

A Brief History of Revisions to the Rules of Golf: 1744 to 2016

While golf has been played for more than 600 years, the earliest known written rules for the game date from 1744. This early code of “Articles & Laws in Playing at Golf” (known today as the “13 Articles”) was drafted by The Gentlemen Golfers of Leith (later known as the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers) for a single day of competition on the Leith links. Still, the principles represented in these 13 rules fundamentally describe the same sport that is played around the world today.

Although the Rules of Golf serve to define and preserve the essential challenge and character of a game rich in history, they were not decided centuries ago and then simply preserved ever since. On the contrary, continuous evolution in the rules is one of the game’s central traditions. While the core principles of the sport have endured through the centuries, their outcomes and the procedures for applying them have undergone regular change.

Much of the time, the Rules of Golf have changed in response to the seemingly infinite variety of unforeseen or unique circumstances that keep arising in a sport played outdoors in a natural setting. Reasons for rule changes have included the evolution of course design, maintenance and agronomics; innovation in clubs, balls and other player equipment; and the expansion and diversification in the landscapes where golf is played. More generally, the Rules of Golf Committees have often made changes after listening to passionate debates among golfers about whether particular outcomes or procedures are fair or appropriate.

Less frequent, but highly significant, have been the efforts to step back and review the overall philosophy, structure and presentation of the Rules of Golf. Such efforts have periodically led to revisions of a larger scope, as happened in 1899, 1934, 1952 and 1984 – and is happening now. Such fundamental reviews have been driven by larger concerns, such as a desire to make the rules easier to read and use; to address perceived complexity, inconsistency or unfairness in outcomes and procedures; to reinforce and reinvigorate golf’s fundamental principles; and to make sure the rules will work for everyone who plays the game.

These periodic fundamental reviews and their underlying motivations provide a useful framework for understanding how the Rules of Golf have developed and the context of the 2019 Rules Modernization initiative. This paper examines this history by looking at five eras: 1744-1899, 1899-1934, 1934-1952, 1952-1984, and 1984-2016.

Defining a Game: 1744-1899

The 13 Articles of 1744 was the first of several early efforts to record the Rules of Golf and bring structure to a game that was already several hundred years old. Such rulemaking activity began in Scotland in the mid-18th century with the formation of golfing societies, such as the Gentlemen Golfers of Leith and the Society of St. Andrews Golfers (later known as The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews), that had competitions where clear rules of play were needed for members.

During the next 100 years, individual codes were adopted by more than 30 different clubs. Many of these copied or borrowed liberally from the 13 Articles, but with modifications to reflect the particular conditions and rules issues found on their own courses. Many of the basic concepts reflected in these codes are, in some form, still seen in the game today, such as:

- The rule for an unplayable lie and the recognition of stroke play as a form of play in addition to match play (1759 St. Andrews).
- The rules on outside agencies and plugged balls (1773 Edinburgh Burgess).
- The concept of “ground under repair” and the first clear reference that a ball “must be played where it lies” (1775 Gentlemen Golfers).
- The limited search time for a lost ball, and the definition of a stroke (1783 Aberdeen).

- The terms “putting green” and “bunker,” as these elements emerged as distinct features on a golf course (1812 St. Andrews).
- Defining a match as consisting of 18 holes (1842 St. Andrews).

Although these codes developed and reinforced the game’s core principles and concepts, there was considerable divergence and ongoing change in their outcomes and procedures. For example, there were various procedures for how to put a ball back into play when taking relief (with penalty) for a ball in a water hazard:

- Throw the ball at least six yards behind the hazard (1754 St. Andrews).
- Throw the ball over the head (with no provision on how far) (1776 Bruntsfield Links).
- Tee the ball and play it from behind the hazard (1812 St. Andrews).
- Face the hole and drop the ball over the head (1809 Honourable Company).
- Drop the ball over the shoulder (1825 Perth).

As another example, there were different procedures and outcomes for what happens when a player has played the opponent’s ball (that is, played a wrong ball):

- The opponent plays the ball as it lies and there is no penalty (1828 Blackheath).
- The opponent has the option to claim the stroke or to replace the ball within one yard of its original location and play on (1815 Aberdeen).
- The player loses the hole (1812 St. Andrews).

Having so many different codes served to allow for experimentation as the rules developed for a game played on fields that were neither regulated nor standardized. But the lack of a common set of rules later became a serious problem:

- As golf expanded beyond its origins in Scotland to other locations in Britain and to places such as India, Canada, Australia and the United States, new clubs needed to adopt their own rules to address types of course conditions and situations not covered in the earliest codes.
- The late 19th century was marked by extraordinary innovation in the design of and materials used in golf balls and golf clubs, leading to disputes about what equipment was acceptable for playing the game and highlighting the need for common standards.
- The increasing frequency with which golfers from different clubs played with and against one another led to confusion and controversy about which rules applied and drove the need for consolidation of the disparate codes.

As debate intensified about the need for a common set of rules, The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews (referred to as “The R&A” in the rest of this paper as the club’s rule-making responsibilities were transferred to The R&A in 2004) formed a special committee to undertake a major revision of its code. The resulting R&A code of September 1891 was soon widely followed, and several years later The R&A became acknowledged as the rulemaking authority. In 1897, The R&A established its Rules of Golf Committee, leading to the first-ever consolidated code in 1899. This code also had important new provisions, such as a one-stroke penalty (in stroke play only) if a ball was played from within 20 yards of the hole without the flagstick having been removed and the first definition of “out of bounds” (followed three years later by the first rule allowing the play of a provisional ball).

The other significant development of the time was the founding of the United States Golf Association in 1894. Its original By-Laws stated that USGA competitions would be played under the Rules of Golf as written by The R&A, but “with such modification as the [USGA] Executive Committee may from time to time adopt.” A USGA Rules of Golf Committee was established and soon began to provide its interpretations of the rules, and eventually the USGA’s own code began to diverge from The R&A Rules of Golf in significant ways.

Decisions and Interpretations: 1899-1934

The global expansion and growth of golf continued unabated in the early decades of the 20th century, causing new rules situations to arise at an increasing rate. A regular stream of requests for rulings, interpretations, and modifications quickly became a reality. The USGA and R&A recognized that guidance was needed to help golfers understand and apply the rules.

For example, in 1897 the USGA began to provide informal interpretations of each R&A rule to serve as clarification for American golfers. Some of these merely defined terms that were unfamiliar to some American golfers (such as single, foursomes, partners, competitors, match play, medal play and opponent) or specified penalties that were not explicitly stated in The R&A code. But other interpretations had a more substantive effect. For example, in commenting on the rule against pressing down or removing irregularities in the turf “near the ball,” the USGA defined this as “within a club length” and stated that “pressing down the surface near the ball by prolonged or forcible soling of the club shall be deemed a breach.”

Reflecting its own efforts to respond to queries from golfers and clubs, The R&A began recording its answers in a single “book of decisions,” and in 1908 it published its first official “decisions book.” Similar publications of decisions followed on a regular basis, and the USGA began doing the same in 1927. These decisions interpreting the rules became an increasingly important part of the rulemaking process and often, in effect, modified the rules, such as by recognizing new exceptions or dealing with circumstances not covered in the rules codes.

The need to issue many decisions made it clear to the new governing bodies that the Rules of Golf would need regular review and revision. Four revised codes were issued in the first decade alone, with the 1909 code being a particularly thorough revision. The changes in that code were primarily made to incorporate, where practical, elements from more than 230 decisions from the past decade. The 1909 code also broke new ground by adding headings to each section to help the reader, as well as by adding detailed clarifications to many Rules.

The first part of the 20th century was also notable for the emerging debate (which continues to this day) about whether the Rules of Golf should be focused on general principles or be written in the form of detailed restrictions and requirements intended to provide clarity and produce equity. Traditionalists argued that trying to maintain “fair” circumstances between golfers removed the natural drama of the game, that the rules no longer translated the spirit of the game to golf’s newcomers, and that someone playing golf “from a long practical acquaintance” against one with “perfect literal knowledge” of the Rules of Golf would be playing two very different games. But the rules were becoming strongly influenced by the concept of equity and the desire for clarity, and they became more detailed and prescriptive as time went on.

The Rules of Golf continued to evolve in other ways over the next couple of decades. There was a particular focus on responding to major equipment innovations, such as the rubber core ball, the Schenectady putter, deep groove irons, steel shafts and concave irons. On these issues as well as certain issues under the playing rules, the two rulemaking bodies began more often to take different views, at least for some periods of time.

Questions about the Rules and proposals for change also continued to increase from other places around the world where golf was played. To address this, in the late 1920s The R&A revised its rulemaking processes to include a Joint Advisory Council consisting of the golf unions of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales; the Ladies’ Golf Union; and the golf associations of Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The Council provided general suggestions and specific proposed changes for review by The R&A’s Rules of Golf Committee, which helped lead to a major revision to the R&A and USGA codes in 1934. There were no major changes in outcomes or procedures, but the Rules of Golf were reorganized and rewritten to clarify the meaning of the rules and the definitional elements of the game.

Recognizing the Need for a Uniform Set of Rules: 1934-1952

The 1934 revisions did not end the push for reform, and several key changes were made by one or both of the rulemaking bodies during the 1930s. In particular:

- After many years of controversy that arose when some players began to use as many as 30 or more specialized clubs in a round, in 1938 the USGA adopted a 14-club limit; The R&A followed suit one year later.
- Also in 1938, after long debate about the fairness of the historic concept of the stymie in match play, the USGA modified the stymie rule by allowing the lifting of the ball that created the stymie if it was within six inches of the hole; The R&A made no change, and this was reconciled only in 1952 when the stymie was eliminated.

Rulemaking activities largely ground to a halt during World War II, but soon thereafter each rulemaking body separately made extensive – and very different – changes to the Rules of Golf. In its 1946 code, the USGA revised and reordered the rule book and made various rule changes, such as adopting a distance-only (no penalty stroke) penalty for a ball that ended up out of bounds. Four years later, The R&A issued a new code (on a two-year experimental basis) that restructured the Rules of Golf in an entirely different way than the USGA and, among other things, applied the distance-only penalty to any ball that was lost, out of bounds or unplayable.

These and other major departures from prior codes, combined with the fact that the two sets of rules differed so much, caused considerable discussion and controversy within the game. This was resolved when The R&A and USGA came together to issue the first truly unified code as of January 1, 1952. The rule book was completely reorganized (including covering match play and stroke play in one set of Rules rather than in separate parts), and dozens of differences between the USGA and R&A codes were reconciled. Although the new code reverted to the traditional stroke-and-distance penalties, it adopted many other important changes, such as:

- Eliminating the stymie rule entirely,
- Expanding the circumstances in which a lifted ball was allowed to be cleaned, and
- Recognizing the concept of a lateral water hazard where relief could be taken within two club-lengths of where the ball entered the hazard.

Continuing to Pursue Uniformity: 1952-1984

Soon after issuing the new joint code, the USGA and The R&A began work on a revised code, which went into effect January 1, 1954; a further revision then followed in 1956. Most of these changes simply altered words and phrases to facilitate uniformity throughout the English-speaking world, while other changes were in response to the now familiar process of inquiries and suggestions from individual golfers, clubs and officials around the world. The frequency of these code revisions led to debate about how to balance the need for regular updates to ensure uniformity against the problem of having too frequent revisions that could create confusion. In 1960, it was agreed that a four-year revision cycle would be used going forward, and this has been done since then (with occasional deviations).

The late 1950s and the 1960s were a particularly active period of change, as The R&A and USGA – sometimes separately and sometimes together – adopted a number of significant changes (and then in some cases later withdrew them). For example:

- The 1956 code eliminated the penalty for a ball hitting an unattended flagstick in the hole when played from the putting green (but by 1968, both rulemaking bodies had agreed to restore the penalty).
- Reflecting evolving views within the game as the surfaces of putting greens became more uniform and consistent, the 1960 code included the major change of allowing players to mark, lift, clean and replace a ball on the green.

- In a continued effort to find alternatives to the need to take stroke and distance relief, the 1960 USGA code adopted a distance-only penalty for balls lost or out of bounds and eliminated the provisional ball (but these experiments ended a year later).
- Seeking to speed up play, the 1968 code introduced a new rule allowing a player to clean a ball on the putting green only once (before the first putt); and, in stroke play only, requiring the player to putt continuously until the ball was holed (but these changes proved impractical and unpopular, and were revoked in 1970).
- The 1968 code also prohibited use of a “croquet-style” stroke on the green and adopted the first general restriction on using artificial devices to assist a player in his or her play.

The 1968 code also reconciled the remaining significant differences in the playing rules, and the USGA and R&A codes have been essentially identical ever since.

The next major development happened in 1980, when the USGA and The R&A began a project to reorganize the rule book to make it more logical and intuitive. This resulted in the Reorganized Rules of Golf, a draft of which was widely distributed to golf associations and individual golfers for review. The new code was issued in 1984 using this reorganized structure and a revised writing style, and with various other revisions such as:

- Requiring a player to drop a ball by standing erect and holding the ball at arm’s length and shoulder height, rather than by facing the hole, standing erect and dropping it over his or her shoulder.
- Expanding the prohibition on making practice strokes between the play of two holes, so that a player was no longer allowed to play full practice shots from the side of the next tee while waiting to play.
- Setting a specific (10 seconds) limit for a ball overhanging the hole to fall into the hole.
- Eliminating relief without penalty from an immovable obstruction or burrowing animal hole in a water hazard.

One other highly significant change that same year was the publication of the first-ever uniform decisions book. Before then, The R&A and USGA had each published a separate book of decisions (which sometimes differed). The new joint decisions book was also organized in a more helpful way, rather than the previous style of having individual decisions appear in chronological order within each rule. Since that time, the decisions book has become an even more important part of the rulemaking process.

Responding to Rapid Developments: 1984-2016

Since 1984, the volume of inquiries about the Rules of Golf has continued to be high. The four-year revision cycle has resulted in a substantial number of changes being made in each new edition of the Rules. At least as significant has been the amount of activity in revising the Decisions on the Rules of Golf every two years. The number of decisions increased substantially from 933 in 1985 to 1,275 in 2012, and has remained at about that level since then.

Although the 1984 revision was the last fundamental revision until the 2019 Rules Modernization initiative, in the past two decades new and modified rules and interpretations have been made in many different areas, such as:

- An exception to Rule 13-4 was created in 1992 so that there is no penalty if a player touches the ground or loose impediments in a hazard when falling or to prevent a fall; this was one of many recent changes made to Rule 13-4 for practical reasons.
- The 2000 code prohibited a caddie from standing on a line behind the player while the stroke is being made.
- In 2008, the definition of prohibited “advice” was revised to exclude information on distance, so that players would be allowed to share distance information with each other or obtain it from others without penalty.
- In 2008, the penalty for a player (or his or her caddie, partner or equipment) accidentally deflecting his or her ball in motion was reduced to one-stroke, whereas before it was the general penalty (loss of hole in match play, two strokes in stroke play).
- The 2016 edition adopted new Rule 14-1b, which prohibits use of anchored strokes.



Other changes during this period can be seen as reflecting the need to deal with a wide range of contemporary issues, such as pace of play, environmental stewardship and developments in technology:

- Rule 6-7 was revised in 1996 to address a growing concern about pace of play; Committees were authorized to establish pace-of-play guidelines and enforce them by applying penalty strokes.
- A number of important Local Rules were authorized, such as allowing Committees to designate environmentally sensitive areas where play is prohibited (1996) and allowing use of distance-measuring devices (by decision in 2006 and rule change in 2008).
- The question of who or what caused a ball at rest to move, which has become even more difficult in televised golf because of high definition video, was addressed in several Rule changes, such as the 2004 elimination of Rule 18-2c (which had presumed the player was the cause if the ball moved after the player moved a loose impediment within a club-length of the ball); the 2012 recognition of a “known or virtually certain” exception to Rule 18-2b (which had presumed the player was the cause if the ball moved after the player addressed it); and the 2016 elimination of Rule 18-2b.
- The effects of video review were also addressed through Decision 18/4 (issued in 2014), which applies a “naked eye” test to decide whether a ball has moved.
- In 2016, a new exception to Rule 6-6d was established, so that a player is not disqualified for returning a score card with a lower than actual score for a hole if the reason was that the player did not include a penalty he or she did not know about; instead, the player’s score is revised to include that penalty, plus an additional two-stroke penalty.

As this historical review shows, a continuing need for definition, clarity and revision has informed nearly three centuries of rulemaking. The same fundamental considerations that drove change in the past are at the core of our 2019 Rules Modernization Initiative. Our goal is to bring the rules up to date to meet the needs of the game today across the world.

We expect the same to be true going forward as well. Golf will continue to expand to new places and involve new golfers; exciting and challenging new technologies will impact the game; and the demands of an ever-evolving game will continue to require attention and thoughtful action. Moreover, we can be certain that golfers will never cease to debate and disagree about the fairness and appropriateness of many of the rules. The R&A and the USGA will remain committed to providing leadership and guidance on all of these issues through their role in making and interpreting the Rules of Golf.