

Lydia Ko – all the angles

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May 1, 2015



When three rules officials sit and discuss a complicated “what if” situation, they often come up with three different but three “right” answers when it comes to the rules of golf. This can come as a surprise to those who think rules are simply black and white. Rules are complicated and they can take many twists, sometimes arriving at different places.

When Lydia Ko’s flop shot at the 14th hole Thursday of the Volunteers of America North Texas Shootout went into a tree beside the green and didn’t come down we had an interesting situation. Her caddie, Jason Hamilton, climbed the tree but was unable to reach the ball to identify it. Spectators said they saw where Ko’s ball came to rest. LPGA rules official Brad Alexander ruled that there were enough witnesses who saw the ball land there that identification wasn’t necessary and that she could proceed under Rule 28 – Ball Unplayable.

Here is the LPGA's official explanation of the ruling:

[The officials involved in the ruling with Lydia Ko today on the 14th hole](#)

referenced Decision 27/12 to support their ruling. Due to the fact that it was roughly a 30-yard shot, the spectators were able to see Lydia's ball from start to finish and therefore provided indisputable evidence that the ball in the tree was indeed Lydia's ball. Therefore the ball did not need to be identified as it was never lost. The USGA confirmed that in a situation where observers indisputably saw the player's ball in motion come to rest in a specific location at which the ball remains visible, the ball has been identified as the player's ball. Thus, since the ball in the tree was deemed as Lydia's ball, she was then able to proceed under Rule 28 – Ball Unplayable.

Decision 27/12: Identification of Ball Through Testimony of Spectator

Q. A's ball and B's ball came to rest close together. Neither A nor B could identify one of the balls as his ball because they were using balls with identical markings. A spectator who saw both shots land was able to state which ball belonged to A and which one belonged to B. May his testimony be accepted, or should both balls be deemed lost because they could not be identified by A and B?

A. If the Committee determined that, based on information given by the spectator, A and B were able to identify their balls, the balls should not be deemed lost. Otherwise, they would have to proceed under Rule 27-1.

Hmmm. I can completely see how he arrived there but let's look at all the facts and discuss all the angles. Can we say that the spectators were able to follow that ball with their eyes from the time it struck the club face until it landed in the tree and came to rest in that exact location? I'm not sure, but I am certain the spectators said they could. Looking at the tape over and over I couldn't reach that same conclusion, but from another angle it might be possible. This is the crux of how the ruling was made. It means the ball was never lost from view and that it was obviously right in front of them. This why it gets complicated and why we have a Rules of Golf Decision Book. This book is case law and basically says, "this is how we dealt with this situation the first time we saw it and this is how we are going to deal with it from now on." If we look at Decision 27/15 it says:

27/15 Ball in Tree Visible But Not Identifiable

Q. A player is certain that his ball is lodged high in a tree. He can see a ball

in the tree, but he cannot identify it as his ball. Is the player's ball lost, in which case he must proceed under Rule 27-1?

A.Yes.

There is reason for a need to identify a ball in a tree because it dictates where we are going to take a drop if employing Rule 28 – Ball Unplayable. We take the spot directly underneath the spot where the ball is identified (whether it is recovered or not) and drop either along the behind-and-between-flag line (28b) or two club lengths no closer to the hole (28c). This reference point is a MUST before we can proceed under this rule. There could be several balls in the tree and we can't just guess which one is going to dictate this reference point.

The spectators said they saw Ko's ball go in that exact spot but could it have been in another clump of pines boughs? Or in a hollow that we couldn't see? With these other possibilities it seems like we are dealing with virtual certainty – in other words – the spectators might be 99.9% sure the ball that could be seen with the TV cameras was indeed Ko's ball. Virtual certainty can be used under Rule 26 - Water Hazard (spectators see ball go in water but players don't). Virtual certainty can also apply for a ball that may have been moved by an outside agency (Rule 18-1) or a ball that has not been found and may be in an obstruction (Rule 24-3) or an abnormal ground condition (Rule 25-1c). It does not apply in Rule 28. We have all seen player's balls go into a tree and they swear that they know which one is theirs but they are forced to go back and play under stroke and distance when they can't identify it. That is why Jason climbed up there. He knew this and was trying to save Lydia a stroke and distance penalty even though it was only 30 yards back.

Whether the ball was in view at all times and had no need to be identified or it was a ball that couldn't be identified and thus not able to use Rule 28 is all a matter of perspective and an analysis of the facts. This is how we get to different answers under the rules. They can both be right and can both be argued. The rules aren't always black and white but I'm virtually certain that the officials gave all the facts their due attention. We do the best that we can and try and get the player to the right place. I love this game.