

Rule 18-2 and Committee Decisions

By Missy Jones • @missyjonjones

June 20, 2016

The screenshot shows the USGA website's 'RULES' section, specifically 'DECISIONS'. The main content area contains text and a highlighted bullet point. The highlighted text reads: "A player's ball lies on a flat portion of the putting green on a day with light winds. The player addresses the ball and the ball immediately moves. Under these circumstances, it is more likely than not that the act of addressing the ball caused the ball to move." Below this, another bullet point describes a scenario on a tuft of grass in the rough. To the right, a sidebar lists 'Rule 18 - Ball at Rest Moved' with sub-sections 18/1 through 18/11, each with a brief description of the situation.

USGA CHAMPIONSHIPS RULES HANDICAPPING SERVING THE GAME MEMBERSHIP ABOUT

RULES • DECISIONS

With reference to the considerations above, examples of situations where the weight of the evidence would indicate that the player caused the ball to move are:

- A player's ball lies on a flat portion of the putting green on a day with light winds. The player addresses the ball and the ball immediately moves. Under these circumstances, it is more likely than not that the act of addressing the ball caused the ball to move.
- A player's ball lies on a tuft of grass in the rough. The player takes several practice swings near the ball, with the club coming into contact with grass in the process. Almost immediately, the ball then moves vertically down in the grass. Under these circumstances, it is more likely than not that the practice swings, in conjunction with the lie of the ball, caused the movement of the ball.

With reference to the considerations above, examples of situations where the weight of the evidence would indicate that the player did not cause the movement are:

- On a very windy day, a player addresses the ball on the putting green. A short time later the ball moves slightly in the direction the wind is blowing. The strength and direction of the wind and the delay in the movement of the ball after the club was grounded indicate that factors other than the player are more likely than not to have caused the movement.
- A player's ball lies on an upslope in a closely-mown area. He makes a practice swing, but does so some distance from the ball as he is concerned that the ball may move. He carefully takes his stance but does not ground his club. Prior to making his backswing for the stroke, the ball moves. As the ball did not move while the player made the practice swing or took his stance, it is more likely than not that other factors (i.e., the ball's lie on an upslope) caused the ball to move. (New)

Rule 18 - Ball at Rest Moved

- 18/1 Ball Moves Vertically Downwards
- 18/2 Ball Oscillates During Address
- 18/3 Ball in Fork of Tree Moves in Relation to Ground But Not in Relation to Fork
- 18/4 Television Evidence Shows Ball at Rest Changed Position But by Amount Not Reasonably Discernible to Naked Eye
- 18/7 Explanation of "Any Ball He Has Played"
- 18/7.5 Player's Ball Moved by Ball Accidentally Dropped by Opponent or Fellow-Competitor
- 18/8 Ball Moved by Golf Cart Shared by Two Players
- 18/11 Meaning of "Immediately Recoverable"

Wow! I've never experienced such high emotion and vitriol on Twitter as I experienced during the final round of the U.S. Open. Emotions were running high. I got calls and texts and tweets from many, many people. These emotions clouded things that I think players already know but chose to scream about instead. I am, in no way, a spokesperson for the USGA but I am definitely a defender of the Rules of Golf. They make the entire field play by the same standards and they are the very definition of the Game we all love. Let's break down what the Rules tell us when a ball at rest is moved by a player, caddie or equipment.

The new update to Rule 18-2 in 2016 made the rule more player friendly. Before this rewrite, if a player addressed the ball (grounded the club immediately in front of or behind the ball) and then walked away and the ball moved, we had no choice but to give a penalty unless we could point to some other factor other than gravity that made the ball move. The new rewrite and interpretation allows us to weigh all the evidence and come to a decision as to whether the player caused the ball to move.

Initially, this was a gray area and as officials we looked for guidance as to how and when it "was more likely than not" to deem that the player was liable for a penalty. Decision 18-2/0.5 is loaded with guidance and also becomes case law for us to handle these situations. The fact that Dustin Johnson was moving and grounding his club very close to the ball as well as the fact that the movement happened almost instantly after these actions would lead us to believe that his actions, in some way, caused the ball to move.

We see this all the time don't we? As players and as officials? This is not a rare occurrence and I'm not sure why there is so much confusion about it. The rewrite gives us more leeway in deciding the weight of evidence but this was a pretty straightforward case of a player properly getting the one stroke penalty. Getting close to your ball comes with some risk – don't do anything that could make it move other than with a proper stroke.

Though I don't want to continue in arguments with readers who just seemed to want to be loud, I do feel there are some points that can and should be addressed. Many wanted to argue that the referee's ruling needs to stand (Rule 34-2) and I'm telling you that it did. The player did not receive a second penalty stroke for not replacing because the walking referee was called in and made a decision that was upheld. The player did not receive the second stroke because of this but the Committee will always take any additional evidence (Rule 34-3/9) that comes to light in getting to the right ruling. It is a Committee's job to protect the whole field. Video, testimony of others and other facts are appropriate ways in assisting in resolving doubt.

Another point that I heard over and over that bothered me was that the Committee was somehow calling the players involved "liars or cheaters". That is just emphatically no where near an accurate statement. A player may or may not have done something obvious (i.e. kick his ball or drop his club on his ball) in order for the rules to deem he moved his ball at rest. As we talked about earlier, we take all the relevant information and the weight of evidence must be evaluated. They broke a rule, they are not cheating or lying. A huge distinction.

One more theme that people wanted to dwell upon was they couldn't figure out "how his ball moving one dimple gave him any advantage." The Rules aren't about advantage or disadvantage. The basic tenet of the Game is: hit your ball from the teeing ground and don't touch until you are pulling it out of the hole. If at all possible, we don't want the player touching it, moving it other than with a proper stroke or influencing it's movement in any way. We have had to evolve and deal with situations like getting drops from cart paths and other immovable obstructions or figure out how to continue play of the hole if the ball is lost in a water hazard, for example, but this basic tenet is still at the heart of the rules. Moved is moved. Whether it is moved by a dimple or 30 feet. Moved is moved. We cannot make distinctions as to what is "an advantage" or not. If it moves two inches and gets some mud on the opposite side from where club would strike it is that an advantage? If it moves two inches to exact same lie is that an advantage? 5 feet from rough to first cut? The rules are not going to contemplate these as one is okay and one is not. Moved is moved and Rule 18-2 deals with them all.

I will always welcome intelligent, respectful conversations on the Rules of Golf. I'm glad to try and explain nuances and work through things that might not make sense to a reader. I didn't write the book, I'm just here to help you translate it.

Here is the USGA's official statement on the incident. They speak for themselves.

USGA Statement Regarding Dustin Johnson Ruling

The USGA wishes to congratulate Dustin Johnson on his victory and thank him, and the other players in the field, for their professionalism and grace throughout the championship. Dustin is a wonderful champion, a talented golfer and a gentleman.

Our team at the USGA has seen and heard a great deal of discussion and debate about the ruling on Dustin's ball moving during the final round of the 2016 U.S. Open Championship at Oakmont Country Club. In addition to the explanations we offered upon the conclusion of the final round, we add these comments.

Upon reflection, we regret the distraction caused by our decision to wait until the end of the round to decide on the ruling. It is normal for rulings based on video evidence to await the end of a round, when the matter can be discussed with the player before the score card is returned. While our focus on getting the ruling correct was appropriate, we created uncertainty about where players stood on the leader board after we informed Dustin on the 12th tee that his actions on the fifth green might lead to a penalty. This created unnecessary ambiguity for Dustin and the other players, as well as spectators on-site, and those watching and listening on television and digital channels.

During any competition, the priority for Rules officials is to make the correct ruling for the protection of the player(s) involved and the entire field. In applying Rule 18-2, which deals with a ball at rest that moves, officials consider all the relevant evidence – including the player's actions, the time between those actions and the movement of the ball, the lie of the ball, and course and weather conditions. If that evidence, considered together, shows that it is more likely than not that the player's actions caused the ball to move, the player incurs a one-stroke penalty. Officials use this "more likely than not" standard because it is not always apparent what caused the ball to move. Such situations require a review of the evidence, with Decision 18-2/0.5 providing guidance on how the evidence should be weighed.

Our officials reviewed the video of Dustin on the fifth green and determined that based on the weight of the evidence, it was more likely than not that Dustin caused his ball to move. Dustin's putter contacted the ground at the side of the ball, and almost immediately after, the ball moved.

We accept that not everyone will agree that Dustin caused his ball to move. Issues under Rule 18-2 often require a judgment where there is some uncertainty, and this was one of those instances. We also understand that some people may disagree with Rule 18-2 itself. While we respect the viewpoints of those who disagree, our Committee made a careful and collective judgment in its pursuit of a fair competition played under

the Rules of Golf.

In keeping with our commitment to excellence in all aspects of our work on behalf of the game of golf, we pledge to closely examine our procedures in this matter. We will assess our procedures for handling video review, the timing of such, and our communication with players to make sure that when confronted with such a situation again, we will have a better process.

We at the USGA deeply appreciate the support of players, fans, and the entire golf community of our championships and our other work for golf – and we appreciate your feedback as well. We have established an email address (comments@usga.org) and phone mailbox (908-326-1857) to receive comments. We thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts.

We all share an abiding love of this great game. Let us continue to work together for its good.