

ESPN does Ahn a favor

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I've heard from many about the "unfairness" of the two-stroke penalty assessed to Sun-Ju Ahn on Saturday but I say she should be thankful that ESPN caught it and helped her to be able to tee it up in the final round and be able to finish the tournament without the cloud of suspicion hanging over her.

On the 18th hole of the third round at the Ricoh Women's British Open at Royal Birkdale, Ahn had to figure out how to hit her third shot out of the left greenside bunker. In the process, she scraped some sand down the side of the bunker wall to help even up the slope where she was standing.

A player is entitled to firmly take her stance, but must not build a stance. Ahn's actions are a classic example of a breach of Rule 13-3 and when watching the tape, there is no question in my mind that she incurred a penalty. Officials wish all the tape we review was this clear cut and Decision 13-3/3 is quite clear on what constitutes a breach.

Q. A player knocks down the side of a bunker with his foot in an effort to get his feet on the same level. Is this permissible?

A. No. Such an action constitutes building a stance in breach of Rule 13-3. If we look at Decision 13-4/0.5, we see that “a certain amount of digging in with the feet in the sand or soil is permitted when taking a stance for a stroke.”

Sometimes we need to decide what is “digging in” and what is “building a stance” and as a good friend of mine would say, “it’s like trying to define pornography ... you know it when you see it.” Generally a player is firmly taking their stance if they waggle their feet around and negatively subtract sand downward but not lift their feet, if a player lifts their feet out of initial spot and adds sand we would call that building a stance.

Nobody likes to give a penalty or call attention to a possible breach but Ahn should feel thankful her breach was called to the attention of the officials. It was handled quickly and decisively and we need to consider the alternative to it not being questioned before scoring. She could be disqualified for signing a wrong card or if there was a question and no footage, her round would have a asterisk next to it in people’s minds. No player wants to win if they think they may have broken a rule and gotten away with it.

In the end, the integrity of the competition was protected and even Ahn agreed. “I mean, it’s the rules. I’m a player and I have to abide by the rules. So I can’t say it would be – it would be unfair for me to say it’s unfair. But the truth is that I was trying to, the intent was to make a stance, not break the rules. I just have to abide by the rules.”