least one player has commenced play of the next hole, before making any comment on a penalty that you witnessed on the previous hole. At this stage it cannot be considered that there was agreement between the sides to waive a Rule and no penalty is incurred.

Conclusion

I hope that by overviewing these differences between match play and the stroke play format that you are more accustomed to, you will be more comfortable in facing you opponents. Confidence that you have a good understanding of the Rules of Golf can be just as important a factor in winning a match as confidence in your swing, or your ability to read putts.

Good Golfing
Barry Rhodes

www.barryrhodes.com – a weekly blog on the Rules of Golf

www.rhodesruleschool.com – a resource for purchasing products on the Rules of Golf

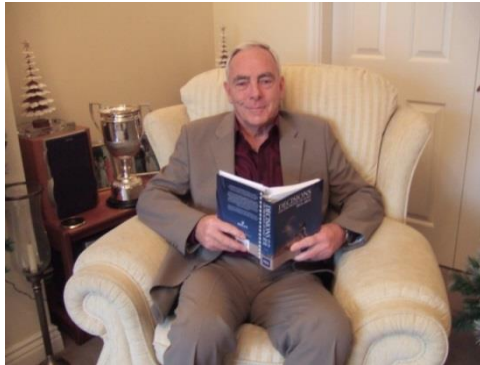
The next page is a summary check list of 12 items that all team players should be aware of.

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Match Play Essentials by Barry Rhodes (<http://www.barryrhodes.com>)

1. You may **practice** on the competition course on the day of a match (Rule 7-1).
2. You must **not touch your opponent's ball** in play, unless you are helping to search for it (Rule 18-3).
Do not mark an opponent's ball on the putting green.
3. A **concession** of a hole may be given at any time and cannot be declined or withdrawn (Rule 2-4).
You may putt out after your putt has been conceded, providing it will not assist your partner.
4. **Incorrect information** (Rule 9-2).
If your opponent gives you wrong information about their score they must correct it before you make your next stroke, or they lose the hole.
5. **Order of Play** (Rule 10-1).
If your opponent plays out of turn you **may** ask them to cancel their stroke and play again in order. In four-ball match play, balls belonging to the same side may be played in the order that the side considers best.
6. **Your ball hits your opponent** or their equipment (Rule 19-3).
You may choose to replay the stroke, or accept it and play your next shot from where it comes to rest.
7. **Putt from the putting green hits a ball at rest** on the putting green (Rule 19-5).
There is no penalty in match play, the other ball is replaced and you must play your ball from where it comes to rest.
8. **Four-Ball Match Play – Representation of Side** (Rule 30-3a).
One partner may play for all or any part of a match, but when their partner arrives they must wait until the start of the next hole.
9. **Four-Ball Match Play – Wrong Ball** (Rule 30-3c).
If a player makes a stroke at a wrong ball his partner may continue play of the hole incurring no penalty, even if the wrong ball belongs to them.
10. **Asking for and giving Advice** (Rule 8-1).
If a spectator gives advice there is no penalty, but you must request them not to. You may not give advice to any team member other than your partner.
11. If you are **unsure of a Rule or procedure** try and resolve it with your opponent immediately (Rule 2-5).
If you cannot agree, a claim has to be made before teeing-off at the next hole. You must notify your opponent that you are making a claim, agree the facts and ask the Committee for a ruling.
12. **Ignoring an opponent's breach** of Rule (Rule 1-3).
In match play, you do not have to call a penalty on your opponent if you witness a breach of Rule by them, but don't discuss it with them before teeing off at the next hole, or you could both be disqualified for agreeing to waive a Rule.

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<http://www.rhodesruleschool.com/ebook/>

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Good golfing,

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